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Points of Departure: Paul Auster and the Loss of Authority

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text.

The first section of chapter two appeared, in a slightly different form, under the name "Signs of Grace: Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*" in English 55.211 (Spring 2006): 65-78. The first section of chapter six appeared, in a slightly different form, under the name "Carrying the Burden of Representation: Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*" in Journal of American Studies 40.1 (April 2006): 53-69.

A small portion of chapter five (the analysis of Marco Stanley Fogg's dreams) is to appear in the Summer 2006 number of Janus Head. All publications are with the permission of my supervisor, Doctor Kenneth Millard.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the primary catalyst for Paul Auster's work is the loss of authority. In his early poetry this is chiefly the loss of language's ability, and hence the poet's ability, to reflect accurately and with sincere attention the objects of the poetic gaze. Following The Invention of Solitude, the absent authority is reconfigured as the father, and by analogy God and foundational mythologies of national and authorial identity. In Auster's texts one can see two possible reactions to the loss. First, a tendency for characters to retreat melancholically and solipsistically into the self. Alternatively, characters can seek democratic, paratactic connections with others in a more ethical and ultimately more liberating form of mourning. Auster's constant use of other literary sources can be seen as such an immersion in a plurality of voices, whereby a sense of substantive individual authority is eschewed in favour of the dialogic sharing of stories. The thesis uses Freudian psychoanalysis as a critical vocabulary to describe states of mourning, melancholia and the paranoia which melancholia can engender. Then the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber is employed in order to explore the ethical alternatives to the melancholic state. For Auster, both these positions carry profound political implications.

Word count: 99,434

Contents

List of abbreviations

Unless otherwise indicated, the editions of Auster's works cited parenthetically in the text are abbreviated as follows:

3F   3 Films: Smoke, Blue in the Face, Lulu on the Bridge New York: Picador, 2003.

AH   The Art of Hunger Essays, Prefaces, Interviews and The Red Notebook London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

BF   The Brooklyn Follies New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.

BI   The Book of Illusions New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002.

CLT   In the Country of Last Things London: Faber and Faber, 1989.

CP   Collected Prose New York: Picador, 2003.

HM   Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.

IOS   The Invention of Solitude London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

L   Leviathan London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

MC   The Music of Chance London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

MP   Moon Palace London: Faber and Faber, 1989.

MV   Mr Vertigo London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

NYT   The New York Trilogy London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
(incorporating CG City of Glass, G Ghosts and LR The Locked Room)

ON   Oracle Night New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003.

RN   The Red Notebook London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995.

Select   Selected Poems London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

T   Timbuktu London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

(and as Paul Benjamin)

SP   Squeeze Play London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

Introduction: Some Stories and What They Might Mean

> The reader and the writer make the book together [. . .] (Personal interview)
>
> I do, indeed, close my door at times and surrender myself to a book, but only because
>
> I can open the door again and see a human being looking at me. (Buber,
>
> "Books and Men" 4)

I was fortunate enough to interview Paul Auster at his Brooklyn home on 27 March 2005. Various insights gleaned from our conversation will appear throughout this thesis, but as Auster tended to eschew the theoretical in favour of the anecdotal in offering these insights, it seems appropriate to begin with some stories. After all, Auster is first and foremost a storyteller, and one who possesses an unshakeable belief in the vitality of a story's connecting power. As he declared during our interview:

> Just because we're in a moment of historical crisis and wars are breaking out around
>
> us, it doesn't mean that that's the only subject because human life goes on and we
>
> have to keep telling these stories and if we don't tell these stories about the small
>
> lives of ordinary people, we're lost.

The National Story Project, which resulted in the anthology True Tales of American Life, edited by Auster, collates some hundred and eighty of these stories, quotidian tales that nonetheless "revealed the mysterious and unknowable forces at work in our lives, in our family histories, in our minds and bodies, in our souls. In other words, true stories that sounded like fiction." With a nod to Walt Whitman, Auster adds, "I didn't hear America singing, I heard it telling stories" (xiv, xv), suggesting that American national identity is itself shaped by its people's multifarious yet interlinked narratives.

After the interview, on the way into Manhattan, Auster allowed me ingress to just such a small life by telling me a story about a good friend of his, a story innocuous enough on the surface, but which has resonated with me ever since and informed many of the observations made in this study. A boy of four from a very large and noisy New York Italian family is causing consternation to his parents

because he is not yet speaking. On a friend's advice, they take the boy to see a specialist in child development. Appalled by what he perceives as the parents' lackadaisical approach to the child's linguistic development, the doctor berates them roundly and insists that they make a concerted effort to encourage speech through a series of games and exercises. Several minutes into the tirade, the boy, looking exasperated, turns to the specialist and says in perfect Brooklynese, "What are you, some kind of a jerk?"

Despite its manifest straightforwardness this is a quintessentially Austerian narrative and in fact a distillation of many of his key preoccupations. First, it suggests that language and its acquisition might always, despite the best efforts of the experts, remain slightly mysterious. All we can assume is that the boy, deprived of opportunities to speak himself in the babble of family life, quietly absorbed language from his older siblings and chose the most apposite moment to exercise his rhetorical gifts. As Auster stated in our interview, "thought is always a product of language, and language is something we learn from other people." Fundamentally transactional and relational, language reinforces paratactic (in this case familial) links while effectively resisting the theoretical impositions of authority figures such as the child specialist. Language may ultimately be mysterious, but we should not forget that the Ancient Greek for "mystery" – *sôd* – derives from the word for "council." In other words, enmeshed in the mysterious is a drive toward togetherness.

The act of re-telling the anecdote confronts and denudes authority in another way. Auster as storyteller has responsibility for his story, and it could be argued that in the time of narration he possesses authority over the words he chooses. Yet he can in no way arrogate to himself full authority, chiefly because the story is at least second-hand already, having been passed on to him by his friend. Moreover, there

will certainly be alterations in the choices of lexis, idiolect and rhythm, all of which undergo further mutations dependent on the reactions, fillers and queries offered by me the interlocutor. To further complicate matters, I decided to employ the historical present tense in my re-telling. This is a common enough technique, and helps provide an illusion of present-ness (something which assumes a much wider significance from chapter three). In short, the latest manifestation of the story enters a transferential and transformative space between narrator and narratee in which any origin inevitably recedes further into the distance and with it the original signifying authority. Indeed, if one accepts the idea that there is an attendant slippage between an event and the representation of that event engendered by language, then even the father's "original" sharing of the story with Auster succumbs to a divestiture of authority.

It should be acknowledged that a similar story is told about the historian Thomas Macaulay. At the age of six, in response to his mother's concerns about his lack of speech and his propensity for headaches, he is believed to have responded, "[t]he pain, madam, has somewhat abated." The fact that this story already exists in no way undermines my argument. In fact, the idea that there is a kind of morpheme for the story which can be realised in a number of ways in different contexts, reinforces the sense that pursuit of authority is meaningless.

What happens instead is that a relational community is formed, centripetally centred on an idea of a story, whilst centrifugally spreading and modifying that conceptual framework to include more and more listeners and potential narrators (as I have done by passing the story on to my readers). In the process the hypotactic – that is, the question of who stands as claimant of original authority for the story – undergoes progressive diminution while the paratactic, the fraternity of sharing storytellers, is expanded. Importantly, each teller becomes merely a vehicle through

which the story travels and as such is never fully in possession of its syntactic or semantic elements. We are reproduced by the story as much as we reproduce it, and consequently sacrifice our authority to the always-already existing community of subjects it involves. Thus although the story-as-idea can reveal potentially an infinite number of textual variants depending on the techniques and motivations of the teller, so too can it sculpt the life and consciousness of each teller and listener as it re-emerges in different forms. For example, Auster told me the story specifically to reassure me that paediatricians the world over tend to rely too heavily on statistics and averages, and that I should not be concerned that my daughter Bonnie was a little late in standing. So in entering the world of the story, *my* world is effectively changed. Whether or not the story is actually "true" in any objective sense is irrelevant: the recession of origin and authority dictates that we suspend our yearnings for such truth as it will always be unavailable. We should enjoy instead the more subtle and edifying, but deeply subjective, moral or spiritual truths on offer. As the narrator "Paul" observes at the end of the New York Times version of "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," "[a]s long as there's one person to believe it, there's no story that can't be true" (3F 165).

Another "true" story Auster passed on to me. In 1869 the Sioux leader Sitting Bull was invited to say a few words at the driving of the "golden spike" at Promontory Point, Utah, which would mark the opening of the first Transcontinental Railroad. Opting to make the speech in his native language, Sitting Bull availed himself of the opportunity to rail against the brutalities and injustices perpetrated by the white man on his people. Fortunately for the assembled dignitaries, a "translator" was present who duly did his job, declaring to the crowd that "Sitting Bull is happy and honoured to be here on this historic occasion," or words to that effect.

What this story reminds us, in a distilled form, is that every enunciation falters at the point of reception and becomes a translation, whether or not an agent of deliberate mistranslation intercepts the message. As Jacques Derrida argues in "Des Tours de Babel," the existence of multiple tongues necessitates translation as it renders it impossible (108). Moreover, the tale forces us to confront the fact that what we designate as "history," and within that the power to narrate localised stories of marginalized groups, is always contested and subject to ideological acts of translation which go well beyond the attempt to imbricate lexical units. The loss of authority portrayed here, unlike the previous anecdote, poses real threats to disenfranchised peoples. Yet what links both stories is the destabilising of authority and what I shall refer to as the ethics of storytelling – that is, the responsibility of the self in relation to others in the act of narrative creation.

This thesis aims to expand on the ideas schematically laid out above, working on the assumption that the ethical standpoint is the key to understanding Auster's work. The loss of authority I have been describing has profound ramifications throughout Paul Auster's thirteen novels, collections of poetry, eclectic critical essays and introductions, autobiographical memoirs and the four films he has been involved with either as screenwriter, director or cameo actor. Broadly, I argue that there are two reactions to any loss of authority. First, as the initial example indicates, there is an aspiration toward a cementing and an expansion of the community of storytellers, a reinforcement of paratactic bonds or a reconciliation through language of the inner and the outer – what we might dub the positive reaction or *dialogic* reaction (to borrow a term from Martin Buber). In this model, the loss of an original signifying authority becomes liberating, a chance to immerse oneself in a fraternal cultural, historical or specifically literary tradition and arouse suspicion of those who claim

authority in the first place. It will be apparent that the repercussions of this position may prove to be political as well as personal.

The second position – the negative – foregrounds the frightening aspects of the loss and insists that the breakdown of perceived hierarchies has the potential to leave the self unmoored and stranded in a flexuous realm of signification without grounding and validating authorities and only stories as reference points. Consequently, alternative modes of authority are sought out, chief amongst which is the self regarded as substantive and striving either to locate truth, facts or objective reality within itself, or retreating into a nihilistic rejection of all such epistemologies and an inability or refusal to see beyond the self at all. Throughout the study, this retreat into the self assumes various names depending on context, but the superordinate term I deploy is *solipsism.*

Of course, I do not argue here that Auster's work adheres to a strict binary opposition between positive and negative standpoints. Protagonists, poetic subjects and the author himself (as you would expect if authority is a central concern) live in a post-authoritative world and are constantly engaged in negotiations between the positive and the negative, between the need for connection and community and the dangerous comforts of solipsism. Dennis Barone, in his excellent introduction to Beyond the Red Notebook, views a key relationship in Auster's novels as that between "postmodern self-fashioning" (exemplified by Marco Stanley Fogg in Moon Palace and Hector Mann in The Book of Illusions) and "the premodern notion of the individual." Despite being actively engaged in self-creation, Auster characters do not, Barone argues, inevitably fall into "aimless purposelessness" or "do-your-own-thing individualism" but are forced to acknowledge the "consequences of actions," the "impact on others" (5). We might add that they invariably come to realise the inverse:

that self-fashioning cannot be executed without recognising the authorship of the self by others. An ideal by no means always achievable in Auster's world is the leap out of solipsism and the willing embracement of the fact that any self is historically, socially, culturally and linguistically constituted in constant relation with others.

In the light of the consistency and integrity of Auster's vision and the incessant revisiting of key themes in different contexts from his early poetry through to his recent novels and films, my chapters are arranged thematically rather than chronologically. This way, individual texts can reflect upon each other in enlightening ways and the emphasis be consistently placed on ideas. With this in mind, certain novels will also appear, with a shift in focus, in different chapters. Auster's playful tendency to reference a text's predecessors (for example, the narrator of The Book of Illusions, David Zimmer, is Marco Fogg's friend in Moon Palace) might be seen as an example of postmodern *retour de personnages*, an appreciation of the inherent artificiality of that which we designate "reality." However, it can more usefully be viewed as a consolidation of a sense of internal and exophoric unity, of community, of the sense that his protagonists share with us a non-substantive constitution. Either way, such intertextuality makes a thematic approach unavoidable and also allows a consideration of Auster's almost obsessive allusions to his nineteenth century literary antecedents, particularly Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Thoreau. In my choice of approach I align myself with critics such as Aliki Varvogli, whose study on intertextuality The World that is the Book registers Auster as a writer who persistently "signals an awareness of his position within the site of cultural production" (18), and with Adriana Neagu, who sees in his work a "profoundly humanistic revival in the individual of the consciousness of the Other" (83) as opposed to the nihilistic "thanatos syndrome" (149) of much contemporary

postmodern discourse. I am impatient with critics such as Bernd Herzogenrath who, despite some brilliant theoretical prestidigitation, tends to crowbar Auster's novels into a strict Derridean and Lacanian framework and forgets the human in his preoccupation with the signifier. The proceeding chapters will illustrate how the strictures of theory are frequently exposed as egregious in Auster's work.

The autobiographical memoir The Invention of Solitude occupies a position of pre-eminence in Auster's oeuvre as a work which dramatises the impossibility of distinguishing with any clarity between the biographical / factual and the fictional. In short, what if the investigation of biography unearths only a set of unverifiable stories? Although it shares preoccupations with the poetry which preceded it, in particular the prose poem "White Spaces," it is the first of Auster's works extensively to engage with the concept of lost authority and how the mourning of that loss renders the mourning self and the writing self diffuse. As such, it has had a profound effect on everything that has come afterwards, and part of the first chapter's project is to mark out the territories of its influence and of this study's argument. Taking as its point of departure the sudden death of Auster's father Sam, an alienated, distant figure who comes to symbolise the essential difficulty of really knowing or representing another, The Invention of Solitude throws up a number of theoretical questions, including the issue of the legitimacy of theory itself, which underlie the whole thesis.

For example, if The Invention of Solitude is born from the tension between the experienced loss of firm identity attendant on the loss of authority figures and the God-like creative paranoia or megalomania of the controlling writer, subsequent novels portray the paranoid sensibility in both diegetic and metanarrative terms. Chapters two and three examine three novels, Oracle Night, Leviathan and The Music of Chance, which in varying ways portray distinctly puritan (and in some ways

quintessentially American) world views. In each of these texts we encounter at least one male protagonist who feels that "everything has designs on him, is a 'sign' of his state. Nothing in the world is innocent of intention, but the messages are all in code" (Manning, Vision 9). He refuses to accept chance as the dominant factor and instead believes in an elaborate universal plot both comforting and minatory. Such plots, I contend, compensate for the certainties offered by departed or at least radically inaccessible signifying and moral authorities, in particular God. They are stories we tell ourselves as surrogate explanatory systems, but they serve primarily to intensify our isolation.

History itself, which Auster sees as rhizomatic, a network of relations, can be co-opted into paranoid forms of authority. I argue, particularly in chapters three and five, that a mythology of endless regeneration, coupled with an American-style rejection of historical precedent as a determining factor in national identity, results not only in Edenic fantasies but also in a brand of decontextualised, self-regarding and melancholic ahistoricism which has a lot in common with the more insidious, self-ratifying aspects of postmodernism. Auster's poems, in particular (but also novels such as Moon Palace) attempt to recuperate the civilizations and voices which are inevitably suppressed in order to fuel the ideology of manifest destiny. The Music of Chance can be read as a satire on the "folly and nullity" (Personal interview) of this brand of historiography.

The New York Trilogy is another paranoid work. It is also the work which has attracted the most critical attention, much of it happy to call the three short "detective" fictions of which it is comprised "postmodern." Whilst recognising that the uncovering of the flaws and limitations of a detective's positivistic world view in each part of the trilogy lends weight to the argument that they are anti-detective

works, chapter four of this thesis places this recognition in a more philosophical light.

Drawing extensively on the work of Martin Buber, whom Auster has acknowledged as

a profound influence on his thinking, I argue that the detective, as the archetypal

paranoiac, needs to break free of his solipsistic need for authoritative explanations and

his tendency to make the world in his own image and enter a relational space in which

a meeting with the other can occur. Art is the primary catalyst for this entry: along

with Sven Birkerts, who notes Auster's "solid modernist grounding," I believe that he

"has not given up on the idea that art can discover new meaning from experience" and

that The New York Trilogy demonstrates that "all existence is, at root, a stalking of

clues to the self, and to the true relation of that self to everything that is Other"

(Energies 338, 340).

Thus the frontier most difficult to surmount is ontological: it is the frontier

between self and other. The Invention of Solitude and The New York Trilogy

dramatise this and it is a truth with which Martin Buber is preoccupied. As Herbert

Schneider expresses it:

> What makes Buber's contribution to religious empiricism so striking and un-
> ambiguous is his definite turning from introspective psychology with its search
> for the sense of the Divine Presence to a social psychology of inter-personal
> experience. (470)

The shift in emphasis in my thesis from psychoanalysis to dialogic philosophy

(broadly speaking the thrust of my "narrative") can be seen as reflecting a similar

frontier crossing in Auster's work from inner to outer, or at least a reconciliation of

the two; from, if you will, part one to part two of The Invention of Solitude and from

that work as a whole to the relative openness of a novel such as The Brooklyn Follies.

All the chapters are consequently "about" frontiers, but it is chapter five which

explicitly tackles the numerous transgressions of physical, psychological, symbolic

and metaphysical frontiers we witness in Auster's work. Whereas chapter three is dominated by symbols of building, bounding and the oppressive demarcation of space, this chapter focuses on the permanently or temporarily homeless, the hobos and vagabonds who people the pages of the novels and more obliquely the poems, and are constantly striving to find a place in the world to dwell with others. The irony for characters such as Marco Stanley Fogg, Mr. Bones and Willy G. Christmas is that only in itinerancy might the ontological gap be bridged. As a literary trope, the frontier is where the shift from a psychoanalytic concern with the self to a secular metaphysic of dialogue must succeed or fail. Additionally, the argument acknowledges that restlessness is iconically American and, taking into consideration Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis, ideologically and politically inflected as well as philosophically complex.

The first five chapters of this thesis stress the importance of persistent reinvention in language and the sympathetic exercise of the creative imagination in bodying forth toward the other. In chapter six I develop the idea, first encountered in The Invention of Solitude, that if an individual is indeed constituted through multifarious representations, that is, the stories he or she tells and those which are told about him or her, then art and life cannot be satisfactorily separated, indeed *should not*. Life as an authoritative meta-text deliquesces such that it attains only equal status with all the possible parallel stories. Given this perilous situation, in which the writer cannot in the profoundest sense be *original*, a possible solution for the contemporary American fiction writer, and one which I argue Auster's narrative construction reflects, is neatly articulated by Tony Tanner in his discussion of John Barth:

> if he cannot tell an original story in an individual voice he can attempt to explore
> the origins of story and try to lay bare all the ambiguities of using a narrative voice

which both is and is not his own. (<u>Scenes</u> 187)

By arguing this, we risk entering the territory of Baudrillardian postmodernism, but part of this thesis' argument (especially in chapter six) is to offer a change of emphasis. I suggest that the novels frequently employ parabolic, Chinese Box structures not only to mime the recession of authority, but also to remind us of the communal nature of stories. In other words, any stories about the self can carry equal weight, and this in itself should be cause not for despair, but for a celebration of the democracy which obtains.

Throughout the thesis I introduce comparisons with other contemporary American writers such as Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, Philip Roth and Donald Barthelme. Despite Auster's assertion that his writing is "so contrary to what most novelists are trying to accomplish that I often have trouble thinking of myself as a novelist at all" (<u>AH</u> 305), there are congruencies between these disparate writers profitably to be highlighted. Among them we can include a preoccupation with father figures which can be extrapolated to symbolise an interrogation of religious, historical and foundational mythologies; a predominance of building metaphors for the paranoid or transcendental extension of the self (a tropological tendency observed by critics such as Richard Poirier in <u>A World Elsewhere</u> [18]); and a breakdown of confidence in narrative authority and control which is derived, largely, from nineteenth-century post-puritan writers such as Melville. I aim to a certain extent to counteract a prevailing opinion that Auster's treatment of existential themes somehow deracinates him from his American contemporaries. Robert McCrum, for example, states, "[i]f you had to set him alongside anyone, it would be Kundera or even Sebald, rather than any contemporary American or British writer" ("Abstract Expressionist"). Although Auster's European

influences, especially Beckett and Kafka, are at least as strong as his American ones, this is overstating the case, for it suggests a lack of interrogation of the existential in American fiction generally. Above all, I hope that my readings of Paul Auster, in proximity to the work of other writers, will not only provide a useful alternative to the familiar, avowedly postmodern approaches to his work, but will act as a vehicle for a re-assessment of the contemporary in general.

I would like to complete this introduction with closer readings of two texts, one a poem and one an excerpt from the film Smoke. Choosing works temporally and formally so distinct yet thematically far from dissimilar facilitates a clear appreciation of the consistency of Auster's vision, but also serves to confirm Norman Finkelstein's remark that the poetry unmasks itself as "a farewell to poetry" (56). For Auster, poetry, as a form fully immersed in one standpoint, as "that way of using language which forces words to remain *in* the mouth" ("Truth, Beauty, Silence," CP 341), feels retardant to a truly dialogic experience of connection:

> [. . .] if we speak
> of the world
> it is only to leave the world ("Narrative," Select 91)

Hence its abandonment in favour of forms more amenable to the task – the novel, film, the directness of storytelling – is inevitable.

To engage, then, with Paul Auster's poetry is partly to meet the challenge of its "difficulty." At first reading, these tight, pithy, often predominantly monosyllabic pieces seem wilfully impenetrable. Auster implies that the discipline and perseverance required of the reader stem from self-imposed *authorial* discipline:

> I set very high stakes for myself very young, and it was very difficult. I consciously
>
> reduced the range of imagery I was going to allow myself to work with [. . .]
>
> I didn't want to write poems that sounded like anybody else's poems [. . .] (Personal
>
> interview)

It is interesting to note that the poet's self-discipline looks forward to the self-imposed stringencies of Auster protagonists such as Daniel Quinn, Anna Blume and Marco Fogg. Joseph S. Walker's article "Criminality and (Self) Discipline. The Case of Paul Auster" provides the best critical exploration of this aspect of his work. Chapter three offers a more detailed analysis of the poetry, but suffice to say for now that if the reduction of poetic vocabulary to certain recurrent images – earth, bones, stones, the eye, walls – serves inevitably to expand the range of valences of each image as it struggles to express the author's repertoire of ideas, it also, by restricting the interpretive routes "into" the poem, enacts the oscillation between isolation and connection this introduction has been outlining. Just as the works themselves are about "the possibility of a connection between people" at the same time they speak of "the inadequacy of language to express the world" (Personal interview), so too the reader grasps at moments of elucidation even as he or she may feel largely excluded. As Norman Finkelstein asserts, Auster "always implicates his readers in the most intimate of his psychic examinations, which is to say that he makes us a gift of the lies [. . .] which he tells to himself," producing "verbal textures that both attract and repel" (45).

The poem called "Braille" (Select 57) encapsulates many of the themes – the other, paranoia and signification, frontiers – that subsequent chapters explore. It deals with both the difficulty and the necessity of forging a connection. The title reminds us that to conceptualise reading as simply a means of gaining "knowledge" or "truth" is to condemn ourselves to blindness, yet through that loss of conventional vision comes the recognition that reading as a fundamental process of being and attempting to meet the other is best felt as tactile and intensely physical. Stanza one elaborates on the

inefficacy of a post-puritan hermeneutic, the belief in the possible readability of a
semiologically charged world:

> Legibility of earth. Bone's
> clear pelt,
> and the swerve of plume-and-weal clouds
> in victim air – no longer
> to be read.

Tantalisingly, legibility is promised immediately, only to be withdrawn just as rapidly.
Moreover, no poetic or viewing subject is yet located within this world, and the
passivity of the last line's infinitive ("to be read") reinforces our feeling of separation
from the scene and from an optative future of comprehension. We are onlookers
whose gaze is not registered or appreciated.

And yet the direct speech of stanza two introduces pronominal specificity and
leads us toward dialogue:

> 'When you stop on this road,
> the road, from that moment on,
> will vanish.'

Who is addressing who here? If the poet is talking to the reader, he is attempting to
forge a relationship by advocating itinerancy in reading practices, an unending
movement which resists the urge to delineate, neatly categorise or quantify meaning.
Truth is ever elusive, but it is in the searching for it, the progress along the road, that
edification occurs. This theme, recurring in Auster's work and seen for example in
his essay "Northern Lights" ("he must move. And as he moves, he will begin to
discover where he is" [CP 313]), underpins chapters three, four and five.
Alternatively, and this is the essential ambiguity running through the poem, the reader
may simply be eavesdropping on one half of a conversation between remote
interlocutors. In which case, even if the messages conveyed somehow apply to us,
our abstraction is recapitulated, not mitigated.

Either way, there must *be* the other, either residing within the poem or stranded outside as onlooker, more or less a participant in the struggle of language and thought:

> And you knew, then,
> that there were two of us: you knew
> that from all this flesh of air, I
> had found the place
> where one word
> was growing wild.

Like Tony Kushner, who declares ""[t]he smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one" (289), the knowledge of the existence of the symbiotic two is a paradigmatic aim in Auster's work, representing as it does the requisite movement beyond the threshold of the self towards what will variously be referred to in this study as "relation," "connection" or even "love." Yet it offers little in the way of epistemological certainty, only meaning in the purely relational which itself is always under threat from solipsism. Language, inherently interactive, enables this relation only through acceptance of its rampant metaphoricality, its incessant shifting. This is exemplified in the enigmatic concreteness instantly rendered ethereal of "flesh of air." Words grow wild in a Transcendentalist landscape, or in the stories which Ben Okri envisions as propagating fields of minds (41), but always uncontrollably, beyond human restraint. In any Auster text, their wildness is both to be celebrated and, for humans who crave control, feared.

Stanza three's use of the past tense – "you knew, then" – suggests that this all too brittle knowledge of the other has subsequently been lost. The final stanza offers a present not simply of the objectivist's devotional attention, but of profound ambivalence, haunted by a past relationship (romantic or linguistic) in which the tension between connection and retreat cannot be resolved:

> Nine months darker, my mouth bores through
> the bright ways
> that cross with yours. Nine lives

> deeper, the cry is still
> the same.

Has there been a birth after these nine months? And if so, how are we to interpret the darkness it has invoked? Prefiguring the visualisation of language as a biological system in <u>The Invention of Solitude</u> (160) and the analogy of the empty room as womb lurking behind <u>Oracle Night</u>, "Braille" conceives of the word growing wild as having been fertilised, eventually spawning the poem itself. Yet the darkness and impenetrability contrasted so melancholically with "the bright ways" of the other from which, with the clumsy force of the mouth which "bores through," the poet surely feels himself newly estranged, equivocates and dampens our joy at parturition. Fathering the poem might briefly ignite a sense of empowerment and authority, but the child, created through language, will always be wild, delinquent.

At the end, the enjambment is significant: the optimistic reading is of a unified "cry," the poetic self and other joined in a like quest for connection and relational meaning. However, it could be read as a silencing of the cry ("the cry is *still*" as in lifeless) and a return to stasis ("the same"), echoing the illegibility of the first stanza. The poem has oscillated between the potential for connection and retreat into the poetic subject and ends with a muted cry (decidedly not an epiphanic "barbaric yawp," [Whitman, "Song of Myself" 87]) which is both and neither. No progress has been made, and the poetic cry fulminates with despair at the inadequacy of the poetic.

Somewhat obliquely, then, "Braille" pertains to the non-fixity of creative and semantic paternity. To what extent, it asks, can the child that is the text ever be said to be uniquely our offspring? In a sense, all of Auster's work concerns itself with literal, metaphorical and of course theological fatherhood, which is why I have chosen <u>The Invention of Solitude</u> as the focus of chapter one. As the following chapters confirm,

Auster's texts are littered with surrogate father figures who simultaneously stand in for lost authority while undermining the very legitimacy of the paternal relationship.

Smoke (1995) is no exception. In the scene I examine briefly here, the writer and temporary father figure Paul Benjamin tells the errant son Rashid (Thomas) Cole a story which first appears in Ghosts (150-51). As well as rendering dialogic what feels trapped within the metric constraints of "Braille," the story explicitly interrogates authority and implicitly provides an image of the elastic relationship between the artist and his influences, a relationship of great concern to the always-allusive Auster:

> About twenty-five years ago, there was a young man who went skiing alone in the Alps. There was an avalanche. The snow swallowed him up, and his body was never recovered [. . .] His son was just a little boy at the time, but the years passed, and he grew up to be a skier, too. One day, last winter, he went out alone for a run down the mountain. He gets about halfway to the bottom and he stops to eat his lunch beside a big rock. Just as he's unwrapping his cheese sandwich, he looks down and sees a body right there at his feet, frozen in the ice. He bends down to take a closer look, and suddenly he feels that he's looking in the mirror, that he's looking at himself. There he is – dead – and the body is perfectly intact, frozen in a block of ice – like someone preserved in suspended animation. He gets down on all fours, looks right into the dead man's face, and he realizes he's looking at his father.
>
> And the strange thing is that the father is younger than the son is now. The boy has become a man, and it turns out that he's older than his own father.

In a sense, the son has *become* the father, but at the same time this revelation is founded on the classic Freudian / Lacanian misrecognition engendered by the mirror image. To see oneself reflected in the ice is partly to reassert the influence of genealogy, the inspiration provided by the father's death in, for example, The Invention of Solitude, but it is also to project the self onto the other. In terms of

cultural inheritance, it implies that, as Robert Kiely's <u>Reverse Tradition</u> contends,

influence operates bi-directionally, in that it is impossible to look back upon the past

or to mine it for literary material without viewing that past through the prism of one's

present and subsequently exerting equal influence backwards onto the works one

alludes to.

Moreover, as potentially a dangerously solipsistic reading practice, the

affirmation of the normative self and the fallacious belief in the conformity of the

other to that self informs American ideological and political practices but is also a

metaphysical issue. As "Braille" tells us, it is above all a hermeneutic symptom: the

very craving for all encompassing legibility may diminish the possibility of dialogue

in favour of reversion to the paranoid reading self. The figure in the ice can therefore

be read as other or self. Central to <u>Ghosts</u> in particular, the idea of the mirror

constitutes a key element of my argument in chapter four.

As well as the mirror stage, certain other Freudian ideas are implicated here.

In acquiring the same hobby and in visiting the same slope, the son succumbs to the

kind of repetition-compulsion central to Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

This is variously associated with a paranoid sense of "malignant fate" (21); the re-

enactment of traumatic experience to facilitate apprehensiveness as opposed to shock

(31-32); and participation in a series of detours on the road to a unique and suitable

death (39). Additionally, the son's attainment of authority over the younger father,

however warped, adumbrates fantasies of (the potential for) father-rescue, dramatised

in the stories of Anchiles and Pinocchio and analysed in the work of Karl Abraham.

These ideas are intrinsic to <u>The Invention of Solitude</u>, as chapter one shows, and they

help provide an appropriate critical vocabulary, if not an all-encompassing theoretical

framework, with which to begin a reading of Auster's work.

Given Auster's need to revisit and re-tell stories, it is no coincidence that the vocabulary he occasionally employs to portray them is redolent of analysis: "I never go out looking for stories to tell; they grow inside me and become a weird compulsion" ("Abstract Expressionist"). After all, the analyst and the analysand are engaged in repetitive acts of storytelling, and it is in the transferential space between the two participants that inner – outer connection and successful treatment may be achieved. If psychoanalysis proposes anything, it is a subject which cannot be deemed self-legitimating or entirely self-knowing, a subject split between the rational and the uncanny, the conscious and the uncontrollable unconscious. Necessarily, such a non-Cartesian subject becomes to an extent an *effect* of its impressions on others. The transference of therapy is therefore a distillation of a process which is played out constantly in life and becomes the basis for the ethical thinking of Martin Buber.

For Auster storytelling is a kind of therapy and, as this introduction has outlined, the means by which the scarcely believable (and indeed the completely fictional) mysteries of the world may be shared. It is the pre-eminent link between the inner life and the outer world. Exploiting the metaphorical nature of language in the process, Auster expatiates on this vital connection in the introduction to True Tales of American Life:

> We all have inner lives. We all feel that we are part of the world and yet exiled from it. We all burn with the fires of our own existence. Words are needed to express what is in us [. . .]
>
> If I had to define what these stories were, I would call them dispatches, reports from the front lines of personal experience. They are about the private worlds of individual Americans, yet again and again one sees the inescapable marks of history on them, the intricate ways in which individual destinies are shaped by society at large. (xvi, xx)

Returning to my primary figure, it will become evident in my readings of

Auster texts that authority, if such a thing can even be said to exist in any definable way, resides somewhere *between* the inner and the outer, in the spaces where these stories evolve. Necessarily, this has metaphysical implications, but also implications for narrative construction, the question of literary influence and the whole anxious issue of the author's role in writing (or in Auster's case, sharing the writing) of his text. It is in The Invention of Solitude, as I have suggested, that these implications are explored in the most detail. Auster's search for his lost father is a search for the very meaning of authority, and for the possibilities of reconciling the inner and the outer, taking one's place in the space between and thereby arriving "at the core of human feeling, in spite of the evidence" (IOS 28). This, as the next chapter illustrates, is something Sam Auster was singularly unable to achieve:

> One could not believe there was such a man—who lacked feeling, who wanted so little of others. And if there was not such a man, that means there was another man, a man hidden inside the man who was not there, and the trick of it, then, is to find him. On the condition that he is there to be found. (IOS 20)

As we will see, the paradoxical state of being both "not-there" and "there" is not unique to Sam Auster. It becomes the default state of the author, a state to be both desired and dreaded in the freedom from authority it brings.

1. The Story Begins with the End:
<u>The Invention of Solitude</u>, Death and the Birth of the Novelist

Even before his death he had been absent [. . .] The nature of his life

had prepared the world for his death—had been a kind of death by anticipation [. . .]

(IOS 6-7)

Fatherless now, you must deal with the memory of a father. Often that memory is

more potent than the living presence of a father [. . .]

(Barthelme, Father 144)

Paul Auster in "Portrait of an Invisible Man" is a genealogical detective, "trying to find the father who was not there" (IOS 7) and re-insert himself into a family narrative. Marco Stanley Fogg in Moon Palace attempts to do the same, entering into relationships with substitute fathers such as Uncle Victor and Thomas Effing, and his real father, Solomon. The recuperation of Sam Auster's death provides the impetus for writing in The Invention of Solitude, and for David Zimmer in The Book of Illusions the critical volume on Hector Mann's films springs from despair at the loss of his wife and son. As Auster feels that "the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language" (IOS 32), so in Ghosts Blue begins to realise that "words do not necessarily work" (147).

Clearly, The Invention of Solitude (1982) has been, in many senses, a point of departure for Auster's novels. Several critics have noted its centrality to an understanding of his work. Marc Chénetier calls it "the matrix of everything he has written since" ("Pseudonymous" 36) and Dennis Barone, whilst warning against an overly instrumentalist analysis of the book's influence, refers to it as "Auster's chosen and invented mythology" (14). Auster himself acknowledges that "[i]n retrospect I can see that everything I have done has come out of that book" (Bigsby 22). Indeed, although I would disagree, for reasons which will become apparent, with Aliki Varvogli's assertion that in "The Book of Memory" "subjectivity is not yet thematised," I would concur that the second part of The Invention of Solitude

constitutes a shift from an emphasis on biographical investigation to "the genesis of a novel" (World 11). Moreover, the transition from apparent biography to apparent fiction proves to be a necessary coping strategy when the processes of biographical investigation and interpretation are revealed as nothing more than problematic fictions themselves.

"To recognize, right from the start, that the essence of this project is failure" (IOS 20): my aim in this chapter is to examine the various ways in which this failure is fundamentally a failure to locate and identify, as the introduction outlined, any validating *authority* for meaning and reality; why it is inevitable (indeed, imperative) in The Invention of Solitude; and how it is extrapolated to form, with subtle changes of emphasis, the basis for similar doomed projects in the novels. First it is necessary to explore the different disappearances of authority (to borrow the title of one of Auster's poetry collections) in The Invention of Solitude, and provide examples of their anxious repetition in proceeding works, from the three existential detective-like narratives which comprise The New York Trilogy to the puritan-provincial meditation on faith, confidence and perception entitled Oracle Night and the American dreams found in Brooklyn Follies.

Auster's novelistic preoccupations – detection; itinerancy versus incarceration; death-within-life; the prevalence of coincidence; the essential unknowability of the self and others; the inadequacy of language in designating "reality" and the consequent deliquescence of that reality – all participate in and are predicated on the concept of the absent authority. This absent authority is configured in The Invention of Solitude as the biological father but becomes by analogy the literary author himself and, as Varvogli has noted, "history, his literary ancestors, writing" (11). Eventually, the chain of metaphor brings us to the ultimate authority, one whose perceived

departure has been mourned at a personal, social and national level from the arrival of

the first Puritan settlers through to the arbiters of postmodernism – God. I refer not to

the "blank atheism" described by J. Hillis Miller (1), the nihilism of Nietzsche's

wandering madman declaring that God is dead (Gay Science 119-20). Rather I refer

to what Miller himself depicts as "the gradual withdrawal of God from the world" (1),

brought about by, amongst other factors, the rise of cities actuating a breakdown of

meaningful communion with God's creation; a Calvinist reconceptualisation of the

Eucharist as celebrating a Christ who *formerly* walked on the earth rather than an

"immediate presence"; and existentialist philosophy which locks man within his

consciousness (Miller 5,6,8). As we shall see, the withdrawal of God underpins

Auster's work as much as it does his nineteenth-century literary antecedents. Auster's

itinerants and artists are prone to wondering, like Søren Kierkegaard, "where is the

director?" (Repetition 114).

As the introduction noted, authority is also a concern of the poetry which

preceded The Invention of Solitude, but there much more obliquely and linguistically

focussed, such that the central problem is paternity of words themselves and if a

poetic voice is even possible. Auster's first full-length prose work opens up the

problem and, particularly in the second part, offers out the possibility of a dialogic

solution unavailable in the knotted and introverted lines of the verse.

A Token of Absence

Rummaging through his father's possessions in the house which "became the

metaphor of my father's life" by virtue of its paradoxical combination of stasis and

the "ineluctable process of disintegration" (IOS 9), Auster is engaged in an equally

contradictory task. For through the work of sifting, sorting and disposing of the

"tangible ghosts" (IOS 10) of his father's possessions and writing about it, Auster is

simultaneously destroying evidence of the latter's existence while piecing together clues to re-construct a picture of the man. The material presence of the father accedes to the memorial and, most importantly, the *representational*, as Auster mourns his loss through the activation of the literary impulse. That the birth of prose is therefore intrinsic to the process of mourning should be apparent: in their essay "Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation," Abraham and Torok expand on Freud's paper "Mourning and Melancholia" by asserting that the material satisfactions enjoyed by the child at an early age (notably the mother's breast) are replaced in a non-pathological mourning by figurative substitutions – that is, words:

> The passage from food to language in the mouth presupposes the successful replacement of the object's presence with the self's cognizance of its absence. Since language acts and makes up for absence by representing, by *giving figurative shape* to presence, it can only be *comprehended* or *shared* in a "community of empty mouths." (128)

This process is dubbed "introjection." Although Auster's father was clearly not present to him in quite the same way, the author's desperate need to fill the space with his writing indicates that he has joined that community of empty mouths. Thus <u>The Invention of Solitude</u> inevitably invites a psychoanalytic reading, which I undertake in more depth later.

Bound up inextricably in the memorial and the representational, the family photographs Auster discovers begin to assume a vital significance. Susan Sontag succinctly describes one aspect of a photograph's fascination:

> All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. (15)

One image in particular, the trick photograph of Sam Auster which forms the cover of the book, doubly inscribes the image with death, that is, physical death and the death-

in-life which characterises the subject for the author. It carries epistemological and ontological significance which reverberates through Auster's entire oeuvre and is therefore the ideal starting point for a discussion of the book's influence:

> There are several of him sitting round a table, each image shot from a different angle, so that at first you think it must be a group of several different men. Because of the gloom that surrounds them, because of the utter stillness of their poses, it looks as if they have gathered there to conduct a seance. And then, as you study the picture, you begin to realize that all these men are the same man [. . .] as if, by multiplying himself, he had inadvertently made himself disappear. There are five of him there, and yet the nature of the trick photography denies the possibility of eye contact among the various selves. Each one is condemned to go on staring into space, as if under the gaze of the others, but seeing nothing [. . .] It is a picture of death, a portrait of an invisible man. (IOS 31)

Characteristically, Auster's insightful gloss on the image appears to pre-empt the critic: here, artfully interpreted, is the emblematic image of the intangible father which leads Auster to declare "I have the feeling that I am writing about three or four different men" (61). Here is the self-consciously artificial representation which parodies Sam Auster's estrangement from "the domain of the other." Because, as Auster muses, that domain "was unreal to him, his incursions into that domain were made with a part of himself he considered to be equally unreal, another self he had trained as an actor to represent him in the empty comedy of the world-at-large" (15). Staring into space, distant from himself and from others and living his séance-like life, Sam Auster paradoxically disappears in his multiplicity precisely because the nature of the trick photography and the manner of his life deny access to the "real," the essential or authoritative self. Truly this is, in the words of Susan Sontag, "a token of absence" (16).

Clearly what Auster dubs "the multiplicity of the singular" (<u>AH</u> 319) plays a pivotal role in his novels, and I believe it is not fanciful to posit the trick photo of Sam Auster as precipitating a fascination with this theme on both a thematic and an aesthetic level. As chapter four illustrates, for example, Quinn, the protagonist of <u>City of Glass,</u> has a self refracted (as if through the numerous mirrors and reflecting panes of glass of the title) through his pen-name William Wilson, through his detective hero Max Work, and through the detective he decides, in a moment of spontaneous madness, to become – Paul Auster. Later, <u>The Book of Illusions</u> presents a hero, Hector Mann, who is unavailable to us other than as a series of shifting identities, cunning disguises, masks and silent film roles.

Yet certain attributes of the photo itself complicate matters even further. For this is a surreal trick shot which has been deliberately constructed by the photographer, in a sense *authored* by an artist who likewise is liable to stay unidentified and hence absent forever. If, as Roland Barthes has argued, "the photograph allows the photographer to *conceal elusively* the preparation to which he subjects the scene to be recorded" (and by analogy to conceal his authorship) by utilising "the special credibility of the photograph [. . .] in order to pass off as merely denoted a message which is in reality heavily connoted" ("Message" 21), then the image is mystified long before Auster attempts his reading of it. In fact, whereas Auster's reading may initially strike us as being in some way authoritative, perhaps because of his deep emotional investment in the implications of the image, it in turn relies primarily on connotation taken as denotation by bringing a stock of cultural references and significations to bear in order to confirm certain assumptions he has already made about his father. Despite cognisance of the technical manipulation of reality involved, Auster intuits an emotional or psychological reality within the frame.

What the picture attests to, then, is the reification attendant upon the interpretive act. According to Susan Sontag, "[a]esthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs" (21) – this distance is only exaggerated by trying to bridge it with interpretation. Adumbrated by Auster's analysis is the increasing remoteness from reality caused by hermeneutic endeavour, the futility of piling signs upon signs in an effort to get to the heart of an aesthetic artefact which not only dramatises absence in the first place but also, by virtue of what Barthes calls its "structural paradox [. . .] that here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message *without a code*" ("Message" 19), holds out a promise of critical efficacy it is destined to break. We might also add that, to use Walter Benjamin's highly influential terminology, the photograph epitomises the denigration of the sense of "aura" or originality in a piece of mechanically reproduced artwork ("Work of Art" 223).

As readers, our interpretation exacerbates the problem. For if we allow that a photograph "could also be described as a quotation" (Sontag 71), then we must accept that our quotations arrive third-hand. For is it not true that just as Auster reads his father through an image which, being selected, posed, tampered with, has already in a sense been *read* by the photographer, we then receive the image doubly filtered through the work of the photographer and Auster? Disingenuously adopting the pronoun "you" in his account, Auster assumes a reified consciousness on our part by suggesting that we see through his eyes while effacing his presence, to accept as a "real" analysis that which has already been doubly abstracted. In short, the task we actually perform is to quote Paul Auster quoting the photographer quoting Sam Auster. Conversely, the pronominal displacement only serves to highlight Auster's own removal from the core of the image's meaning. The use of the present tense,

moreover, which withdraws temporarily from the biographical past tense employed elsewhere in "Portrait of an Invisible Man," seems to position us in the precinct of critical discourse, forcing us to reflect on the hermeneutic processes taking place. And although, as Timothy Dow Adams has highlighted (36), the paradoxical nature of photographic art (creating light from darkness) neatly metaphorises Auster's art in The Invention of Solitude (the light of literary inspiration brought about by the darkness of death), the attempt to further illuminate the subject through writing plunges us back into the impenetrable blackness of the photographed subject, thereby reaffirming the photograph as itself a form of "sublimated murder" (Sontag 14-15).

Self-reflexive, ventriloquising, cleverly assembled like a Chinese box or a Russian doll: the formal peculiarities of the trick photo passage speak as much of the difficulties of criticism and writing than of the unknowability of the father himself, stressing that whatever information we can acquire about someone, will never be first-hand. The structure "A quotes B quotes C quotes D" occurs with notable frequency in Auster's novels as a narrative technique. For example, with regard to City of Glass Auster explains: "you have a book written in the third person throughout, and then, right at the end, the narrator appears and announces himself in the first person – which colors the book in retrospect somehow, turning the whole story into a kind of oblique, first-person narrative" (AH 317). So Auster narrates a friend of the fictional "Paul Auster" narrating Quinn (who is himself posing as "Paul Auster," remember) on his existential adventures. Jarring in its suddenness, the effect of this move is a radical undermining of any authority, a casting of doubt upon our preconceived notions about who holds the narratorial reins. Conversely, but with equally unsettling effect, large portions of Leviathan (Auster's most overtly "political" novel, the proceeding chapter demonstrates) switch from the unreliable first-person narration of Peter Aaron to a

temporary third-person as Auster narrates Aaron narrating Benjamin Sachs.

The Book of Illusions and Oracle Night stretch this particular technique almost to its limits. In the former, what appears to be the definitive elucidation of Hector's life and character is filtered through so many narrators (David Zimmer narrating Alma Grund narrating Hector [126-218]) that each successive storytelling seems not to take us closer to an authoritative reading of the text that is Hector Mann, but rather along a trajectory which describes an inexorable diminution of authority. Likewise, the Möbius Strip-like Oracle Night, by Paul Auster, portrays a writer, Sidney Orr, who writes the beginning of a novel which includes a character, Nick, who in turn describes the plot of a novel entitled Oracle Night. Stories within stories are multiplied until, like Nick, we feel ourselves to be locked in a room full of words, with no visible means of escape (109). Every room promising access to the essence becomes merely an antechamber to a meaning which forever remains deferred and unobtainable.

In chapter six, I borrow from the lexicon of visual arts to explore further Auster's formal strategies in works such as The Book of Illusions, particularly the Chinese box narrative construction outlined above, in the light of the concept of *framing*. Physically, the trick photo of Sam Auster possesses a frame within which the subject(s) have been carefully posed by the photographer. Metaphorically, Auster imposes a second frame upon the image by constructing a written argument to explain it. Our reading builds yet another frame around the photograph in relation to the linguistic signifiers added by the author. In so doing, we succeed only in heightening our awareness that what the image *means,* and what Auster's father means, will never be ours for the taking, at least not ours alone. The excision of Auster's grandfather from the frontispiece's family photograph betrays a radical act of alteration and thus

re-framing in an effort to insist through the denotative image on an alternative underlying reality (IOS 34). Likewise, the continual re-assessment of the trick photo further destabilises any reality it may ever have advertised. Each successive re-framing struggles against the delimitations of its successor so that, as Jacques Derrida avers in The Truth in Painting, the *parergon*, or frame (including those things attached to the piece of art but not strictly part of its intrinsic value) becomes a permeable membrane, one which renders the polarities of "art" and "reality" untenable (Truth 57-64). The same thing happens to those Austerian protagonists like Quinn and Mann who are subject to multiple re-framings through different narrators: it is not possible to know where the frame ends and the reality begins. As the subsequent discussion notes, this is cause both for anxiety and for potential liberation from the confines of the self.

The Indefinite Article

> Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good they're a whole *lot* of people trying so hard to be one person. (Fitzgerald, Last Tycoon 325)

Before proceeding to an interrogation of the obvious theoretical implications of this argument, I would like to turn first to the ramifications for Auster as (auto)biographer / novelist in The Invention of Solitude. For if Auster's father is the author's Bartleby, "an emblem of the unavailability of truth, in writing as in life" (Varvogli 9), then one needs to examine how Auster as a writer copes with truth's unavailability for himself. Perhaps then one can ascertain whether Sam Auster really is "the epitome of the postmodern character" (Nikolic).

Given that The Invention of Solitude is a work imbued with suffering and emotion, a book which variously deals with Auster's thoughts on fatherhood (164-66), the death of his maternal grandfather (118), the illness of his son Daniel and the consequent strain placed upon his first marriage (107-8) and the remarkable tale of

how Auster's paternal grandfather was murdered by his wife (34-48, and see Contat 177-78), it appears perverse for Russell Banks to declare that "Auster is not given to confession." Banks continues: "One way to keep his private life private is to smooth over the seams" (qtd. in Begley). How Auster "smoothes over the seams" or, more precisely, unstitches the seams between fact and fiction in the same way he transgresses the frames between art and reality, can be witnessed in the transition from the first-person narrative of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" to the third-person narration of "The Book of Memory." To quote Adam Begley: "First, there is the upper case 'I': Auster's life is broken in two, and the crisis that marks the break is the quintessential Auster story." In the move from "I" to "A.," Auster hovers, I will demonstrate, between a writing subject and a written subject, between some measure of authority and a radical plurality and indeterminacy which echoes his father, and in so doing becomes what Umberto Eco has dubbed the "Liminal Author, or the Author on the Threshold – the threshold between the intention of a given human being and the linguistic intention displayed by a textual strategy" ("Between" 69). In short, he becomes "a gathering of symptoms" (White 26), the indefinite article who haunts the pages of the novels which follow in anagrams (John "Trause" in Oracle Night); names corrupted in transmission ("a guy named Anster, Omster, something like that" [T 67]); overt incursions into the fictional world (the various "Austers" in The New York Trilogy); and pen names (the Paul Benjamin who writes Squeeze Play and becomes the author in the film Smoke). Therefore to analyse The Invention of Solitude, "the laboratory in which Auster, guinea pig, seminal subject, reveals and displays his inconsistence" (Vallas 94, trans. Sheena Kalayil), is necessarily to debate the instability of autobiographical and authorial acts themselves.

Here is what Auster has to say about the transmutation of narrative voice:

> What it came down to was creating a distance between myself and myself. If you're too close to the thing you're trying to write about, the perspective vanishes, and you begin to smother. I had to objectify myself in order to explore my own subjectivity – which gets us back to what we were talking about before: the multiplicity of the singular. The moment I think about the fact that I'm saying "I," I'm actually saying "he." It's the mirror of self-consciousness, a way of watching yourself think. (AH 319)

Auster's comments are interesting for a number of reasons. First, it is evident that contrary to Aliki Varvogli's assertion, subjectivity is very much the theme of "The Book of Memory." If "Portrait of an Invisible Man" uses the figure of the father to dramatise "the vanity of trying to say anything about anyone" (63), including the self which is forever shut out of the centre by the very act of representation, then the second part posits that the writing subject cannot therefore be coeval with the written. Auster's mirror metaphor is slightly misleading: unlike Blue, who "is forced to look at an exact image of himself" (Jahshan 395), the disjunction between Auster and "A." activates a distorted specularity in which the definite article Auster is refracted. Thus it becomes a vague signifier which might well stand for "Auster," but might equally represent "Author," "Anyone," "Autobiography" (like John Barth's "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction"), or even "Absence," in the sense that "[h]e must make himself absent in order to find himself there. And so he says A., even as he means to say I" (IOS 154). One thing it is unlikely to signify is "Authority." What it achieves is a recapitulation of the idea that the "self that exists in the world – the self whose name appears on the cover of books – is finally not the same self who writes the book" (AH 293).

In this relation, it should also be noted that given Auster's allusiveness, it is unlikely that he is unaware of the connection with the scarlet letter "A" in Nathaniel

Hawthorne's novel. As I argue in subsequent chapters, one of Auster's enduring

concerns is what I dub, in a phrase borrowed from The Book of Illusions, "the burden

of representation." Hester's "A" attests to the inescapability of representation by

others, and the transition from "I" to "A" similarly enacts the move from something

designated as reality to an acknowledgement of that burden.

Without being monolithically connected to an identical extratextual referent,

the "A." undermines the traditional view of autobiography's authoritative status, its

"metaphysics of presence" (Derrida, qtd. in Couser 15), its unrivalled facility for

offering practical advice by example from an author indistinguishable from his

narrative standpoint. Paul de Man, in "Autobiography as De-Facement," outlines the

traditional notion of autobiography, before going on to counter it:

> Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less
>
> ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of
>
> referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and
>
> dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose
>
> identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name [. . .] (68)

(It is interesting that autobiography *seems* at least, in its apparent referentiality, more

denotative than fiction in the same way photography's disingenuous pretence of

uncodedness distinguishes it, for Barthes, from other forms of visual art.) Auto-

biography in the Enlightenment context of Benjamin Franklin may well have been the

literary form "most congruous with this idea of a unique and autonomous self"

(Couser 13), but we should not forget that it is precisely the expectation of congruity

which uniquely enables the genre to refute it.

There are of course notable precedents for Auster's displacement technique.

The Education of Henry Adams is a third-person autobiography whose ego

effacement, influenced by Rousseau's Confessions, serves to emphasise the education,

not the man. Metaphorically configured as a "manikin," the autobiographical subject is a Lockean tabula rasa upon which the clothing of experience is progressively placed, such that "[t]he object of study is the garment, not the figure" (7). Curiously, just as Franklin's dedication to empirical observation and confidence in individual, first-person testimony partly stem from Scottish Enlightenment thought, so too does Adams' impulse to dislocate the self by projecting it into a space suitable for perusal or judgement. Pronominal displacement in journals and moral philosophical texts was common practice during the eighteenth century, as exemplified by James Boswell in his journals: "WEDNESDAY 11 APRIL. Yesterday you got up as miserable as a being could be. All was insipid and dreary. But, blockhead that you are, have you not experienced this five hundred times?" (Boswell 107). If, as Adam Smith formulated in 1759, "we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct [. . .] when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station" (Theory of Moral Sentiments III: 1, 109-10), then Adams' or Auster's processes of objectification paradoxically insist on the impossibility of knowing the self while allowing the writer a privileged viewpoint as an ideal spectator.

One might query my use of Enlightenment examples. Indeed, William Dow argues that postmodernism has traditionally gone against Enlightenment values and that Paul Auster's work, whilst offering certain challenges, participates in postmodernism. I would argue that the displacement of the (autobiographical) self constitutes a kind of postmodern fragmentation which is present in many Enlightenment texts, in fact is fundamental to the Science of Man as a field of inter-disciplinary study. Susan Manning makes a similar point, arguing that "well in advance of postmodernism, Hume had rewritten the notion of the 'fictiveness' of

human knowledge in a thoroughly 'decentering' way" (<u>Fragments</u> 17). Interestingly, James Boswell's striving for "self-perfection" involves, like Auster's, questions of authority, and a search for "father-figures" (Manning, <u>Fragments</u> 135). Dow is right to point out, like Jacqueline Austan (23) that the intensely ethical aspect of Auster's memoir works against claims for its postmodernity. This idea assumes greater significance as this thesis progresses, suffice to say for now that the Enlightenment term "sympathy" is largely commensurate with the philosophical and ethical terms I employ, particularly "dialogue" and "relation."

For a more humanist Enlightenment thinker, the ideal spectator may indeed have been a cultivated, sympathetic member of civil society; in a more pietistic mode, as for a Quaker journalist, it may have been God. For John Calvin, a major influence on American Renaissance literature with whom I deal in chapter two, it is most definitely the conscience which, in a rather minatory and despotic way, acts as a "kind of sentinel" which exists within man "to observe and spy out all his secrets, that nothing may remain buried in darkness" (II: 141). What is important is the extent to which the spectator is or is not omniscient. For Henry Adams, struggling to understand an increasingly mechanised world poised on the verge of the twentieth century from an outdated position informed by eighteenth-century Enlightenment values, the consequences of the *breakdown* of that omniscience are startling:

> The secret of education still hid itself somewhere behind ignorance, and one fumbled over it as feebly as ever. In such labyrinths, the staff is a force almost more necessary than the legs; the pen becomes a sort of blind-man's dog, to keep him from falling into the gutters. The pen works for itself, and acts like a hand, modelling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best. The form is never arbitrary, but is a sort of growth like crystallization, as any artist knows too well; for often the pencil or pen runs into side-paths and shapelessness, loses its relations,

stops or is bogged. Then it has to return on its trail, and recover, if it can, its line of force. (XXV, 325)

Abandoned by epistemological certainties to a kind of Humean scepticism, Adams has recourse to an almost post-structuralist mode of writing in which the pen takes control, such that rather than life experience dictating autobiography, the reverse is true. His subjectivity is undermined and becomes, in a Lacanian or Derridean manner, an *effect* of its inscription into autobiographical discourse, "determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium" (de Man 69). Importantly, Adams' disquisition suggests that in the face of the unfathomable in reality (such as the death of his sister in chapter nineteen, or the daunting dynamo which is the focus of chapter twenty-five), the subsumption of the writing self into the written self is necessary for survival, acting as a guide for the blind observer.

Likewise, for Auster, "A." begins to write at the moment when the observable world seems absolutely inexplicable: "this is where it begins. The first word appears only at a moment when nothing can be explained anymore, at some instant of experience that defies all sense. To be reduced to saying nothing. Or else, to say to himself: this is what haunts me. And then to realize, almost in the same breath, that this is what he haunts" (IOS 81). Haunted by the ghost of his father and the subsequent loss of his own sense of authority within a reality which is ghost-like in its defiance of logical description, Auster too runs the risk of becoming a melancholic spectre, the nebulous "A." who haunts the pages of the text which creates him. It is as if, to quote Michel Foucault, he has been "transformed [. . .] into a victim of his own writing" ("What is an Author?" 117).

Impelled to write by the father's death, Auster speaks with a "voice-from-beyond-the-grave" (de Man 77). In fact, "The Book of Memory" ventriloquises a clamorous multitude of voices from beyond the grave, filled as it is with an eclectic

selection of quotations from Pascal, Hölderlin, The Bible and <u>Pinocchio</u>. Auster explains: "the reason I quote so liberally from other writers is because I wanted it to be a collective work. This is the hoard of voices which inhabits my skull. These are the voices that I live with and I wanted them to come out and share the work with me" (Bigsby 23). Elsewhere he has stressed that the voices "are all part of the process of trying to discover what it is to be human" (Personal interview). So replete with quotations is "The Book of Memory" that it at times resembles a kind of speculative commonplace book. By overtly drawing on his literary antecedents – Milton and Poe in <u>City of Glass,</u> Thoreau in <u>Leviathan,</u> Hawthorne in <u>The Book of Illusions,</u> Dashiell Hammett (via Hawthorne again) in <u>Oracle Night</u> – Auster continues the trend for collectivity in the novels. The effect of this amplification of internal voices is to render Auster's own voice more diffuse, to dramatise by exaggeration what Paul de Man says is the default tropological mode of autobiographical writing – prosopopeia, the wearing of dead people's masks (75-76).

Employing substitutions in this way, Auster risks the dissolution of the individual into the multiple, frequently incompatible selves witnessed in the trick photo of his father. "The Book of Memory" stipulates that the sins, or at least the idiosyncrasies, of the absent father be revisited at a textual level by the son, who far from being engaged in confessional acts uses multivocality and displacement in "a meditation about certain questions, using myself as the central character [. . .] it still seems to me not so much an attempt at biography but an exploration of how one might begin to speak about another person, and whether or not it is even possible" (<u>AH</u> 276). After all, Sam Auster also "talked about himself only obliquely—in the third person, as if about an acquaintance of his" (<u>IOS</u> 16).

So, prosopopeia threatens dissolution or authorial ghostliness. Yet in enlisting

the help of other voices, Auster can also be seen as engaged in a *constructive* act of self-effacement which enables the joining of a community, a literary history which is not necessarily confined to the textual or to the limits of the self. This is an idea treated in more detail in subsequent chapters, particularly in relation to the existential philosophy which I feel informs Auster's secularised metaphysics, but it is important to stress that if "Portrait of an Invisible Man" sets up the problem – that is, how one might begin to speak of another person or to encounter oneself – then "The Book of Memory" tentatively offers a solution: the kind of shared storytelling outlined in the introduction. Through this technique, the mistrust of authority recognised by John Zilcosky in Auster's work (199) is filtered through what we might term the community of empty mouths of the other figures present in the work to create a literary artefact which is no longer personal confession but rather joint testimony to certain enduring truths.

Chronologically, too, "The Book of Memory" strives against the confessional mode (which does, after all, stress an individual authority for one's life Auster is at pains to counteract). For though the title would appear to invite us into the past, Auster chooses to write predominantly in the present tense, restricting the preterite to the interpolated anecdotes and examples of chance incidents which litter the text. It is as if Auster realises that, as John Frow points out, the autobiographical or historical dredging up of what we dub "memories" or "recollections" exemplified by the vogue for volumes of "recovered memories" of trauma, results in poorly reconstructed or idealised images (Frow 220-21). True memory is *actual* and "rather than being the repetition of the physical traces of the past, is a construction of it under conditions and constraints determined by the present" (Frow 228). Frustrated by his efforts to mine the past for clues about his father, Auster resorts to a more measured and distanced

meditation on the *constructedness* of memory (as place [82], as room [88], as storytelling voice [123-24]), betraying an awareness that "memory is of the order of representation rather than a reflex of real events" (Frow 234). Most importantly, memory aims at "immersion in the past of others" (IOS 139): constructed or otherwise, it should be an act of sympathy.

As the book opens, the author seems caught in a temporal maelstrom in which, owing to Sam Auster's departure and the resultant immersion in the past which constitutes "Portrait of an Invisible Man," the logicality of time itself has been obliterated:

> Christmas Eve, 1979. His life no longer seemed to dwell in the present. Whenever he turned on the radio and listened to the news of the world, he would find himself imagining the words to be describing things that had happened long ago. Even as he stood in the present, he felt himself to be looking at it from the future, and this present-as-past was so antiquated that even the horrors of the day, which ordinarily would have filled him with outrage, seemed remote to him, as if the voice in the radio were reading from a chronicle of some lost civilization. Later, in a time of greater clarity, he would refer to this sensation as "nostalgia for the present." (76)

Escape from this peculiar nostalgia can only be achieved through the adoption of a present tense which conjoins memory and the *representation* of that memory in a synchronous instant, lending to the work the appearance of spontaneously engendered fragments arranged diary-like. (How to achieve simultaneity of experience and representation of experience is a crucial theme, and one which I examine in chapter six.) The diary, whose famous exponent Anne Frank is undoubtedly an influence on the holocaust narrative of In the Country of Last Things and Auster's enduring preoccupation with writing in solitude, provides, according to John Sturrock, a more authentic form of chronology than the autobiography. Its discontinuity resists the idealising concatenation of much biographical discourse, and mirrors the discontinuity

of writing itself (Sturrock 55). For Auster, it enacts the breakdown of strict causality, the "[r]emission of cause and effect" (IOS 126), allows for the interruptive commentaries "on the nature of chance" (80, 88, 94, 134, 143) and disabuses us of comforting notions of organising meta-narratives such as genealogy.

Theoretical Implications

Collapse of metanarratives in favour of local, anecdotal forms of storytelling; suspicion of causality; a dedication to intertextuality through the ventriloquising of other authorial voices; distance from an underlying reality through the very act of writing; the foregrounding of subjectivity and interrogation of ontological questions – my discussion of The Invention of Solitude so far has guided us inexorably towards the postmodern theories of Jean-François Lyotard, Linda Hutcheon, Jean Baudrillard and Brian McHale. A cursory glance at the body of Auster criticism tells us that although Paul Auster is not always *explicitly* dubbed a postmodernist writer, his alienated individuals are frequently believed to inhabit a postmodern milieu haunted by the concerns of that most nebulous and diffuse of critical frameworks. Stephen Bernstein, for example, while analysing intertextuality in The New York Trilogy, asserts that the protagonists struggle against the loss of meta-narratives or a "holistic response" ("Question" 137) to a fractured reality. Bernd Herzogenrath employs both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean post-structuralism to scrutinise what he calls Auster's "novels after the death of the novel" (4), asymptotic texts trapped in a world of postmodern entropy. Joseph S. Walker calls In the Country of Last Things "a microcosmic embodiment of certain theories of the postmodern: endless change, a failure of narrative and knowledge to cope with the crisis at hand" (406). Though her chief aim appears to be to position Auster in relation to his nineteenth-century literary antecedents, Aliki Varvogli, in arguments indebted to Brian McHale, still suggests that

the exaggeration of coincidence in his stories, especially in <u>Leviathan,</u> is an example

of postmodern *retour de personnages,* and hence is designed to highlight the

indeterminacy and artificiality of the text (<u>World</u> 143).

      Inevitably, though Auster regards chance not as textual phenomena but a

reflection of his reality (Bigsby 18), there is still some validity in all this. Borrowing

from two theorists who reflect the sometimes bewildering diversity of postmodernist

thought – Brian McHale and Jean Baudrillard – we can see how Auster's fiction

occasionally invites such readings. From the moment the narrator Quinn declares

"the question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the

story to tell." (<u>NYT</u> 3), it is clear that despite raising our expectations of a generic

detective story, which McHale calls "the epistemological genre *par excellence,*"

Auster is actually renouncing the very possibility of epistemological certainty in

favour of an investigation of the pluralised and overlapping worlds of detective,

writer, reader and text. The question is less what the solution to the case might mean,

but rather what the case itself *is* – a shift, in McHale's terms, from epistemology to

ontology (<u>Postmodernist</u> 9). Additionally, the first half of <u>The Music of Chance</u>

sporadically reads like a postmodern manifesto of what Margaret Morse calls "An

Ontology of Everyday Distraction" (99), an unfocussed and fleeting way of viewing

the world:

> Speed was of the essence, the joy of sitting in the car and hurtling himself forward
>
> through space. That became a good beyond all others, a hunger to be fed at any
>
> price. Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment, and as one moment
>
> followed another, it was as though he alone continued to exist. He was a fixed point
>
> in a whirl of changes [. . .] (<u>MC</u> 11)

Morse's "nonspace of privatised mobility" (121) is a version of the hyperreal, and we

are reminded of Baudrillard's assertions in <u>America</u> that "[s]peed is the triumph of

effect over cause" and "[d]riving is a spectacular form of amnesia" (America 6, 9).

Auster's protagonists are often seen to inhabit this nonspace, and are characterised by

their movement.

Paul Jahshan has recently insisted that "debates as to whether Auster's writing

is postmodern or not are [. . .] sadly irrelevant" (390). Whilst I would reservedly

agree that his postmodernism has become, with the weight of criticism outlined

above, almost axiomatic, I do feel it is important to re-contextualise those postmodern

elements by foregrounding two contributing discourses which Auster scholars tend to

neglect – puritanism and psychoanalysis. I would argue that the post-puritan

literature of the American Renaissance which has influenced Auster, notably Poe,

Hawthorne and Melville, displays all the characteristics of postmodernism in the

context of a mourning of lost authority, and that postmodernism itself, though

supposed to emerge when God disappears, is inevitably still heavily inflected with

theological tropes and ideas. The apocalyptic tone, the entropy, the suspicion of that

which is designated "reality" in American postmodernism in the fifties and sixties

(and beyond), as described by Tony Tanner in City of Words (141-52), are already

present decades before. I, like Marc Chénetier, "am not convinced there is so much

that is new in the contemporary newness" ("Posthumanists" 347).

What *is* new is the more nihilistic strand of postmodern thought, epitomised

by Baudrillard and variously associated by a critic such as Christopher Norris with

"frequent shifts of political ground," "disenchantment with enlightenment reason," or

"a species of inverted Platonism, a discourse that systematically promotes the

negative terms (rhetoric, appearance, ideology) above their positive counterparts"

(164, 167, 166). Such a strand, it seems to me, is less concerned with critique of

realist norms (Lyotard's position) than with celebrating the impossibility of

meaningful critique. Most importantly, it peels away from *ethical* considerations in a way that Auster would find repellent.

Despite Auster's dismissal of the "cookie cutter Derridean nonsense of postmodern criticism" (Personal interview), I would not consign Derrida to the same category as Baudrillard, for his insistence on *différance* and the interdependence of supposedly binary opposites seems to me to have profound ethical implications. In professing impatience with (loosely) a Baudrillardian stance, I aim neither to be simply fashionable nor to empty his work of all validity. Indeed, his thinking forms an integral part of chapter six. My main motivation in invoking and debating these ideas is to insist that Auster is doing something very different. Even at his bleakest (and most Baudrillardian) he investigates the ethicality at the heart of writing.

Moreover, the ostensibly postmodern ideas which surface in Auster's novels are actually to a large extent inherited, handed down from the first Puritan settlers and filtered through the work of his literary predecessors by way of the Enlightenment. From the Reformation, the preponderance of anti-Catholic sentiment has been inextricably connected to Protestant anxiety about iconography, over-simulation and the concomitant loss of God's authority. A desire to divest oneself of the intermediary symbols of worship is a desire to reinstate direct contact with the "real" of God. (This yearning lies at the heart of Jean Baudrillard's <u>Simulacra and Simulations</u> [172]).

Likewise, the familiar American wilderness metaphor stems from Puritan feelings of disappointment upon arrival in the New World. As Patricia Caldwell states, the early Puritan settlers' migration across the Atlantic was occasionally rendered in conversion narratives as a literalisation of the Red Sea crossing by the Jews to the Promised Land, with reference to the Book of Exodus (136). This was transmuted upon arrival: the vicissitudes of the colonising experience forced a change

of perception so that the Promised Land became, as Alan Heimert has shown (361-82), a testing wilderness, a site of struggle. Indeed, as Auster muses in "Portrait of an Invisible Man":

> Just because you wander in the desert, it does not mean there is a
>
> promised land. (32)

As we shall see, this is a statement which has precise *linguistic* implications as well as locating Auster's work in a puritan mode: just because we wander through the web of signification, aspiring to descriptive efficacy, it does not mean we can ever succeed. We are all, as Bernd Herzogenrath stresses, free-floating, orphaned signifiers and "decentered" subjects in the desert (131).

As early as 1976, in his essay on Edmond Jabès, the image of the desert haunts Auster. "If language is to be pushed to the limit," he states, "then the writer must condemn himself to an exile of doubt, to a desert of uncertainty. What he must do, in effect, is create a poetics of absence. The dead cannot be brought back to life. But they can be heard, and their voices live in the book" (CP 372). A poetics of absence might aptly describe what Auster formulates in The Invention of Solitude: to spend time in the desert, as characters like Walt in Mr Vertigo do, is not only to undergo the biblical trial in the wilderness from Deuteronomy 8, it is also to attempt to recuperate these voices. In other words, it is part of the process of mourning.

Mourning, as defined by Freud, is "regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ("M and M" 243). Paul Auster's prose work, beginning with The Invention of Solitude, enacts the necessary mourning process when a loss of authority occurs, a loss either of God himself (in The Book of Illusions and Oracle Night) or of authorities analogous to God (most influentially Sam Auster, but also genealogical imperatives in Moon Palace; substitute fathers in Mr

Vertigo and Timbuktu and American foundational ideologies such as liberty in Leviathan). A brief examination of some key psychoanalytical theories will illustrate how the mourning process involves, as was stated previously, the installing of figurative substitutions (which can include memories) for material (and in the Puritans' case, spiritual) presences, in other words, elaborate networks of hieroglyphs, signs and narratives which risk resulting in a kind of narcissistic paranoia. What a number of scholars, including Tony Tanner and Susan Manning, have identified as "puritan paranoia" corresponds with the psychoanalytic patient's potential for narcissistic drift into mourning's pathological other – melancholia. Writers such as Poe, Hawthorne and Melville equate such paranoia with the act of writing itself, and I argue that Auster would concur. Indeed he has dramatised this paranoia using, as Freud himself does in his work on the Schreber case, construction metaphors, notably the wall in The Music of Chance. Moreover, if we conceptualise a *successful* mourning as a full acceptance of loss and a comprehensive exchange of the real, the material, for the represented, the simulated, there is always the danger of retreat into melancholic textuality or a nihilistic postmodernism.

The question posed in Auster's work, and the question I return to in subsequent chapters, is whether one can avoid this and re-establish sympathetic ties with the outside world, rather than indulging in mere linguistic or representational deferral or play. What lies at the heart of Auster's fiction is less a celebration of undecidability, of an anti-positivistic debunking of myths, but more what Kathy Acker has dubbed a "post-cynical phase" within the postmodern era. In her words, "there's no more need to deconstruct, to take apart perceptual habits [. . .] We now have to find somewhere to go" (35). Auster, too, is constantly looking for this somewhere. As the introduction stated, I suggest that it resides in a form of dialogic existentialist

philosophy the seeds of which can be found in late Heidegger, with the primary influence coming from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. If psychoanalysis promotes a deep interrogation of the self, the transferential space of the therapeutic relationship, commensurate with the processes of storytelling discussed in the introduction and acknowledged in later Freud as a key factor, approximates to the kind of dialogic arena Buber postulates. Moreover, if representation for Freud is always compensatory, a second-best, for Auster it becomes much more than that. It is the very place where dialogue may be facilitated.

I should stress at this point that it is not my intention to "psychoanalyse the Puritans" or wield psychoanalytical theory as an all-encompassing explanatory system for Auster's novels, for that would be to fall prey to the paranoid tendency toward "taking somebody's system and taking somebody's book and glomming that book onto that system to see if it works out" (interview with Chris Pace), an enterprise which Auster's notoriously allusive and slippery prose proves otiose. Freudian theory, however, does provide an appropriate critical *vocabulary* with which to start tackling what I feel are the central issues, particularly in The Invention of Solitude. After all, as Malcolm Bowie argues, "[t]he whole of clinical psychoanalysis belongs, in one notable sense, to the biographical arts, for the encounter between 'analysand' and analyst involves the writing and rewriting of a life history" (178). The Invention of Solitude is, amongst other things, a self-analytical autobiography.

Freud's analysis of Paul Schreber's Memoirs of a Nervous Patient constitutes his most explicit and revealing diagnostic exploration of the concept of paranoia. Based entirely on textual interpretation rather than direct consultations with Herr Schreber, it not only attempts an understanding of the elaborate narratives of the sufferer's delusions but also betrays an equally potent paranoia through its

hermeneutic practices, its need to impose a primary source of meaning upon the empirical evidence. (Freud is thus the critic to Schreber's author: the critic as paranoid impositionist assumes greater significance as this thesis develops.) Schreber's bizarre conviction that God is transforming him into a woman in order to impregnate him and therefore save the human race Freud attributes primarily to his "father complex," which arises from "an infantile conflict with his beloved father" (43). The crisis of authority represented by this conflict results in a powerful attachment to a surrogate father figure in the form of Schreber's doctor, Flechsig, which arouses latent homosexual feelings. Freud describes: "a yearning for this substitute person reasserting itself in him and with an intensity such as can be understood only by virtue of its roots and original significance" (36). To compensate for and defend against his homosexual instincts, Schreber constructs the paranoid delusion that he is being persecuted by the second surrogate – God – to ward off the originary conflict. Leaving aside the troubling imbrication of femininity and regressive homosexuality implicit in Freud's thinking, it is clear that the collapse of a reassuring relationship with authority (the father) leads to the fabrication of a complex and enfolding narrative which is endlessly able to assimilate new elements and therefore can stand as its own authoritative structure. That this is both paranoid and in a sense megalomaniac should be obvious, a point which has tremendous significance for the subsequent discussion of puritan paranoia.

For the puritan, the loss of the Father (or for Jacques Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father, "the model of some harmony" [Psychoses 96]) is precisely the perceived loss of the Word of God. Unable to achieve immediate spiritual and linguistic regeneration in the land he had imaginatively constructed as a new Eden, the self-allegorising settler typically spoke of disillusionment, of a failure to comprehend the

vast expanses of the landscape. This inspired a Job-like railing against his new-found suffering and an "accompanying loss of confidence in the special destiny of his mission" which "sowed the seed of doubt in the puritan's mind" (Manning, Vision 20). An example from Thomas Shepherd's Confessions illustrates this anguish:

> And when I desired to come hither and found a discontented heart and mother dead and my heart overwhelmed [. . .] And in this town I could not understand anything was said, I was so blind, and heart estranged from people [. . .] I found not what I came for hither [. . .] (185)

("I found not what I came for hither" might serve as an appropriate epitaph for several Auster figures: "A.", Quinn, Blue, Anna Blume, Nashe, Mr. Bones and David Zimmer.) The crisis in understanding, confidence or faith in an already inscrutable world inscribed with cryptic evidence about God's nature leads to the obsessive reading of that world for signs of grace or damnation. Thus, the Puritans' own "father-complex," couched partly in the linguistic difficulties of interpreting signs left by a receding source of primary representation, results in internal divisions which bring about paranoia powerful enough to precipitate the New England witch trials (see Manning, Vision 21), and actuate a radical bifurcation of the soul into observer and observed, a concept which assumes great importance when examining the works of Hawthorne, Melville (particularly The Blithedale Romance and The Confidence-Man) and Paul Auster's detectives.

Returning to the lexicon of Freud, paranoia is tantamount to a form of child-like primary narcissism, a belief that the world revolves around the self and that somehow that self is implicated in every plot and every web of signification. As the seminal "fort-da!" game illustrates ("Beyond" 14-16), the potentially traumatic realisation of the mother's material absence and therefore the breakdown of the child's absolute centrality, provokes a representational substitution for that loss

enacted in the form of play. Taking control of that disappearance, transmuting passive into active and material into symbolic, the child simultaneously enters into the mourning process while replacing traumatic shock with controlled apprehensiveness ("Beyond" 31-32). Untrammelled belief in one's importance can become a form of megalomaniac paranoia in which the child controls the plot of departure and return in the realm of the representational and the ludic.

By dramatising the control of absence and recuperation, the "fort-da!" paradigm corresponds to another area of psychoanalytic research which has peculiar reverberations in The Invention of Solitude, that is, fantasies of father-rescue. Karl Abraham contends that in fantasies in which "[t]he son generally rescues some representative of the father, for instance, a king, or any other highly placed person, from an impending danger to life" (299) the repressed, censored urge is often in actual fact the *death* of the father. Moreover, a debt is overturned in the act of rescue: "the father now 'owes' his life to his son, just as the latter 'owes' his to his father" (Abraham 302). In evoking the myth of Aeneas bearing Anchises on his back through its contemporary reworking in Disney's Pinocchio (IOS 133), Auster implies that the double debt he owes his father – not only the money which he inherited (for Pascal Bruckner, a symbol of chance [29]), but also the inspiration to write prose – is repaid in the symbolic act of keeping him alive in the text.

Yet Auster is trapped between the incessant affirmation of Sam's death which propels his work ("It was. It will never be again" [75]) and the need continually and painfully to rescue him within that work to avoid the ultimate acceptance of the loss:

> In spite of the excuses I have made for myself, I understand what is happening. The
> closer I come to the end of what I am able to say, the more reluctant I am to say
> anything. I want to postpone the moment of ending, and in this way delude myself
> into thinking that I have only just begun, that the better part of my story still lies

> ahead. No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless
> stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this
> silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever. (65)

Time and time again throughout Auster's oeuvre, protagonists from Mr. Bones to David Zimmer oscillate between insistence on death as a necessary inspiration for art and the paradoxical resurrection (or as I observe in chapter three, exhumation) of the loved one through that art. It could be argued that the deliberate indeterminacy and ambiguity of Auster's endings constitute a melancholic refusal to let the mourning process end and thus to recognize without equivocation the departure which engendered it. This is in fact, the omnipresent danger of mourning – that it will slip into self-regarding melancholia. For Auster, I argue in subsequent chapters, such a condition is commensurate with a particular form of self-indulgent, decontextualised postmodern aesthetic.

In chapter four I speculate on why games and sport are so important to Paul Auster. One reason might be the affinity between writing and gaming. In "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," Freud implies that the writer, like the child, indulges in play, creating fantasy worlds in which repressed material can safely be handled and wish-fulfilment acted out (143-53). Auster explicitly refers to this premise in "The Book of Memory" (164). Latent in this argument are again the mourning process and paranoia: the writer plays a "fort-da!" game of his own, constructing plots which regain control of parental absence (or the absence of God) and attempt to fill the hole left by that absence. Auster, as child of Sam and father of Daniel, reflects on the importance of storytelling both for his son and by analogy for himself in distinctly psychoanalytical terms:

> It is said that a man would go mad if he could not dream at night. In the same way, if
> a child is not allowed to enter the imaginary, he will never come to grips with the

> real. A child's need for stories is as fundamental as his need for food, and it
>
> manifests itself in the same way hunger does. Tell me a story, the child says. Tell me
>
> a story. Tell me a story, daddy, please. (154)

Elsewhere, Auster accepts Freud's assertion that the *unheimlich* is a "revival of the

ego-centric, animistic world-view of childhood" (IOS 148). Writing The Invention of

Solitude, we can infer, is a return to childhood, to a time before absence: "He is

remembering his childhood, and it has appeared to him in the present in the form of

these experiences" (149).

Yet the battle which lies at the heart of The Invention of Solitude and all

Auster's novels is glimpsed through the following statement: "All the coincidences

that seem to have been multiplying around him, then, are somehow connected with a

memory of his childhood" (IOS 149). Just as Freud attempts a neat interpretation of

Schreber's delusional narratives, so Auster here attempts to offer a kind of

psychoanalytical reading of his own experiences, to rein in coincidence and make it

explicable. But elsewhere, Auster evinces an awareness of the innate paranoia of the

writer, something which, like melancholia, must be avoided:

> In a work of fiction, one assumes there is a conscious mind behind the
>
> words on the page. In the presence of the happenings of the so-called real world, one
>
> assumes nothing. The made-up story consists entirely of meanings, whereas the story
>
> of fact is devoid of any significance beyond itself [. . .] Like everyone else, he craves
>
> a meaning. Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a
>
> connection between two fragments he is tempted to look for a meaning in that
>
> connection. The connection exists. But to give it a meaning, to look beyond the bare
>
> fact of its existence, would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world, and
>
> he knows it would not stand. (146-47)

Two contradictory impulses therefore dominate Auster's life, corresponding to Steven

Alford's neat distinction between the "brave" and the "weak" Auster ("Chance" 123).

What is at stake is the urge to construct cohesive, paranoid tales which reinstate him as author in a world stripped of recognisable signifying authority, versus the need to embrace "meaninglessness as the first principle" (147) – or in Charles Baxter's rephrasing the "stubborn meaninglessness of trauma" ("Bureau" 41) – thereby producing a narratively fragmented and temporally disjunctive work which mirrors the randomness of the world itself, post-authority.

Though Auster insists that ""[i]f my work is about anything, I think it's about the unexpected, the idea that anything can happen" (AH 333), he populates the pages of his novels with paranoid characters such as Pozzi in The Music of Chance and to a differing degree Benjamin Sachs in Leviathan, who persevere with the idea of a profound and arcane logic and order in the universe, a consoling inscription of the self into meta-narratives. This clash of world views originates, I would argue, in "The Book of Memory," which acts as a kind of injunction to Auster and to the reader (who let us not forget is also unavoidably engaged in paranoid acts of narrative construction) to reconcile these warring opposites. Additionally, my analysis in the proceeding chapters of various key themes in Auster's fiction – paranoia versus chance, detection, wilderness and the frontier – place Auster, as this chapter has intimated, within a literary history of the United States stretching back to the Puritans in order to ascertain to what extent, as Christopher Bigsby suggests, this paranoid tendency "to read every event, every conversation, as a clue to some sort of hidden meaning" is a *national* characteristic, "firmly in the American vein" (31).

The Potential of an Entire World

"When the father dies, he writes, the son becomes his own father and his own son. He looks at his son and sees himself in the face of the boy" (IOS 81). "The Book of Memory" emerges at the point when the son, as part of the mourning process,

takes control of both signification and reproduction, duel aspects of the loaded term "authorship." As a meditation on fatherhood and writing, "The Book of Memory" configures the latter as progeniture in a solipsistic and deeply paranoid-megalomaniac paradigm which apparently works against Auster's predilection for self-defacement. One night "A." enlists the services of a nameless, faceless prostitute in a bar, who takes him into the back room for fellatio. "A." continues:

> As he came in her mouth a few moments later, with a long and throbbing flood of semen, he had this vision, at just that second, which has continued to radiate inside him: that each ejaculation contains several million sperm cells – or roughly the same number as there are people in the world – which means that, in himself, each man holds the potential of an entire world [. . .] Each man, therefore, is the entire world, bearing within his genes a memory of all mankind. Or, as Leibniz put it: "Every living substance is a perpetual living mirror of the universe." (114)

As Stephen Fredman argues, the monadology described here is deeply paranoid, stipulating that the world converges in the (specifically masculine) self which is capable of spawning entirely new worlds ("Consequences"). That this is an image of literary authorship is affirmed by Auster's further comments on Leibniz, where he conceives of language in systemic, biological terms, as "an infinitely complex organism, all of whose elements – cells and sinews, corpuscles and bones, digits and fluids – are present in the world simultaneously" (IOS 160). Auster's "multiplicity of the singular" assumes a radically different connotation as the son, freed of the constraints of paternal authority, re-invents himself as a God, creating worlds through words. Such megalomaniac fantasies are re-envisioned in The Music of Chance in the form of Stone's "City of the World" model, and in Oracle Night, which repeatedly metaphorically links the empty womb as the room where the author spawns his creations with the impregnation of the female who bears the material evidence of

male signification.

However, Auster, never one to shy away from paradox or contradiction, quickly balances the megalomaniac view of language and creation with its logical correlative. For if one is capable of encompassing the whole world within oneself, does it not follow that every other human being possesses that same potential, and therefore every human being is infinitely reproducible in every other, in the same way that every word carries within it the more or less tangible traces of every other word? Envisaged this way, the monadistic becomes the fragmentary or, most importantly, the relational. Auster, expanding on the intricate imbrications of the human and the linguistic, continues:

> Language is not truth. It is the way we exist in the world. Playing with words is merely to examine the way the mind functions, to mirror a particle of the world as the mind perceives it. In the same way, the world is not just the sum of the things that are in it. It is the infinitely complex network of connections among them. As in the meanings of words, things take on meaning only in relationship to each other [. . .] The grammar of existence includes all the figures of language itself: simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche – so that each thing encountered in the world is actually many things, which in turn give way to many other things, depending on what these things are next to, contained by, or removed from. Often, too, the second term of a comparison is missing. (161-62)

What Auster is describing here, in essence, is the ethics of language.

We return to the trick photograph: any attempt to approach an adequate description or knowledge of someone is necessarily entangled in the myriad representations of others: to use words of Nathan Zuckerman with which Auster would undoubtedly concur, "we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (Roth, Counterlife 164). Hence, perhaps, the exaggerated prosopopeia and collectivity of

"The Book of Memory." Language is the way we exist in the world – it is indeed not an essentialist truth: it is multiple, interested approximations of portmanteau truths. Tellingly, the second term of Auster's comparison – his father – has always already been missing from his prose writing, consigning the project to locate essence empirically to a *necessary* failure which, far from being "incompatible with language" (IOS 32), actually dramatises precisely language's potential to forge unexpected connections. "No sooner have I thought one thing," Auster says, "than it evokes another thing, and then another thing, until there is an accumulation of detail so dense that I feel I am going to suffocate. Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing [. . .] when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it" (32). What Auster eventually realises in "The Book of Memory" is that the truly important things are in fact the writing journey, the dialogic sharing of the experience with other writers and the "simultaneity in which they function in memory" (Neagu 111).

The Point of Departure

Whether or not the singular important thing (that is, authority) ever existed is precisely the point of The Invention of Solitude, its bequest to the novels, and brings us back to our point of departure. Mourning replaces material reality, as I have argued, with figurative signifiers in the form of language, potentially producing paranoid texts which, through the nature of language itself, may cast doubt on the very existence of that which is mourned. In this way, mourning risks tipping over into melancholia; psychoanalysis spawns postmodernism; epistemology becomes ontology; and the puritan wonders in his obsessive scrutiny of the world of proliferating signs if he ever really was one of the elect, or if God ever really existed for him. Likewise, as the opening quotation shows, Auster's father never existed; he

was always already absent.

In the chapters which follow, using as my departure point the mourning of the loss of authority first confronted in The Invention of Solitude, I study the implications of the theories outlined in this chapter for Auster's constructions of the meaning of human relationships. If the other is always already in a sense dead for us, how can we ever establish the "tentacles of connection" (Osteen 88) required to form telling human interactions? Are we doomed to inhabit "tiny apertures of meaninglessness" (BI 109), divorced from others? If we are constantly re-authored by everyone we encounter, how is it possible to know even ourselves without knowing the whole world, which is surely impossible? Does love have a function in all this? Auster's phrase "the grammar of existence" (IOS 161) seems particularly apt: the proceeding analysis further investigates the concept of paranoia and how the breakdown of a hypotactic, hierarchical syntax of all-embracing authority needs somehow to be translated into a paratactic configuration of democratic fidelity. As Susan Manning has said: "It appears that severance of hypotactic chains leaves paratactic links (whether epistemological, ethical or grammatical) tremblingly vulnerable to rupture" (Fragments 157). In other words, with no structure of authority in which to locate ourselves, how can we form meaningful relationships with others? As we shall see, the implications of this question for Paul Auster are at once literary (that is, to do with the primacy of storytelling), personal, theological and political, getting to the heart of what it means to be an American, and what it means to be human.

2. All Part of a Big Plot: Paul Auster and Paranoia

Certainly, there was some deep meaning in it [. . .] (Hawthorne, Scarlet 27)

the true paranoid for whom all is organised in spheres joyful or threatening about the

central pulse of himself [. . .] (Pynchon, Lot 49 89)

"You tampered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does that, he's got to

pay the price." (MC 138)

Oracle Night: Signs of Grace

What's in a name? A great deal, if you are Paul Auster. It is clear from

observations in the previous chapter on the anagrams, malapropisms, mistaken

identities and direct borrowings of the names of literary characters littering Auster's

work that the name cannot be deemed a fixed point of identity. Rather it epitomises

identity in negotiation. The slippage from "I" to enigmatic "A." in The Invention of

Solitude is the representative example of this situation. The adopted indefinite article

is, as we have seen, precisely that – indefinite – casting the liminal author figure into

the chorus of voices which constitutes "The Book of Memory." Thus, recognising the

otherness inherent in identity, "the writing consciousness discovers the twofold

danger contained in the assumption of a full autonomy of the subject: the

estrangement from both oneself and the world, and the immobility of the vision of the

self thus achieved" (Neagu 83-84). Mobility is a key trope for Auster: the

paradigmatic transport from purportedly fixed "I" to mobile, ambiguous "A." is

rehearsed throughout his work in the iconic American hoboism of the protagonists; in

the open-endedness of ostensible detective plots; and above all in the recognition that

language itself is itinerant, transgressing frontiers and facilitating imaginative work

beyond the confines of a substantive self. For so many characters, for example Daniel

Quinn as "Paul Auster," Marco Stanley Fogg as "MS," or scriptable manuscript, the

name is where this work begins.

Auster's penchant for mischievous nomenclature occasionally throws up red

herrings: for example, it would be a brave critic indeed who attempted to ascertain any real significance in the name of Walt the Wonder Boy's some-time companion in Mr Vertigo, Mrs. Witherspoon. Nonetheless, for every example of sheer playfulness can be found a name whose relentless punning reverberates throughout the text and gets to the heart of the author's concerns, chief amongst which (and I take this as axiomatic throughout this chapter) is the essential unknowability in any intellectual sense of self and other.

Thus Calvin Murks, the sinister foreman in The Music of Chance, is the embodiment of a penal puritan work ethic the inner workings of which are designed to remain obscure. As John Calvin himself warns in relation to predestination, "let us willingly abstain from the search after knowledge, to which it is both foolish as well as perilous, and even fatal to aspire" (II: 204). (As we shall see, it is the combination of profound ignorance and a lust for arcane knowledge which precipitates the fatal paranoia of certain of Auster's protagonists.) Zimmer, the surname of The Book of Illusions' narrator, is the German for "room," and consequently participates in the ongoing art / life dialectic which has haunted Auster since The Invention of Solitude and before. Is the act of artistic creation in the locked room merely a way of avoiding life with the other, and therefore commensurate with death, or does it provide a chance for connection? Clearly, the punning name's efficacy in inviting multiple interpretations whilst enacting the slipperiness of identity is something Auster relishes, along with a number of his protagonists. Marco Fogg, for instance, is "unable to resist the perversity of the pun" (43). Of course, this self-consciousness constitutes one of the reasons why Auster's novels attract criticism for seeming "too obsessively literary" (Deveson 52) or for indulging in "intellectual gamesmanship" (Maslin 7).

Oracle Night (2003) is replete with overt and implied puns. For a man who comes to believe that "[w]e sometimes know things before they happen" (222) and that writing has vaguely-conceived magical properties which can shape the future, it is appropriate that the narrator's name – Sidney Orr – adumbrates the orr-acular visions of the title. Additionally, homophonic punning suggests "oar," the potential for movement in a man still debilitated by a near-fatal fall, and for the power of writing to navigate the future. And of course "or": the instability of identity, the only partially-hidden alternative, multiple selves which inhere within us. Another rich seam of wordplay (ore?) is opened for Orr upon discovery of Mr. Chang's mysterious Brooklyn stationery shop "Paper Palace," itself a reference to the Chinese restaurant named "Moon Palace." The "clever display in the window (towers of ballpoints, pencils and rulers arranged to suggest the New York skyline)" (3-4) implies that the protagonists, typically, inhabit a city of words which is in a sense constructed of "stationery" and rendered "stationary" in being bound by the limits of the page.

Labyrinthine and suggestive though these semic networks are, I do not intend to pursue them any further. Neither am I tempted by the hermeneutic possibilities generated by John Trause, Sidney's friend and fellow author whose surname is an anagram of "Auster." From the previous chapter we are already well aware of the games Auster plays with his own name and the resultant tension between authorial presence and absence. Instead I wish to follow what I believe to be a more fruitful line of inquiry inspired by yet another pun, that on Sidney's wife's name – Grace. Not only does her name refer to the attributes which first entranced Sidney, "the sense of calm that enveloped her, the radiant silence burning within" (20), it also functions as a nexus for a reading of the novel as a text deeply imbued with *puritan* sensibilities. For in its paranoid obsession with signification and reading; the concomitant

megalomaniac streak which persuades the various writers to manufacture life-changing stories; the impulse toward division and doubling; the inscrutability of a reality which, further distanced from us by our imperfect language, recedes almost into nothingness, Oracle Night, as narrated by Sidney Orr, resembles nothing more than the kind of puritan-provincial text (to borrow Susan Manning's expression in The Puritan-Provincial Vision) exemplified by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville in the nineteenth century and more recently transposed into a late capitalist world by Thomas Pynchon in The Crying of Lot 49.

It is important at this juncture to point out that this is not to argue for Auster as a direct literary descendant of the Puritans, rather that his imaginative engagement with his literary antecedents has brought about the inheritance of certain puritan preoccupations which his *protagonists* tend to fall victim to. Briefly, by "puritan" I mean, as my initial reading of Oracle Night confirms and subsequent analyses of Leviathan (1992) and The Music of Chance (1990) elaborate upon, not a theological persuasion or practitioner (for this I use "Puritan") but a restricted and restrictive paranoid worldview which subjects the self to a dispiriting oscillation between total self-abnegation before a perceived authority and a megalomaniac self-aggrandisement, coupled with frantic hermeneutic activity, resulting from the perceived loss of that authority. Such an oscillation I have previously touched on in relation to Freud's Schreber case.

Using Oracle Night, as undoubtedly the most explicitly puritan of Auster's novels in this sense, to tease out the main issues, I go on to discuss what the oft-discussed puritan legacy might actually mean for American literature and for Auster in particular, and then in the light of this discussion use Leviathan and The Music of Chance, in many ways richer and more sophisticated texts, to explore how paranoia as

an intractable epistemological state informs both fiction and the reader's / critic's dilemma. Through his paranoid puritan protagonists, I argue, Auster offers a critique of an excessively Manichean worldview which runs the risk of figuring the self as normative and the other as necessarily conformative, and of seeking totalising, explanatory, *economic* systems which betray their exclusionary foundations. At the same time – and this is a strand of my argument which attains greater significance in proceeding chapters – the depiction of such paranoia threatens to expose the egregiousness of the critic's project. Narrator, author, critic: all are seen in their fear and desperation to impose meaning upon the world, to play God when God may no longer be around.

So in a novel infused with violence and suffering, Oracle Night's male characters persist in asking whether God – the ultimate authority figure – is still available as a source of reliable meaning and whether he is punitive or merciful. Dwelling on these concerns the novel stipulates that in such a dark world, to quote John Burnside, "none of us is deserving of grace, we must simply accept it when it comes" ("Careful" 7) and achieve some measure of goodness in our striving for it. The difficulty of course lies in recognising its arrival. Ultimately, and troublingly, grace (and Grace) is revealed in Oracle Night to be a luxury available exclusively to the male protagonist and predicated on an excess of female suffering inflamed by masculine paranoia.

Tony Tanner's book Scenes of Nature, Signs of Man provides a succinct account of puritan semiological obsessiveness (or "rampant hermeneutic activity"):

> the Puritans were continually searching for signs of grace or damnation in
> themselves and everybody else [. . .] you have the conditions for an unchecked (even
> paranoid or megalomaniac) semiology [. . .] The Puritans lived in a hopelessly over-
> interpretable world. There was a continuous excess of significance and

signification. Everything meant too much. Nothing was simply what it was. (19)

In such an environment, all signs bear the traces of other signs just as, if one is to

believe the deconstructionists, all words carry the residue of other words. Disabused

by the Fall of the comforting notion that words have a direct relationship with their

referents, the Puritan risks drowning in a sea of symbol and allegory in which

punning, I would argue, is a constituent part of the play of sanctioned and

unsanctioned meanings. If, as Jonathan Culler states, *all* words do indeed carry the

traces of others (14), then punning is essentially the default state of language and a

self-consciously punning writer such as Paul Auster seeks only to highlight the

inevitable instability engendered by this state. As a result, "Grace" operates both

diegetically as a thematic pun which drives Sidney and thus the narrative forward in

the quest to be worthy of grace, and (revisiting the territory of City of Glass)

rhetorically on a meta-narrative level as a constant reminder of language's opacity and

volatility after the Fall.

In a protracted footnote, Sidney describes his first meeting with Grace and the

"altogether shocking experience" of instantaneously falling in love with her (17). Far

from being an unequivocally romantic example of love-at-first-sight, the anecdote

shows us Sidney's faltering attempts at textual interpretation as he struggles to read

Grace in order to locate her essence, the true cynosure of his devotion. (And as

subsequent chapters demonstrate, the urge to know, to penetrate the locked room of

the other's essence, is tantamount to an urge to consume or incorporate, not to accept

or be with the other.) In fact, I would assert that this passage, relegated to a footnote

which comes to dominate the page as the past encroaches upon the present and the

unconscious upon the conscious, is fundamental to understanding the novel as a

puritan-inflected document. For, as the proceeding analysis makes evident, Sidney's

descriptive trajectory from literary comparisons to sheer bewilderment to empiricism to a kind of quasi-transcendental mysticism establishes only his remoteness from Grace, his quintessential failure to understand. This is "the puritan-provincial rhetoric of distance" in action (Manning, Vision 14), a self-reflexive discourse on the processes of observation and description which emphasises ineffability and inadequacy in relation to an unattainable because unknowable object.

Sidney's reference points, initially, are other aesthetic representations: "I had read about such things in novels, but I had always assumed the authors were exaggerating the power of the first look [. . .] I felt as if I had been thrust back into the world of the troubadours, reliving some passage from the opening chapter of *La Vita Nova* [. . .] That hair, I later realized, bore some resemblance to the hair shown in the drawings of the hero of *The Little Prince*" (17-19). Signs invoke signs in an inter-textual web which fails to draw an accurate picture and mires our love-struck hero in clichés of passion and helplessness, "inhabiting the stale tropes of a thousand forgotten love sonnets. *I burned. I longed. I pined. I was rendered mute*" (18).

In an effort to anchor the prose in reality, there follows a lengthy description of Grace's appearance, which in itself is significant for being unusual in Auster's spare prose. We are informed that "[s]he was five feet eight inches tall and weighed a hundred and twenty five pounds. Slender neck, long arms and long fingers, pale skin and short dirty-blonde hair" (18). However, this multiplying of surface details is inadequate, Sidney realises:

> But I want to go deeper than Grace's body, deeper than the incidental facts of her
> physical self [. . .] if much of what we are is confined to flesh and bone, there is
> much that is not as well. We all know that, but the minute we go beyond a catalogue
> of surface qualities and appearances, words begin to fail us, to crumble apart in
> mystical confusions and cloudy, insubstantial metaphors. Some call it *the flame of*

being. Others call it *the internal spark* or *the inner light of selfhood.* Still others refer to it as *the fires of quiddity.* The terms always draw on images of heat and illumination, and that force, that essence of life we sometimes refer to as *soul,* is always communicated to another person through the eyes. (19)

Beguilingly complex and densely allusive, this passage yields up intertextual echoes of its own almost too innumerable to mention. Characteristically tapping into his own body of texts, Auster (via Sidney) paraphrases Blue's realisation in Ghosts that "words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say" (147-48). In turn, "cloudy, insubstantial metaphors" reverberates with the same inscrutable menace as both Jonathan Edwards' Images or Shadows of Divine Things and the "phantasmagorical antics" of the "spectre-like" beings moving within the purview of the distanced observer Coverdale in the "counterfeit Arcadia" of The Blithedale Romance (27, 45, 48). (It is in this specific perceptual sense rather than in any traditional generic one that the novel resembles a ghost story.) Puritan spectral imagery is juxtaposed with key Quaker tropes in the citing of "the inner light," and certainly Quaker journalists such as John Woolman wrestled with a similar linguistic difficulty, that is, how to communicate an inchoate, immanent revelation based on individual testimony in the debased language of man. For example, Woolman himself declares at the outset of his journal, "[w]hile I silently ponder on that change wrought in me, I find no language equal to convey to another a clear idea of it" (8). Faced with such a "mystery," Sidney returns to the poets for inspiration in order to catch the merest "glimpse" of Grace.

My aim here is not simply to unpack the manifold allusions in Auster's writing, but to show that this almost desperate allusiveness is symptomatic of the very intangibility Sidney is trying to overcome. Overwhelmingly we feel his distance from the object of his gaze: there is no interaction in this passage, no real relation between

them. She is a series of tropes and metaphors, a spectre drifting upon a stage while he is cast in the role of interested observer.[1] Even if at this point he superimposes an essence upon her, claiming that through her eyes he can sense "a startling absence of inner struggle, an equilibrium of mind that seemed to exempt her from the usual conflicts and aggressions of modern life" (20), by the end of the novel he is reduced to paranoid speculation, denied any knowledge:

> Grace had become a blank to me, and every thought I had about her that night quickly turned into a story, a gruesome little drama that played on my deepest anxieties about our future—which rapidly seemed to be turning into no future at all.
> (176)

It is therefore necessary to investigate the intervening action to determine where Sidney's despair and cynicism originate. What becomes apparent, and what the quotations above hint at, is that his chief failure is one of perception, which both prefigures and presupposes a failure in "*faith* [. . .] often used as equivalent to *confidence*" (Calvin I: 483). That being the case, one would expect God to play an important part in the narrative, an expectation which is borne out by analysis of certain crucial incidents.

Auster's protagonists traditionally have at best an ambiguous relationship with God. Tim Woods, as we shall see, has argued persuasively that an air of minatory predestination hangs over The Music of Chance, the influence of a controlling and malevolent puritan-capitalist deity symbolised by Stone's City of the World model ("Aleatorical" 151). In The Book of Illusions Hector Mann is burdened by the guilt he feels over the accidental murder of Brigid O'Fallon, and regards every accretion of

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[1] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into very much detail on the status of the observer in puritanism. I would recommend Susan Manning's The Puritan-provincial Vision, especially chapter 1, in which she outlines the bifurcation of self into observer and actor engendered by Calvinism, and chapter 5, in which we see that the repeated figures of masquerades, spectres and spies in nineteenth-

hardship, including the destruction of his films upon his death, as his just deserts, the paying off of "debts" to a punitive God (278). Reluctant to trust in "meaninglessness as the first principle" (IOS 147), Auster's characters frequently strive to reinstate a missing deity in order delusively to hold on to some epistemological certainty in a world of seeming chaos, chance and endless representation. Clearly this is a postmodern idea, but I would stress that it was first and foremost a puritan one. It is worth reiterating that Auster is preoccupied much less with postmodernism per se than with its theological and literary-historical antecedents. Indeed, many of American postmodernism's ideas about systems of signification are basically re-cycled puritan ones. The painful irony for Hector Mann and others is that without strictly believing, without truly possessing faith, the comforts of a religious meta-narrative will *always* be denied them, and they will continue to be subject to the endless play of enigmatic simulation. God cannot be taken on and discarded at will.

Oracle Night fixates on the very moments at which God can be seen to abandon mankind to horror, chaos and inhumanity. Sidney is appalled by a terrible story he finds in the paper, one he describes rather hyperbolically as a "dispatch from the bowels of hell":

BORN IN A TOILET,

BABY DISCARDED

High on crack, a 22-year-old reputed prostitute gave birth over a toilet in a

Bronx SRO, then dumped her dead baby in an outdoor garbage bin, police

said yesterday [. . .] She then returned to her customer and resumed having sex [. . .]

(112, 115)

Sidney declares "*This is the worst story I have ever read*" and adds, portentously, "I understood that I was reading a story about the end of mankind" (115). Earlier,

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century American fiction come from provincial anxiety over the recession of a God who could provide

Sidney has been writing the story-within-the-story about editor Nick Bowen. Nick finds himself underground, after a series of adventures inspired by the Flitcraft narrative in The Maltese Falcon and surely by "Wakefield," in the bizarre "Bureau of Historical Preservation" (89) where Ed Victory collects telephone books to prove to himself "that mankind isn't finished" (91). Ed's urge to reaffirm humanity stems from his experiences as a cook in Dachau after the war:

> I saw the end of all things, Lightning Man. I went down into the bowels of hell, and I saw the end [. . .] Human beings did it to human beings, and they did it with a clear conscience. That was the end of mankind, Mr. Good Shoes. God turned his eyes away from us and left the world forever. (91-92)

Catastrophic tales such as these speak not of a gracious God, but of a malevolent and neglectful deity whose departure signals the emergence or triumph of evil and the ascendancy of mourning, the same God who occupies an ambiguous position in relation to Nature's cruel culling of Henry Adams' sister in the Education of Henry Adams (XIX). Interestingly, instead of facilitating an increased awareness of a reality constantly informed by mortality, the sister's death actuates a radical bifurcation of Adams' soul between emotion and reason, rendering reality "fantastic" and a "phantasm" in the process (243, 242). The inscrutability of God's work derives from horror at these worst stories and as we shall see this goes some way to explaining Sidney's perceptual crisis in relation to Grace.

Ed Victory's anecdotal evidence participates in Auster's ongoing engagement with the Holocaust, a subject which, to varying degrees, he alludes to in nearly every novel. Without exploring in too much detail territory which has been expertly traversed by other critics such as Aliki Varvogli (73-74), I wish to emphasise that the puritan notion of the perceived disappearance of God is one which Auster, reflecting

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meaning.

on the brutalising chaos of the Holocaust, has chosen to adopt *metaphorically* (in The Invention of Solitude as the death of his father) as a way of investigating the decomposition of meaning engendered by such apparently meaningless events. Josh Cohen posits that language in Jewish texts involves "productive failure" (95); in other words, the inability to grasp the infinity of God results in plenitude of interpretation. Likewise "the Holocaust appears to refuse assimilation to Meaning" (95). "Jewish writing" thus goes beyond theology to become "a way of inhabiting language" and a manner of tackling the problem of witness to the unrepresentable (96). I examine this aspect of Auster's writing in more detail in chapter five. For now, I would stress that Auster's protagonists are frequently engaged in a struggle to recuperate meaning, no matter how unstable it may be, and often in a deeply paranoid manner, in order to make sense of the world. This "reinvestment of the text with meaning" (Neagu 85) can once again be seen as a form of mourning which in its supplementarity threatens to become melancholic as it attempts to seize life from the ashes.

Additionally, these apocalyptic narratives place Oracle Night, the reader, and the various writers competing for page space within it in a resoundingly eschatological framework which renders unstable not only meaning but also linearity in history. This, argues Susan Manning, is a feature of the puritan narrative. Defined by the absolutism of Puritanism's dichotomy between grace and damnation, the believer exists not within a changing historical context, but within a pre-ordained structure of eternity or descent into the abyss which subsumes past, present and future (Vision 13). In Oracle Night, the preoccupation with grace and / or apocalypse produces a disintegration of chronological time and a subsequent emphasis on subjective time. Chang, the proprietor of Paper Palace, exemplifies this individuation: "Chang seemed to live in a blur of accelerated motion, as if the clocks of the world

ticked more slowly for him than they did for everyone else" (203). Moreover, past,

present and future co-exist within us, the realisation of which leads to John Trause's

rather overweening (and latently solipsistic) assertion that "sometimes we know

things before they happen, even if we aren't aware of it. We live in the present, but

the future is inside us at every moment. Maybe that's what writing is all about, Sid.

Not recording events from the past, but making things happen in the future" (221-22).

With the benefit of hindsight (the novel is supposedly being written twenty years after

the event), Sidney feels compelled to agree with him:

> Stillborn babies, concentration camp atrocities, presidential assassinations,
>
> disappearing spouses, impossible journeys back and forth through time. The
>
> future was already inside me, and I was preparing myself for the disasters that
>
> were about to come. (223)

If this sounds suspiciously like a belief in predestination, or of text as

prophecy (Rankenburg 15), it is hardly surprising. For such is Auster's reliance on

meaninglessness as the first principle that chance becomes "a kind of cosmic current"

(Bray 83) and begins to assume an arcane logic all its own within a literary artefact

which is of course anything but random, being deviously constructed by Auster as

author. As Blake Morrison has astutely observed, "the cruel geometry and alienation

of urban life don't preclude a sense of fore-ordination" (26). Time and again

protagonists are disabused of reassuring notions of cosmic order or certainty and

forced to bump up against the only certainty – chance – while Auster as author

(whether or not he chooses playfully to undermine his identity or authority by means

of onomastic punning) *incorporates* chance in the narrative design. A writer like

Auster occupies the interstices between chance and order by virtue of his God-like

power to produce stories and therefore, as Trause's comments imply, writing becomes

embroiled in questions of power, responsibility and the felicitous or corrupt wielding

of authority. Such questions we shall see are particularly pressing in Leviathan.

Hence we arrive back at the intersection of puritan paranoia and megalomania.

Captain-less – that is, Godless – and lacking in confidence like the travellers on the

river in Melville's The Confidence-Man, left to chaos and suffering in a world of dead

babies and war crimes, what choice do these writer characters have but to resort to

megalomaniac acts of narrative construction in a bid to make sense of the mess of

meanings that surrounds them? Trause's conviction that writing can shape the future

is a uniquely paranoid-megalomaniac delusion, evincing "the paranoia of narrative

formations per se, in their mania for plots and endings" (O'Donnell 14). Likewise,

Sidney's (and Trause's) fetishisation of the stylish Portuguese notebook is precisely

focussed on its blankness, its status as a Lockean *tabula rasa* upon which the artist

can return to a pre-creational point and take up the reins of creation himself. Sidney,

unsurprisingly, fills its magical pages with stories *about* paranoia. Nick Bowen, the

hero of the Flitcraft-inspired picaresque, has no valid reason to suspect that the falling

gargoyle which shatters his acceptance of the world and motivates his departure for

Kansas, "was meant to kill him" (26). He is simply paranoid, refusing to accept a

random act in favour of clinging to a view of the world as full of signs specifically

aimed at him. Auster's distinctive formal peculiarity, his Russian doll-like narrative

construction (dealt with in more detail in chapter six), here participates in this

bewildering paranoia. For here we have an author who believes in chance as a

defining principle, but who seems to appreciate the inherent irony in his position as a

creator of a formal composition, tautologically dramatising within that composition

the act of paranoid or megalomaniac creation inherent in the literary act. Moreover,

the multi-layered structure undercuts Trause's grandiose claims for authorship by

reminding us, as this thesis has consistently been arguing, that any story is inevitably shared between a community of potential and actual storytellers.

So one question is – what is the ultimate effect of this multiplication of stories-within-stories? If the writer tries to replace God as an arbiter of meanings, where does this augmentation of linguistic signs leave him? Sidney's response to the hideous story of the prostitute and the dead baby is "to write some kind of response to it" (116). However, during this literary "harangue" he twice fails to hear the phone ring, "the first time it had ever happened to me" (116). Significantly, he finds a message from Grace on the answering machine: he has therefore missed an opportunity for direct communication with grace. Coupled with the strange incident in which Grace peeks into the room while her husband is writing but fails to see him, even though he insists he was there all along (27), this episode implies that immersion in writing leads to disappearance, estrangement from others, and especially from Grace, an idea which clearly alludes to Henry James' story "The Private Life." Multiplying signifiers, descending deeper into fiction at the expense of whatever reality endures, the writer is reduced to a solipsism which Sidney unwittingly dramatises by locking his fictional creation Nick Bowen in the underground room with no plausible means of escape (105-6). That this is an image of Orr's own situation is surely not lost on him:

> I felt disgusted, ashamed that I had allowed three dozen hastily written pages to delude me into thinking I had suddenly turned things around for myself. All I had accomplished was to back myself into a corner. Maybe there was a way out, but for the time being I couldn't see one. The only thing I could see that morning was my hapless little man—sitting in the darkness of his underground room, waiting for someone to rescue him. (109)

That rescuer might be Grace (or grace) if only his heightening sense of masculine paranoia at her enigmatic absences and mood changes, coupled with his metaphorical (and possibly literal) disappearances into the notebook had not destroyed any covenant of meaning and understanding between them. She truly becomes a blank to him, like the notebook, and as a writer substituting for God all he can do is write his version of her in a desperate bid to pin her down. At the nadir of his confidence crisis, and as the final act of paranoid-megalomaniac narration in the blue notebook, Sidney pours out his speculations on "the darkest, most unsettling possibilities" of his relationship with Grace before and after his accident, her love affair with John Trause, the pregnancy and her decision to stay with her husband (212-19). Its veracity is irrelevant because all that concerns him is putting his trust in Grace and, more importantly, tethering her to a narrative he can at least understand: "As long as Grace wants me, the past is of no importance" (219). We have reached the timeless moment when the Puritan exclaims, "I believe you can save me, if you will."

However, as the speculative Grace-narrative reveals, there is a troubling sexual aspect to Sidney's musings which cannot help but recall the fellatio scene and A's dreams of begetting a whole world in The Invention of Solitude. In the blue notebook, which is tantamount to Sidney's imagination, Grace is portrayed as being involved in a love-triangle with her husband and John Trause and it rapidly becomes apparent that Sidney's paranoia conflates a sense of spiritual and moral guilt, the attendant craving for epistemological transparency (no matter how factitious) and, most worryingly, masculine insecurities about sexual potency. The two men have been engaged in a power struggle which Sidney, prior to his fall down the subway stairs (216), appears to have won, Grace choosing to end her vacillations and opt for

the supposed "more promising future" he embodies (215). Yet his fall, literally a fall

from Grace, leaves him not only with "broken bones [. . .] ruptured internal organs

[. . .] head injuries and neurological damage" (216) but with temporary impotence

brought about by the mysterious "fifth pill" he is required to take for pain relief (217).

Seeking solace, Grace returns to John's arms and the marriage appears to be careering

toward disaster once again. Sidney continues:

> In early August, two things happen that prevent our marriage from crumbling into
>
> ruin. They occur in quick succession, but neither event is related to the other. Grace
>
> finds the courage to break off with John, and I stop taking the fifth pill. My groin
>
> comes to life again, and for the first time since I left the hospital, Grace is no longer
>
> sleeping in two beds. (217)

Just as the random act of fellatio with Martine the Princess in the White Horse Tavern

reduces our narrator to the status of "an abject, guilt-ridden husband" (153), thereby

equating sexual transgression with damnation, so grace is inextricably bound up in

monogamous, marital sexual relations.

So sex, like writing, involves power relations and responsibility. Within this

paradigm of conjugal rights, the baby which may or may not be Sidney's is

configured as an act of inscription, of writing, implicated in the writer's paranoid

processes of creation. If Grace is essentially a blank, to be filled with stories like the

blue notebook, then the child is the sign of Sidney's pre-eminence as storyteller, his

status as surrogate God, and is therefore the absolute guarantor of his worthiness of

grace. How better to ascertain one's election than by impregnating its vessel? Sidney

explicitly refers to the baby's real function, and is even prepared to cite the parable of

the prostitute and the dead baby, manipulating Grace's feelings like "any shyster

lawyer" (131) in order to carry the day:

> It wasn't about having a baby—it was about me. Ever since I'd met her, I had lived

> in mortal fear that I would lose Grace. I had lost her once before our marriage, and
> after falling ill and turning into a semi-invalid, I had gradually succumbed to a kind
> of terminal hopelessness, a secret conviction that she would be better off without me.
> Having a child together would erase that anxiety and prevent her from wanting to
> decamp. (130-31)

Sidney's paranoid arrogance extends to his desire for Grace to make her own "leap of pure faith" (219), to cast aside epistemological and biological uncertainty and embrace the baby as unequivocally her husband's, not John's.

Yet faith is not enough, it turns out. If Oracle Night shows anything, it is that epistemological ambiguity, effected by the fallen state of language, can never satisfactorily be banished. Despite his inscriptions in the blue notebook and in Grace's womb, Sidney has to appreciate that the baby represents the potential for a physical manifestation of perceptual and representational uncertainty and consequently will always vacillate between assurance of grace and the inevitability of damnation. So for the paranoid writer, any comfort the embryonic signifier can offer must be predicated on its destruction, in the same way that after Sidney has demarcated his Grace-narrative, the distance from described objects which the linguistic signs of the narrative have caused warrants their immediate obliteration (219). In a novel which incessantly oscillates between the desperate, paranoid-megalomaniac compulsion to create and an atavistic desire to erase and return to the blank page, Grace becomes the female victim required to sacrifice her part in creation. This frees the male writer from uncertainty and allows him to return to the room which, as Stephen Fredman and Pascal Bruckner note, is configured as an empty womb in which men can create without women. To put it bluntly, she needs to be wiped clean. (In the next chapter, we see that the same principle of erasure is at work in particular strands of American historiography.)

Resorting to the cruellest of narrative devices, Auster employs Jacob, Trause's

delinquent, drug-abusing son, as an egregious *deus-ex-machina* who in a desperate

and narratively gratuitous act of violence, assaults Grace in the flat (having previously

burgled it, malevolently ripping up her photos in the process), causing her to miscarry

(237). Existing outside the theological and literary frameworks of paranoia and

ordination which the authors inhabit, Jacob the "insane destroyer" (236) is the perfect

agent of the random act by virtue of his absolute refusal to believe in curative meta-

narratives:

> "It's for cretins, Sid. All that crap about trusting in a higher power. It's like some
>
> baby-talk religion. Give yourself up to the higher power, and you'll be saved. You'd
>
> have to be a moron to swallow that stuff. There is no higher power. Take a good
>
> look at the world, and tell me where he is. I don't see him." (198)

Jacob *knows* what Sidney *fears*: that God has indeed abandoned us, but instead of

resorting to acts of literary-biological creation, he opts for destruction. The baby that

Sidney wants to believe is his, Jacob kills.

Oracle Night's most crushing irony is the necessity for this destruction. As

Grace lies in hospital, battered and depressed, the pendulum has swung from creation

back to erasure, an erasure which enables Sidney to re-occupy a position of authority

and power, the active to Grace's enforced passive. In fact, despite the procession of

harrowing events and tremendous upheavals in his life, Sidney ends the book in a

state of near-rapture:

> even as the tears poured out of me, I was happy, happier to be alive than I had ever
>
> been before. It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the
>
> ugliness and beauty of the world. Eventually, the tears subsided, and I went into
>
> the bedroom to put on a fresh set of clothes. Ten minutes later, I was out on the
>
> street again, walking toward the hospital to see Grace. (243)

Even a cursory scrutiny of the preceding events prompts the rather alarming conclusion that this happiness is based on the sense of a new beginning brought about by Trause's death (241), Jacob's subsequent murder by his gangster creditors (242), the destruction of the notebook and even, dare it be said, the aborted foetus. Even Sidney's debts have been cleared by John's (guilt-inspired?) gift of a cheque for thirty-six thousand pounds. An incapacitated Grace is now completely his, and life can start again on the *tabula rasa*, pre-lapsarian in its neatness.

And here we return to our puns once more. Grace (grace), whom we have seen enigmatically drifting in a constantly shifting sea of signification, eluding definition, has now been rendered stationary (stationery) in a hospital bed and latterly in the pages of Oracle Night, her capacity for childbirth, and thus the proliferation of new narratives and meanings, perhaps permanently damaged. Conversely, Sidney may have destroyed the blue notebook but he has patently continued writing and felt the need to narrate his anxious search for grace in these pages. But if paranoid-megalomaniac literary endeavour only serves, as we have seen, to efface the author's presence and distance him from the objects of his regard, will the publication of this novel not do the same? Cyclical and infinitely self-reflexive, Oracle Night simultaneously situates every act of creation at the point of annihilation and dictates that the annihilation be narrated, so that the cycle begins again. It is unclear, then, twenty years on from events, whether Sidney is any nearer to knowing or possessing Grace / grace than he was at the time. What is also unclear is Auster's viewpoint: while one is reluctant to accept that he proposes female suffering as the path to masculine redemption and happiness, it is equally unsatisfactory to regard Oracle Night as a damning indictment of masculine paranoia and insecurity, given that the male protagonists are thematically and punningly linked to Auster himself (Orr-ster?

Trause-Auster? Austere, as in puritanical?). Certainly the "real" deaths in the novel

must be balanced against Sidney's self-inflicted anguish, the conspiracies and traumas

which possibly exist only in his head and his notebook. Thus Auster might argue that

writing, and the subsequent destruction of the notebook, are simply the necessary

ways of exorcising the demons which haunt the masculine self.

Grace's tendency is toward a rejection of her husband's desperate and

sentimental attachment to the grace he consistently imposes upon her. Note how

vehemently she repudiates Sidney's affection for the "Blue Team," the secret

brotherhood of boys at the summer camp he used to attend as a kid. Grace recognises

that members were required to possess some "special knowledge" (54) and, when one

considers that a boy was chosen mysteriously in "the middle of the night" (52) and

was required to be "[a]n astute observer, someone capable of making fine moral

distinctions, a lover of justice" (53), it is clear that the Blue Team met Sidney's desire

to be part of the elect. Ironically, however, it is Grace herself who utters what initially

appears to be the sentimental message at the heart of the novel, but upon reflection

resonates with all the difficulties inherent in the multi-layered Austerian narrative:

"As long as you're dreaming, there's always a way out." (136)

Nick Bowen's narrative, however, disproves this theory. Trapped in his underground

room, "[h]e thinks and dreams and does a thousand push-ups a day. He makes plans

for the future," surmising that the God whom, like Hector Mann, he does not believe

in is nonetheless "testing him" (105). Yet this is the exact moment he disappears from

the text, unable, along with his author Sidney, to contrive a solution. The piling up of

narratives distances reality and detaches any governing authority (be it God or the

writer) from the locus of meaning. Continuing to dream, or to write, only lures us

into yet another antechamber to essential meaning, locking us out from the room

where that meaning is situated. In <u>Oracle Night,</u> grace is just another dream some of us had, and despite our best efforts, there is no way out.

The Puritan Legacy

If <u>Oracle Night</u> proves anything, it is that writing in itself will not make us worthy of grace. Indeed, the obsessive tracking of signs in order to find essence can only ever obscure the ultimate goal and cloud the author in shadow or, to employ the novel's own metaphor, to consign him to the locked room. Moreover, by juxtaposing Trause's belief in art's ability to mould the future with Orr's conflicting impulse simply to record the signs which may or may not reveal pre-ordination by an unseen higher power, it dramatises a dilemma which, one could argue, has haunted American literature since the Puritans. That is, a tension between total self-abnegation in writing and a contradictory yet complimentary self-aggrandisement which stems from the literary expression of one's nothingness; or a tension between what Sacvan Bercovitch refers to in relation to Puritan conversion narratives as "humility [that] is coextensive with personal assertion" (18).

Put simply: how does writing as a series of inefficacious symbols struggle to contain or represent that which is always already fore-ordained and ineffable? And how then can writing be anything other than a *re*-writing, or worse, a partial redaction of a totality ever unavailable to the author and which serves only to taunt him with his lack of real (as opposed to self-servingly crafted) autonomy or potency? If, for instance, one concurs with John Cotton and accepts God's prevenient free grace, strictly equivalent to a testament rather than a covenant which implies reciprocity or conditionality, what place is there for the activism or hortatory education of the Puritan conversion narrative or jeremiad? Such a belief risks a passivity hardly conducive to the development of an exceptional society and ensures that to write *well,*

even in the context of intense self-examination, is to put ourselves close to the edge of
"the innate self-love by which all are blinded [. . .] vain confidence" (Calvin I: 211).
Writing as part of self-scrutiny should reveal our absolutely abject state:

> In examining ourselves, the search which divine truth enjoins, and the knowledge
>
> which it demands, are such as may indispose us to everything like confidence in our
>
> own powers, leave us devoid of all means of boasting, and so incline us to
>
> submission. (Calvin I: 211)

Thomas Hooker's "Human Sin and the Disruption of Divine Order" (1659)
sets out to remind the reader that sin constitutes an absolute repudiation of God's
authority and an assumption of "mine own will [. . .] mine own deluded reason" (qtd.
in Reinitz 41). Hence it "perverts the work of the Creature and defaceth the beautiful
frame, and that sweet correspondence and orderly usefulness the Lord first implanted
in the order of things" and "makes a separation between God and the soul" (qtd. in
Reinitz 43). Sin as radical division between man and nature, man and man, man and
God is fundamental to Puritan thought and familiar enough from the work of scholars
such as Perry Miller in Orthodoxy in Massachusetts and latterly Susan Manning, but
of particular interest is the further division Hooker stresses between language and
experience. Having set up an analogous comparison between "the knowledg of a
Traveller, that in his own Person [. . .] hath been an Eye-witness of the extreme cold"
and "another that sits by his fireside, and happily reads the story of these in a Book,"
Hooker applies the same differential to the apprehension of sin:

> one hath surveyed the compass of his whole course, searched the frame of his own
>
> heart [. . .] he hath seen what sin is, and what it hath done [. . .] Another happily hears
>
> the like preached or repeated, reads them writ or recorded in some Authors [. . .] The
>
> odds is marvelous great. The one sees the History of sin, the other the Nature of it;
>
> the one knows the relation of sin as it is mapped out, and recorded; the other the
>
> poison, as by experience he hath found and proved it. (qtd. in Reinitz 39-40)

The irony is pervasive: it seems we can only learn of the inefficiency of the written word through its own medium. Moreover, in the exaltation of experience and denigration of the sermon and the book Hooker's rhetorical skill, his employment of vivid analogy and persuasive metaphor, accrues to the written word an assertive power which undermines the central injunction to self-abnegation and mistrust of the text. In this respect we can witness at a linguistic level the same precarious balance between the assertion of human agency and the worm-like insignificance of a mankind awash in sin which informed Puritan debates on preparationism and Antinomianism. In fact, as Janice Knight makes clear in her fascinating analysis of the covenantal debates *within* what has been called Puritan "orthodoxy," Hooker's own sermonising, whilst advocating prevenience, has a distinctly "homocentric bent" which clears a space for human "right walking" (98).

The rigorous, paranoid but absolutely convinced interpretation of signs as evidencing providence we see in Of Plymouth Plantation (for example the striking down of "a proud and very profane young man" with "a grievous disease" on the voyage to Cape Cod is "the just hand of God" at work [58]) readily gives way to an "elegiac" demeanour in Bradford's text (Daly 557) as a result of hardship and, ironically, the very *success* of the project which leads to the societal divisions Perry Miller observes (Colony 49). After all, the inscrutability of God's will ensures that both endless suffering and the successful emergence of individual entrepreneurship might signal either continued special dispensation or the withdrawal of that favour. This Perry Miller seems to acknowledge, despite adding that "[b]ecause outward afflictions signify the presence of God, a people need not despair" (Colony 25). The irony of course is that either way, the shift is inevitably toward the *self* as the defining

narrative. For the kind of anxiety at the perceived loss of special dispensation for a federally covenanted people we witness in Thomas Shepherd's collected Confessions actually increases the more one believes in human agency as part of the contract. If it is all out of one's hands, then despair *is* unnecessary. Inversely, meritocracy always has failure as its attendant. The jeremiad, of which Cotton Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana is only the most "colossal" example (Miller, Colony 33), attempts to redress the balance and re-assert the need for right walking under God, but in its tendency toward virulent self-expression and, in Mather's case, hagiography, ends up as part of the problem.

Likewise, Mather's "Of Style" explicitly tackles the problem of self-expression, forwarding a distinctly homocentric argument on the side of individualism: "every man will have his own style which will distinguish him as much as his gait; and if you can attain to that which I have newly described, but always writing so as to give an easy conveyance unto your ideas, I would not have you by any scourging be driven out of your gait" (qtd. in Miller, Prose and Poetry 335).

In the process of demonstrating self-abnegation in the face of the possibility of an omnipotent authority, the Puritan writer creates linguistic, metaphorical worlds which can serve to stand in the absence of that authority. (This is an approximation of spiritual presence with figurative substitutions equivalent to the act of mourning previously discussed, in fact.) Far from being a hedging of bets, this duality is the precise consequence of attempting to approach that authority through inadequate linguistic signifiers in the first place. It is of course feasible to claim that *all* literature, by virtue of having to use language, is to some extent about itself, yet the theological-cum-hermeneutic dilemmas of the Puritans (coupled with an avowed

intent to eradicate Old World influence) dramatise this reflexivity explicitly, and in a way which has undoubtedly influenced what has followed.

As Puritan writing becomes more obviously literary, such questions of authority are explicitly foregrounded. Anne Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book" affirms the gendered subject while expressing (as Auster has latterly done) doubts about poetic paternity which connote a faith under stress: "If thy father asked, say thou hadst none" (178). Its direct descendants are Sylvia Plath's "Stillborn" and "Daddy." Mary Rowlandson's "for twenty pounds I should be redeemed" (56) demonstrates that her "redemption," as Teresa A. Toulouse has noted (656), is inflected with a fiscal and social sense of self-worth at odds with the almost neurotic self-denial implicit in the multitude of biblical quotations which dissolve all personal responsibility before God. Edward Taylor's flourishes of conceits which, as Karl Keller describes, are frequently of a scatological tenor, facilitate self-ratifying webs of signification which transcend their own supposed inadequacy in rendering the Puritan experience – so much so that he recognised the theological dangers and chose not to publish.

The essence of what one might term American literary paranoia, then, is the feeling that the writer is powerless and entirely subject to external forces, whilst, in the spirit of American individualism, being implicated as both the mechanism at the centre of these forces and the means by which they are recorded. Puritan subjectivism is, as we have seen, the initialising example. After this, with God in possible recession and other interests paramount, different forces assume control. The examples below are intended briefly to outline these forces, and to illustrate certain congruities within eras and texts. Thus I aim to situate Auster more clearly than has previously been attempted within an American tradition which takes in not just classic

novels, but also contemporary "puritan" texts and popular culture.

Democracy, which forms an integral part of my discussion of Leviathan, precariously sets an emphasis on individual identity and aspiration against collective ideologies and institutions which seem to reduce individuality and compel homogeneity. This, along with the requisite modesty of the eighteenth century gentleman farmer, is why Farmer James expresses reluctance to undertake the task of describing the new nation in letter one of Letters from an American Farmer. The retreat into the Indian wilderness in letter twelve illustrates how a myth of what has retroactively been called "manifest destiny" subjugates the writing self even as it makes it the fulcrum.

Thus the democratic self, as seemingly substantive yet in thrall to larger plural institutions, I read throughout this thesis as a kind of double, in that (as my analysis of Ghosts argues) he sees himself *in* himself and simultaneously in the dissembling mirror of the other. Doubling, as a recurrent trope in Auster's fiction, is touched upon throughout the forthcoming chapters. It is apposite here, however, to note its origins in a similarly puritan conflict between the fashioning self and the forces which appear to dominate it. As Susan Manning explains:

> The puritan's or the provincial's search for knowledge is thus also a bid for independence, an attempt to shed the abject state of distanced ignorance and to live apart from the forces which seem to control existence. He desires, though, to gain knowledge without losing innocence, which in a Fallen world is impossible; the result is that his perception divides [. . .] the Calvinistic heritage means that this division is associated with guilt [. . .] The distinction between self and other blurs and may be lost. (Vision 70-71)

To offer some examples: Poe's "William Wilson" (which Auster draws upon in "City of Glass") dramatises the "intolerable spirit of contradiction" underpinning the

seemingly enlightened self (216). American popular culture is likewise inscribed with different manifestations of the double: in the recent Ang Lee film The Hulk, the result of a patriarchal atrocity attests to the close proximity of savagery and to the catastrophic results of human efforts to transgress the boundary between scientific rationalism and a God-like act of divine creation. The Hulk is just one example of the trope, occurring from the Puritans to present-day superheroes, which confirms the American self as a split self, the embodiment of disharmonious dualities. Others might include the distinctly Poe-like Batman and Spiderman.

Wieland's Gothic nightmare stems from the paradoxes at the heart of Puritanism which Joyce Carol Oates' introduction to American Gothic Tales succinctly describes: "that the loving, paternal God and His son Jesus are nonetheless willful tyrants; 'good' is inextricably bound up with the capacity to punish; one may wish to believe oneself free but in fact all human activities are determined, from the perspective of the deity, long before one's birth" (2). In Wieland, a myth of Enlightenment rationality proves inadequate in the face of disembodied voices which represent, variously, the inescapability of history (including repetition of the sins of the father) and the nascent power of paranoid inner psychology as the propeller of narrative forms. Thus the story feels simultaneously predestined and curiously at the mercy of the individual proto-Freudian signifying consciousness.

Henry Adams' contemplation of the dynamo at the Paris exhibition is arguably the quintessential exemplar of the paranoid mode in a newly industrialised United States: a new form of mechanical "revolution," it echoes the eighteenth-century revolutionary activity which periodises Adams, yet condemns him to total misplacement in a history which appears to be leaving him behind but which he is able to contain within his personal education.

More recently, Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 places its protagonist

Oedipa Maas within a profuse, media-saturated capitalist universe of signs where her

pleading "*shall I project a world?*" (56) attests to a realisation that over-perception

has become synonymous with textual creation. Unable to locate her transcendental

Trystero, Oedipa's world oscillates, like the world of Hawthorne's ancestors in The

Scarlet Letter, between a Puritan end-directed historiography and "the generative

possibility of spontaneously occurring linguistic reality, a reality 'uncaused', literally

unmotivated by a controlling hand of linear causality" (Hinds 3), between a Puritan

typology and the ontological possibilities of undisciplined punning and rampant

symbolism.

Whilst it would be placing undue pressure on the category to dub his work

strictly "puritan," Philip Roth's investigations of doubling and the limits of individual

testimonial veracity, particularly when one is engaged in the job of creating fiction, do

connect him to a writer such as Paul Auster. Where Roth differs from Auster is in his

overt confrontation of Jewish political issues: in novels such as The Counterlife and

Operation Shylock, the context of the absolute absurdity of reality in Israel casts

doubt on the very point of the individual fictionalising consciousness and on the

strength of memory (Shylock 86), and reveals the paranoiac's desire for centrality as a

somewhat laudable attempt at order in a world of extremism, "audacious

perspectives" (Shylock 273) and chaos. Ultimately, however, one must accept reality

for what it is – unfathomable:

> Better, I thought, that the events of these three days should remain incomprehensible
>
> to me forever than to posit, as I had been doing, a conspiracy of foreign intelligence
>
> agents who are determined to control my mind. We've all heard that one before.
>
> (Shylock 290)

What we have in <u>Oracle Night</u> and the examples I have supplied in my schematic overview are selves who strive to write themselves in a paranoid concatenating manner, whilst constantly aware first that language will always divert them from their course and secondly that the self may already have been written in a pre-determined narrative. Be it a covenant of grace, a myth of manifest destiny or simply the re-emergence of history, something always threatens but necessitates the primacy of the individual and shadows the project with failure. Although it could be conceded that it is slightly oversimplifying to posit this strictly as a puritan inheritance, Ruland and Bradbury eloquently point out:

> there is a relation between the way the world is seen and the aesthetic energy of the written vision [. . .] This is a markedly American world, for in the Puritan way America is made the special ground for the contest of grace, part of the sacred land- scape of revelation in which historical and personal event enacts providential meaning. (26)

In highlighting "the moral, psychological and symbolic intensity that comes to characterize so much of the richest American writing, from Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville through Emily Dickinson and Henry James to William Faulkner" (26), Ruland and Bradbury offer a list of some of Auster's chief influences. In Auster specifically, the puritan legacy can be seen not only in the problematic relationship between individual authority and a broader literary tradition, but also in the protagonists' incessant protestations of not being up to the task of telling their stories whilst obsessively fitting every clue, every sign, every verbal slip into a narrative edifice of their own devising. This is paranoia in action, and if <u>Oracle Night</u>'s Sidney Orr rather narrowly hankers after grace in a paranoid manner, <u>Leviathan</u>, even though it is an earlier novel, pursues the ramifications of the paranoid dilemma across far more expansive territories, to explore how it may in fact contribute to foundational

myths and symbols of national identity alike. Above all, it asks in a more sophisticated way whether the paranoid construction of stories facilitates or hinders connection with the other.

Leviathan: States of Mind

Ginger Danto, in a New York Times review of Leviathan (1992), asserts that "Mr. Auster may write about coincidence, but there is nothing coincidental about his prose, in which seemingly straightforward information has an allegorical dimension" ("All of This"). Despite Auster's somewhat disingenuous claim that "[a]llegory seems to imply a specific intention on the author's part, a plan. I myself never have one. From day to day, I scarcely know what I'm doing" (AH 330), the paranoid critical sensibility evinced by Danto's comments does merit closer attention. For Leviathan, I argue, if it is not quite dominated by allegory, is nonetheless partly an exploration of the hypnotic power of metaphor and symbol and how they are attractive to both protagonist and critic as a way of finding deeper meaning where none may in fact exist. The power to fix metaphors and symbols, to render them one's "property" (Cheyfitz 55) rather than let them freely generate webs of interactional meanings, reinstates an erroneous sense of the fashioning and authoritative self in the face of life's bizarre contingencies.

If Oracle Night's key symbols are the locked room and the notebook, both in their own ways symbols of ontological and epistemological confinement, Leviathan's are the Fall, the Statue of Liberty and the address book. Benjamin Sachs' fall from the balcony marks on a superficial level the plot's pivotal point, but more importantly it stands as the novel's consummate example of the desire to transform the random event into symbolic plot. Far from providing an unequivocal image of freedom, the statue comes to embody the strictures of an entirely abstract system of thought which

attenuates the original concept and eventually enslaves and isolates the self. In this sense, I argue, we discover "that freedom can be dangerous. If you don't watch out, it can kill you" (L 35). I hope I can be forgiven for postponing my analysis of the notebook until chapter six where, as a crystallisation of issues relating to the chiastic relationship between art and life, I believe it finds a more suggestive home. Suffice to say for now that the notebook, found one day by the conceptual artist Maria Turner, begins as an aleatorical artefact and a microcosmic symbol of human inter-connectivity. Yet in its appropriation for Maria's "next project" (L 66) it is forced to forego its random properties and participate instead in her subjectivised vision. "Chance had led her to it," we are told, "but now that it was hers, she saw it as an instrument of fate" (67). In contemplating these three central images, the reader is ultimately compelled to ask whether or not the state as connecting principle, symbolised by the statue and against which Sachs as terrorist and "anguished, soft-spoken prophet" is rebelling (L 217), is just another comforting and constraining metaphor or the only true alternative to the individual's paranoid fantasies of centrality – his, if you will, states of mind.

It is therefore appropriate once again to begin by unpacking the semantic potential of some of the names in the novel, starting with the name of the novel itself. For even a cursory glance at its manifold allusions reveals the leviathan in Leviathan to be the embodiment of the paradoxes and dilemmas examined in the previous section. As Aliki Varvogli asserts (153), Peter Aaron's project of re-synthesis, the pulling together of the "dozens of small pieces" (L 1) of Benjamin Sachs we discover scattered across a Wisconsin field at the outset, describes the opposite trajectory to Thomas Hobbes in the 1651 Leviathan. Hobbes, in contrast to Aaron, presents a monolithic entity, "that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE, in

Latin CIVITAS, which is but an artificial man" (19) which he then proceeds to dissect. (Carsten Springer usefully observes that "artificial man [. . .] of greater stature" evokes both etymologically and metaphorically the Statue of Liberty [170]). However, Hobbes' commonwealth is itself a deeply paranoid structure founded on suspicion and hubris and hence fetishises its own coherence in order partly to conceal the radical disintegration, the default state of war (100) which would ensue otherwise. Evidently "[a] multitude of men, are made *one* person" (Hobbes 127) via a malevolent and distinctly puritan spirit of surveillance, and through "*pacts* and *covenants*" (19) which require relinquishment of personal freedom:

> Again, men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself: and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavours, as far as he dares [. . .] to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage; and from others, by the example. (99)

An over-inflated sense of self-worth needs to be denied within a dominant structure. Nonetheless, a pervasive irony throughout Hobbes' text is that the dominant structure is in turn created by man: "the *matter* thereof, and the *artificer;* both which is *man*" (19). It is an irony carried over into fiction, as Auster surely realises. A writer or first-person narrator assumes a responsibility he may not desire: "it is the *unity* of the representer, not the *unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *one*. And it is the representer that beareth the person" (Hobbes 127).

We return once more to self-abnegation versus self-aggrandisement, a debate raging throughout Leviathan where as we will see the narrator Peter Aaron is both the matter and the artificer of his confessional narrative. Mark Osteen (who points out that the titular word comes from the Hebrew *leviath*: "What is joined or tied

together") correctly observes that Aaron "is seeking to collect the fragments of Sachs's personal history to produce a unitary leviathan" and to realise that "every life is a leviathan of overt and covert connections" (87, 88). But what his analysis makes little of is the fact that such a representational leviathan in this context is itself inevitably fragmented before any reconstitution can be achieved. For any semiological or generic solidity is shattered when one considers that Leviathan variously denotes Aaron's confession (which is co-terminous with Auster's book); Hobbes' work of political philosophy and Sachs' fragmentary, unfinished novel, "a potential book buried in a box of messy manuscript pages" (142). If one accepts in addition that Benjamin Sachs functions to a certain extent as a father figure for Peter Aaron, certainly someone who wields authority over him by virtue of his self-containment, not to mention his apparent power over language, then we should consider that Anchiles, via Pinocchio, must also be connoted by the title of the novel. Like Auster in The Invention of Solitude, Aaron attempts to "rescue" the father figure from the belly of the leviathan of myth he has created by reinstating him in the supposedly coherent structure of the novel. We must also consider Melville's leviathan Moby Dick, the terrifying whiteness of which threatens to destroy the entire representational project. From all these divergent connotations it is clear that Leviathan will embody nothing more than a fallacious paranoid striving after a connective unity forever beyond attainment.

Furthermore, Aaron's awareness that "I have nothing to rely on but my own memories [. . .] I don't want to present this book as something it's not. There is nothing definitive about it. It's not a biography or an exhaustive psychological portrait" (22) intimates a puritan frustration at trying to convey the ineffable, in this case the convolutions of human society, but also like The Invention of Solitude the

limitations of memory itself (and in fact biography) as a representational tool. We should not be surprised, therefore, if Peter Aaron proves to be as unreliable as any other Austerian narrator even as he protests his shortcomings.

And once again his name carries its own connotations which reinforce our expectations and which the critic is tempted to unravel in a paranoid manner. As well as sharing initials and not a little biographical material with Paul Auster (he is a writer whose first marriage ended in divorce, he has a son by that first marriage, his second wife's name "Iris" is "Siri" in reverse), his surname puts the reader in mind of key episodes in the book of Exodus concerned with narration, enunciation and confession. Moses, feeling unequal to the task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt, bemoans his lack of oratory prowess to God. In his anger, God proclaims:

> "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him." (Exod. 4.14-16)

Whether or not Auster considered the etymological coincidences between "leviathan" and "Levite" in choosing his narrator's name, he would not have missed the irony of Aaron's situation. For here is a man blessed with rhetorical gifts who not only functions merely as a corporeal mouthpiece for divine instruction (like a Quaker journalist, except that here the deity may be the omniscient author Auster), but has that instruction filtered through his brother Moses. Thus we have a model for the parabolic narrative abstraction employed so frequently by Auster in his novels. The fact that throughout Exodus Aaron is denied direct speech, and is therefore in effect *silent* for us, only exacerbates the difficulty of his position.

His namesake Peter, who "oscillates between concealment and revelation throughout the novel" (Osteen 87), and hence between silence and volubility, inherits precisely this difficulty. Forced into the confessional mode by Sachs' death and the F.B.I. investigation, Aaron is able to offload "the burden of that silence" he has kept on behalf of Sachs, a silence which exaggerates his complicity and destabilises his very identity, turning him into a literary doppelganger: "the longer I kept his secret, the less I belonged to myself" (237). Like the biblical Aaron, who in his priestly garments "will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate" (Exod. 28.36), Aaron is fatally implicated both in his silence and in the narrative profession of truth.

But ultimately silence is, as Arthur Saltzman astutely observes, "the preferable state of things, whereby the writer's most legitimate goal is to minimize his contamination" ("Post Hoc" 69). By "contamination" we can infer the slippages and betrayals brought about by language's inherent plurality, the gap between thought or action and articulation which prompts our narrator to muse "[l]anguage has never been accessible to me" (49) and frequently permits three entirely conflicting versions of the same episodes (for instance, the demise of Lillian Stern and Reed Dimaggio's marriage [165]). This contamination is precisely why Benjamin Sachs retreats into a silence of "unstinting attention" after his fall. "It was not a refusal so much as a method, a way of holding onto the horror of that night long enough to make sense of it," Aaron informs us (119). It reveals a profound awareness that to attempt to articulate his feelings would be forever to displace them, to sacrifice them to the play of interpretation in the dialogic environment of shared storytelling. Despite having always been "fearless in confronting authority" (30) and blessed with a pranksterish mind apt to forge "improbable connections" between disparate historical facts (44),

Sachs is never fully prepared, as the proceeding analysis illustrates, to allow language to do its work and facilitate truly paratactic relationships with those around him. He is paralysed and ultimately destroyed by his compulsive need for all-encompassing explanatory systems.

With this in mind, it is vital to stress that the characters of Leviathan, like the writers in Oracle Night, cannot resist a far more sinister and paranoid conception of language which imputes to it prophetic properties consistent with Sachs' reformulation of the world as "a work of the imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real" (24). The pivotal example is appropriately enough, given that its underlying desire to see meaning where there is randomness is conspicuously puritan, connected to Sachs' fall:

> I don't want to make too much of it, but just moments before Ben fell, we
> [Aaron and Ben's wife Fanny] drifted onto the story that he and his mother had
> told about their visit to the Statue of Liberty in 1951 [. . .] no sooner did we both
> laugh at the idea of falling through the Statue of Liberty than Ben fell from the fire
> escape [. . .] It was as if uttering the word *fall* had precipitated a real fall, and even if
> there was no connection between the two events, I still gag every time I think of what
> happened. (108-9)

Recounting the tale of course fashions a connection, even if one was absent. Moreover, as a complex debridement of language, such an oracular hypothesis posits a strict law of cause and effect which requires that a word *have a particular meaning* in reality. Phenomenal power is thereby attached to *the word* – not of God, but of the narrating voice. We are either to infer that language possesses the ability sporadically to tap into an occluded paradigm of predetermination or, more troublingly, that language itself constitutes a form of predestination. In other words, the fall cannot be

a chance happening – rather, this fall is conjured tautologically by a performative utterance in order to credit it with enhanced significance for its eventual redaction in a cohesive account. Aaron makes it happen at the party, then makes it happen all over again in <u>Leviathan</u> now that we are familiar with the sanctioned meaning of "fall."

It is both a rather obvious joke at the reader's expense and a more serious symptom of interpretive paranoia that the mere mention of a fall in the novel instantly evokes a fall from grace, especially if we have read <u>Oracle Night</u>, and regardless of whether the accompanying diegetic and symbolic elements conspire toward that interpretation. In the same way that to place a chair upon a stage confers a performative meaning upon the object over and above its material significance, so a word must always stand for something else in this constructed environment. As the next chapter illustrates, a wall will always be a wailing wall for an Auster character, and likewise a garden has to be Eden or America. Perpetually susceptible to the metaphorical meaning, the puritan protagonist is always ready to tune in to a reading which has always-already been in effect pre-determined and effectively clichéd through usage since the very moment described by Stillman Senior in <u>City of Glass</u>: the fall of language itself. (Cliché and how its reiteration denudes meaning or authority is an aspect of language intrinsic to the discussion in subsequent sections.)

Now, to contend that language is fundamentally metaphorical is by no means automatically a paranoid position. Indeed, we will see that it is necessary for every Auster character to appreciate how language *travels* across prescribed frontiers and achieves its own alterity. But men like Aaron and Sachs (and Sidney Orr) fail to allocate space for contingent and uncontrollable meanings which are not subservient to a pre-determined account of, for example, lapse, redemption and revelation. In short, they render metaphor not an openly generative figure but a typological,

paranoid one in which "the contingent is turned into the necessary" (Fleck 259).

Importantly, protagonist, author *and literary critic* cannot entertain the gratuitous act

(or word) but must bestow meaning upon it. Leviathan, more than any other Auster

novel with the exception of The New York Trilogy, dramatises the act of critical

interpretation which pursues over-arching meaning to the point of obsolescence or

violent destruction, in this case Sachs' obliteration by one of his own bombs.

Sachs is the consummate critic, then. He unceasingly refuses to acknowledge

chance's role. For example, despite Aaron's valiant attempts to persuade his friend of

the episode's "trite comedy," Sachs cannot resist finding "a direct connection"

between his flirtatious encounter with Maria on the balcony and his subsequent fall.

A punitive deity is perhaps influencing his perception:

> [H]e didn't see the fall as an accident or a piece of bad luck so much as some
>
> grotesque form of punishment. (L 117)

But Sachs, whom Arthur Saltzman aptly describes as epitomising the "difficult

balance between unpredictability and pattern" ("Post Hoc" 65), goes one step further

and, in a bid to rescue volition from the passivity implied in the earlier interpretation

of events, decides that the whole incident was an elaborate suicide bid. "I learned that

I didn't want to live," he tells Aaron, "I climbed onto the railing that night in order to

kill myself [. . .] it happened, and it happened for a reason [. . .] It must mean that I

don't believe in my life anymore" (L 121-22). Suicide attempt as both unforeseen

punishment and imposition of meaning in order dramatically to reconfigure one's life

neatly encapsulates the tension between self-denial and self-mythologising this

chapter has been proposing. Turning divine retribution into the ultimate act of

Romantic individualism (an aspect of suicide with particular relevance to Auster's

detective novel Squeeze Play, as chapter four shows), it allows a character to redirect

the plot of his biography even in its near negation. Simultaneously it provides, as I

have been suggesting, a substantial structural and metaphorical base for the second

textual critic Aaron's equally paranoid retelling of that life.

Sachs' attitude to the universe can be viewed as *economic*: the random event is

assumed to participate in an intangible system of exchange based on retribution,

which in turn valorises human endeavour. In as much as it presupposes belief in

contracts, his worldview is puritan in inception, but coloured, despite his adherence to

civil disobedience (Thoreau being for Sachs "the one man who could read the

compass for us [38-39]), by the demands of capital. His decision, after the

manslaughter of her husband Reed Dimaggio in the New England forest (153), to visit

Lillian Stern in California and offer her a thousand dollars a day as "a man paying off

a debt" (179), comes after his initial certainty that "[t]he essential thing was to accept

the uncanniness of the event" (167). Yet almost immediately he succumbs to his

paranoid instincts and re-enters the imagined world of contracts:

> Not just the money – but the money as a token of everything he had to give, his entire
>
> soul. The alchemy of retribution demanded it, and once he had performed this act,
>
> perhaps there would be some peace for him [. . .] Dimaggio had taken a life; he had
>
> taken Dimaggio's life. Now it was his turn, now his life had to be taken from him.
>
> That was the inner law [. . .] That would be his penance: to use his life in order to
>
> give life to someone else [. . .] (167)

Here is a man who sees his guilt as "the guilt of the world" (132): in short, a man who

sees himself as a secularised Jesus, the instrument of a higher power or ineffable

authority who achieves absolute centrality.

But there are important differences between Jesus and Sachs. Sachs, far from

giving himself up to and for the other, is involved in a messianic economy which is

closed and self-ratifying, involving no connection with the objects of its apparent

transmission. According to Aaron he had come to California "to reinvent his life, to

embody an ideal of goodness that would put him in an altogether different relation *with himself.* But Lillian was the instrument he had chosen" (198, my emphasis). This is incorporation, not altruism, the taking of the other within a self-imposed system. Earlier in the novel there are significant clues to this aspect of Sachs' character. When the two men first meet in Nashe's bar, Aaron remarks of Sachs' insatiable curiosity that "there was always something impersonal about his probing, as if he weren't trying to make a human connection with you so much as to solve some intellectual problem for himself" (16). Likewise, Aaron reflects on dinner at the Sachs house:

> [T]here wasn't much intimacy, they didn't seem as connected to one another as the members of most successful families are. I know that Sachs was fond of his sisters, but only in an automatic and somewhat distant sort of way [. . .] (29)

Subsequent chapters reflect further on the Austerian contrast between a distanced intellectual consideration of the other and an imaginatively inspired sympathetic engagement. But it is clear from these examples how Sachs' instinct is for incorporation of the other into a personalised narrative economy whilst remaining adjacent to, rather than *with* the objects of his intellectual attention.

His decision to become "the Phantom of Liberty" (216), thereby, as Peter Brooker affirms, revealing the very notion of American liberty to be similarly spectral (New York 152), is once again predicated on his fatalism. Experiencing "a kind of cosmic attraction, the pull of some inexorable force" toward the anarchist Dimaggio and his thesis on Alexander Berkman (224), Sachs describes "a miraculous confluence" of aspirations and events which cause him to feel "like a man who had found religion" (228). In order, ironically, to "bring all the broken pieces of myself together" (228), Sachs embarks on his mission to blow up imitations of the Statue of Liberty across the States, accompanying the explosions with prophetic messages

(217). From these words, and from his necessary anonymity and isolation, we can assume that his task is as much concerned with the testing of the limits of the self as with an altruistic bid radically to reconsider American ideals. Simultaneously self-denying – he becomes a phantom, after all – and self-promoting, Sachs' task confirms the spirit of rebellion and liberty upon which the U.S.A. is based even as it shatters representations at its symbolic heart. At the same time it reminds us not only that a nation *is* to some extent, as Benedict Anderson has famously remarked, "an imagined community" (46) and largely an abstract, symbolic construct but also that the American ideal is to some extent oxymoronic, based as it is on communal individualism, what Stephen Fender dubs the "collective singular" (163). Sachs' desire to fragment what for Aaron is a unifying symbol of "democracy, freedom, equality under the law" (216) is less an attack on the leviathan of the state than a confirmation of the doubling contradictions necessary for it to function. Two options initially appear to be available in Leviathan: the protective authority, the at times coercive structure of the state under which the individual is absolved of responsibility for mythmaking, and the Thoreauvian withdrawal of the individual into private myth at odds with state-sanctioned behaviour. Ultimately, however, they turn out to be much the same thing, a line of inquiry I pursue further in chapter four.

Earlier, after his fall, Sachs declares (rather like Quinn in City of Glass) "I don't want to spend the rest of my life rolling pieces of blank paper into a typewriter," in other words, writing will be traded in for concerted action. However, Sachs' chosen puritan imagery undercuts his ambition immediately. "The days of being a shadow are over," he sent, he sententiously claims (122), unable to perceive as the reader can that the difference between a "shadow" and a "phantom" is nugatory. Moreover, the inventiveness required in planning each explosion – which let us remember

disintegrates a series of mere simulacra – resembles nothing more than the literary act, involving as it does the adoption of a pseudonym, an alibi, "a cover story [. . .] a plausible excuse" for turning up in each strange town (231-32). Railing against state authority is revealed as "just a fiction he has created, a synthesis of his various encounters with the Statue of Liberty, whose value, in turn, is symbolic rather than intrinsic" (Varvogli 152). Such mild-mannered anarchism, it seems, is less terrorism than fiction writing writ large.

The over-riding irony is that all we know of Benjamin Sachs we know through his mouthpiece Peter Aaron. Plagued by the awareness that "[b]ooks are born out of ignorance" (36), he nonetheless, and despite himself, forces synthesis from the fragments of Sachs' life, piecing himself together as he does so. Like Sachs, who is seeking the unifying principle of his life, his fate, and reading for patterns revelatory of that fate, Aaron is textual critic, detective and above all, *author* in a Hobbesian sense, the purported owner of others' words (Hobbes 125). As none of these is he proficient. Failing to recognise the fissures opening in Ben and Fanny's relationship, he muses "I had been confronted with a significant piece of evidence, and again I had ignored it" (139). Similarly, his declaration, soon after Fanny has revealed the extent of Ben's infidelity and just before she seduces him, that "[i]n the space of one brief conversation, all my certainties about the world had collapsed," (84) is immediately followed by an assertion of renewed, ludicrous certainty. "I took it for granted that I was going to marry Fanny," he announces (85), adding in portentous tones worthy of Sidney Orr and, as we shall see, the chivalric Daniel Quinn, "[i]f I could establish that he had been a bad husband, then my plan to steal her away from him would be given the weight and sanctity of a moral purpose" (86).

In retrospect, Aaron is brave enough to admit "how badly [he] had misread her

intentions" (87), but the point is that his inability to read inheres in his omnipresent desire to instantiate narrative codes and premises which reconfigure him at the centre, and in a failure of *imagination*. His ability to conjecture is shown to be seriously flawed on this and several other occasions, but more importantly his imagination tends to extend only as far as himself and his likely role in proceedings. In this, he resembles Sachs, but his privileged position as narrator of Sachs and everybody else condemns them to the status of players in a dramatic confessional leviathan, "a book-long delineation of the inevitability of storification" (Saltzman, "Post Hoc" 65), which constantly strives for coherence (as a detective, a congenital paranoiac, must) despite its protestations to the contrary. After the event the other characters, incorporated into Aaron's unreliable and concatenating memory, do indeed relinquish freedom in a Hobbesian manner.

Willing to concede that "there was no universal truth" (98) but also a willing subscriber to the conspiratorial view "that nothing was meaningless, that everything in the world was connected to everything else" (206), Aaron like Sachs appears to sacrifice the real, social and emotional connections with other people in the re-writing of these centripetal connections. (It is telling that the last scene in which we see the two men together returns to images of puritan doubling and inscrutability, emphasising their actual distance from each other. They are "two disembodied voices in the dark, invisible to each other, seeing nothing except when one of us struck a match and our faces flared up briefly from the shadows" [231]). For Aaron to comment that Sachs' first "historical novel" (37), The New Colossus, "feels too constructed" (39) is ingenuous at best, hypocritical at worst. The blending of "documented, verifiable facts" in a "fabulous contraption" (37) is almost exactly the

methodology Aaron pretends to in a novel setting the private lives of its characters against the backdrop of historical events (90). In this, it also resembles Auster novels such as <u>Moon Palace</u> and <u>Mr Vertigo</u>.

In conclusion, one can argue that Auster's <u>Leviathan</u> avoids the narrative cul-de-sacs and locked rooms which characterise <u>Oracle Night</u> at the expense of that text's ability to utilise readerly dissatisfaction at its frustrations as an enactment of the limitations of the paranoid narrator's singular striving for grace. <u>Leviathan</u> leaves us instead with significant questions. How does a narrating consciousness, particularly a first-person one, enable a truly dialogic text and prevent itself from founding a state of mind as incorporative and as wilfully erasing of its fragmentary origins as the democratic state? How can any narrative actually tackle "the opportunities that chance provides" without "transforming them, through the fervency that the political activist and the novelist share, into a calling" (Saltzman, "Post Hoc" 71)? Aaron's "calling," like Sachs', is contractual, existing in an imagined web of exchange and re-payment for his complicity and for the silence he has maintained for his friend. Additionally, he fears criminal charges for "withholding information" (243), the earthly version of the divine retribution Sachs expects.

Without providing easy answers to these questions, <u>Leviathan</u>'s achievement is to stage the writer's dilemmas and vividly reveal the "calling" of the reader as bound up in the hermeneutic processes carried out by each character. For in the act of creating our own critical leviathan (as I have done here), we unconsciously make a "covenant by authority" (Hobbes 126) with the actors of the text – that is, everyone including Aaron and Auster as seen from our singular reading perspective. Privileged as we are in this critical arena, we should not forget as Sachs and Aaron frequently do that a contract of grace, of economics, of hermeneutics, is not only binding and in one

way restrictive of freedom but also born out of negotiation. Meaning and metaphor travel among interlocutors and should not be employed as participants in a personalised solipsistic vision. As Thomas Hobbes declares, *"Every one is author"* (127). Aaron is but dimly aware of this. Whilst appreciating that "every story overlaps with every other story," his paranoid weakness is betrayed in the very next utterance: "I'm the place where everything begins" (51). Our job as readers, given the near impossibility of such perspicacity for the narrator, is to refute this claim to authority.

The Music of Chance: Models of Authority

The Music of Chance (1991) differs from Leviathan formally. Rather than the first-person, we have a third person narrator who is so close to the consciousness of the protagonist Nashe that the text sporadically feels like Free Indirect Discourse:

> But he still had his job with the fire department back then, and how was he supposed to take care of a two-year-old child when his work kept him out of the house at all hours of the day and night? (2)

Critics such as Voloshinov have observed that FID seems to oscillate between empathy for the character and the distance of the narrator and that the dual voice enacts the inherently dialogic nature of the literary utterance (152-55). Moreover, as a form of discourse not simply grammatically or mimetically derived from direct or indirect speech, it disallows the location of an originary or authoritative utterance (see McHale, "Free Indirect Discourse" 256). Without wishing to enter into detailed syntactic or semantic analysis, I would stress that it is worth bearing in mind as one reads the following observations that such discursive liminality allows in some ways a *clearer* perception on the reader's part of the underlying concerns with paranoia and storification. Chiefly it offers a means of bypassing the obscuring monolithic consciousness of the first-person such as Peter Aaron or Sidney Orr.

If as we have seen <u>Leviathan</u> pits the individual's solipsistic mission against the state, or at least its symbolic manifestations, and reveals the two to be co-extensive, <u>The Music of Chance</u>, the Auster novel most concerned with the interplay between a puritan paranoid worldview and the tides of chance, as its title suggests, offers a bizarre third possibility. Here we find God-like acts of creation which demonstrate paranoia, power and the re-appropriation of history itself in building, in effect, an individual's own state. This possibility is embodied by Flower's collection and Stone's City of the World model (79-84). Embarking on the tour of Flower and Stone's mansion, Nashe and Pozzi are offered glimpses of two apparently contrasting world views, exhibited in the halves of the east wing where the millionaires keep their treasures, which actually overlap in fundamental ways. Flower's haunting collection of memorabilia I have chosen to examine in the proceeding chapter, as it distils questions of resurrection, power and presence in ways which can illuminate a discussion of American historiography. In fact, as a novel which leaps from surreal episode to surreal episode and from one ontological condition to an utterly contrasting one (from the ostensible freedom of the road narrative to imprisonment in the field), it is peculiarly amenable to the compartmentalised treatment I have given it. Its disparate elements throw light on a number of Austerian obsessions. For now I wish to focus briefly on the City of the World, as it tenders a dramatic material representation of paranoid megalomania which begins to reveal the wider historical themes of chapter three.

Indeed, Stone's model is, in essence, a disturbing manifestation of the desire to manipulate history. At once eradicating chance and linearity, his "utopia – a place where the past and future come together" (<u>MC</u> 79) distils autobiographical and social events into a spot where "[e]verything [. . .] happens at once" (<u>MC</u> 79). Puritan

paranoia / megalomania has reached its apotheosis in this allegorical construction:
like an exaggerated version of Foucault's panopticon (Discipline 195-228), it enables
absolute surveillance of space, time and signification and effectively deifies Stone, its
creator. "In one way, it's an autobiography" gushes Flower (79): alternatively, it is
another example of the leviathan, with Stone as both the matter and the artificer, and
history narrowed to become coterminous with his biography.

Robert Coover's The Universal Baseball Association depicts a similar world
of omniscient control where the deity, the proprietor Henry Waugh, continually battles
with the roll of the dice to develop the complex baseball simulation game he has
developed.[2] Like Stone's city, the U.B.A. is both a defensive and an offensive move,
"a kind of running away" and a "trying to dominate the world" (Coover 140, 141).
Both structures one can assume allegorise the novelist's art but Coover cleverly
dramatises the process of paranoia by giving the world of the game and the "real"
world equal narrative weight, thus frequently sucking the reader into the imagined
arena.

Tim Woods' observation is germane to both texts:

> The society functions as the Protestant God that keeps all under constant observation,
> and the individual members of the God-society absorb this surveillance unto
> themselves for their own and others' sakes, in acts of self-policing. ("Aleatorical"
> 152)

This is the "great vigilance" Flower speaks of (80), a mania for scrutiny of conscience
and other inherited from Calvinist doctrine. Nashe, upon closer examination,
becomes aware of the oppressive mood of Stone's city:

> A threat of punishment seemed to hang in the air – as if this were a city at war with
> itself, struggling to mend its ways before the prophets came to announce the arrival

of a murderous, avenging God. (<u>MC</u> 96)

Woods, like Paul Maltby, who convincingly lays out the parallels between

accountancy and paranoia in Coover's work (88-97), is correct to posit a conflation of

capitalist and puritan ideals. The citizens of the City of the World are condemned to

the eternal demarcation of social and labour roles in a reified society in which, as

Aliki Varvogli says, there can be no "underlying political or social structure" (115), no

solidarity and, therefore, no rebellion against the founding father. The prisoners are

"glad they've been punished for their crimes" and are engaged in the labour of

atonement, and it is no coincidence that the bank is one of the "Four Realms of

Togetherness" which helps police the population (<u>MC</u> 80). Via the symbol of the city

Auster offers, like Robert Coover, a critique of capitalist ideology in a world

dominated by competition, suspicion and an atemporal adherence to assumed eternal

values.

The atemporality of the City of the World positions it at the intersection of

puritan paranoia and *postmodern* paranoia or rather, suggests that the latter is heavily

indebted to the former. Patrick O'Donnell's book <u>Latent Destinies</u> is of particular

relevance to this argument, in that his definition of postmodern (that is, post-Cold

War) paranoia, is reminiscent of the puritan anxieties this chapter has studied in

relation to Auster's novels:

> paranoia manifests itself as a mechanism that rearranges chaos into order, the
>
> contingent into the determined. As such, it is a means of (re)writing history. (11)

O'Donnell argues that postmodern cultural paranoia allows for a reconceptualisation

of history not as an "aggregate of minor narratives" but as a universal plot, including

"the stories of the nation" (for example the frontier thesis), which the individual can

---

[2] Arthur M. Saltzman has also made connections between Coover's novel and <u>The Music of Chance</u>, his emphasis being on gaming, order and chance (<u>Balance</u> 60-82).

project him/herself onto and identify with. Moreover, he illustrates, through reference to "paranoid" Hollywood films such as The Truman Show and Groundhog Day, that the postmodern nation requires a "compensatory fiction" of centrality, which it achieves by compressing historical time into an (omni)present that supplies a fantasy of absolute centeredness and immediacy (O'Donnell 15, 12, 16). (Chapter three stresses that this fantasy is not specific to the contemporary, that it has been a constitutive element of American historiography since the Puritans.) Such a fantasy is betrayed by Stone's declaration that each citizen "carries the entire city within himself" (MC 80), just as the inclusion of figures representing Flower and Stone at various stages of their lives betrays a libidinal drive to locate themselves within a shared system of surveillance and control, where the stories of the nation are temporally fused together.

In this way, the minor narrative imbricates with the universal plot and becomes its own myth, "an alibi, a form of accommodation for the loss of those grand narratives" (O'Donnell 16) such as God and the meta-narrative of election and salvation. What must be remembered about the resultant myths (for example the settler on the frontier, the democratic individual), and what subsequent sections of this thesis confirm, is that they are fetishes, designed to mystify the ideological means of their production and to exclude the other (Native Americans, Antinomians, the Old World). This is done by, O'Donnell suggests (17), tautologically manufacturing bifurcations between self and other, even as the myths seem to bind people together, in order to give the impression of a unified self within a narrative where nothing has been left to chance. The City of the World, in its oxymoronically divisive cohesion, is Auster's neatest example of this fallacious unity.

Auster has described The Music of Chance as "a political parable about

power" and has likened Nashe and Pozzi's period of enforced labour in a

Pennsylvania meadow to "a concentration camp" (Personal interview). Precise

definitions of a parable are attempted in chapter six, and the author's implicit

allusions to the Holocaust have previously been mentioned. A parallel reading of the

construction of the wall is typological, interpreting it as a period of testing in the

wilderness:

> Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty
>
> years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart [. . .]
>
> (Deut. 8.2)

Such testing, like biblical quarantine, is intended to inculcate a truer cognisance of

and closer bond with the deity, just as a parable affords the believer an opportunity to

broaden his understanding of the theological import of scriptural passages. What

makes the wall the single most generative symbol in all of Auster's fiction, and what

connects it to Sidney Orr's endless quest for grace and Benjamin Sachs' need for

totalising myth, is the invisibility of authority, in this case the millionaires Flower and

Stone. We have already seen how the City of the World casts them in the roles of

deities and the concluding comments of this chapter indicate how the story of the wall

portrays hegemonic puritan-capitalist paranoia in action and returns us to the dialectic

of self-abnegation and self-aggrandisement with the reader / critic as the troubled

subject. Furthermore, in the peculiarly symbiotic relationship between capitalism and

gaming Eyal Dotan observes, one is reminded that economics are involved. Nashe

and Pozzi are contracted to construct the wall in order to pay off the debts incurred in

their disastrous poker game (90-103). Thus the novel moves beyond personal

atonement to include the question of how a "new" nation purchases culture.

Although it could be argued that a series of chance occurrences brings Nashe and Pozzi here (the arrival of the money from Nashe's father [2], the sudden, incongruous decision to pick up Pozzi [20], the ascendancy of luck over skill symbolised by the poker game defeat [100-6]), the insidious impression one gets is of inevitability, of a predestination more closely aligned with Pozzi's belief in "a fundamental law" of narrative (138) than Nashe's pragmatism. This sense is reinforced when, having decided to work for a few more days in order to earn some spending money, they find "the results of that decision already waiting for them, boiled down into the precise language of contracts" (MC 151). Whether or not "the trailer had been bugged" (MC 151), it is apparent that the absent, mystified bosses are always to be one step ahead of the labourers. For the two labourers are bound by a contract couched less in a spirit of true reciprocity or prevenience than in the payment of a debt which seems, like the debts Sachs and Aaron create for themselves and Sidney Orr's attainment of Grace, never fully to have been paid.

Considering this deferral of closure, Aliki Varvogli rightly asserts that the wall, as a "paradigm of fragmentation, a collection of free-floating signifiers" (111) is associated, like the piecemeal construction of Kafka's Great Wall of China, with the impossibility of ever attaining knowledge of the divine law. The signs are there, but a coherent meaning cannot be read. What she also touches on is the reflexivity of the wall image. For like the title of the novel itself the wall is, I would argue, a symbol of fastidious storification in the face of the stochastic. Typically, Auster is playing games with us, in that Nashe and Pozzi's work resembles the art of the novelist, the reader and the critic. All take collections of random objects, people and events and attempt to construct teleological coherence from them. The reader interprets the parable without recourse to any meta-text other than the novel itself and associated

unstable texts such as Kafka's "Great Wall of China" and the Berlin Wall which, according to Auster, came down the day after he finished writing the novel, thereby seeming to prove that coincidence really does rule our lives (AH 294). Thus the author, standing outside the text (like Flower and Stone), is himself cast as a kind of false deity inscribing his fictional world with signs which the paranoiac reader, assuming the presence of "a conscious mind" (IOS 146), is compelled to link up.

Paradoxically, then, whilst drawing attention to its own fictionality, The Music of Chance demonstrates the essential paranoia of human nature (and criticism) as it attempts to co-opt random events into the tyranny of plot, to be exploited by the writer in a slightly lopsided contract. Moreover, the individual reader, like the Puritan believer, craves this tyranny and compensates for his ignorance of authority by taking it upon himself. After all, the story is, as Mark Rudman perceptively points out, "a good part of what makes living tolerable – it mediates between solitude and death" (45). What the three novels I have looked at in this chapter also sadly demonstrate is that excessive storification, at least of a particularly paranoid kind, can also *result* in death.

In The Music of Chance, the economy of paranoia has ramifications far beyond the boundaries of a Pennsylvania meadow. The ten thousand stones comprising the wall have their own history, which Flower and Stone as lottery millionaires have had sufficient capital muscle to transplant from Europe to the States. After all, "money talks, as they say" (MC 85). The next chapter asks what happens when artefacts are appropriated in this manner and whether a connection or in fact a radical disconnection between present and past is engendered by such cultural negotiations. Additionally, if my argument in this chapter has at least implied that the

stones themselves signify way beyond their material status as stones, the following

explores just what stones as a symbol mean for Paul Auster.

3. Digging up the Stones of the Field:
Building, Melancholia and Historiography

narration is all about a building process [. . .] (Auster, <u>Front Row</u> 31 May 2004)

How does building belong to dwelling? (Heidegger, "Building" 145)

we're in a country without a long past, a place in which most people

have obliterated their connection to the past [. . .] (Auster, <u>AH</u> 337)

In the first two chapters it was seen that images of building have been variously employed in psychoanalytic cases and in postmodernism to convey a sense of paranoia. Paul Auster's <u>Music of Chance</u> uses the construction of the wall meta-diegetically to mime the paranoid processes of protagonists, readers and the writer himself. I would like to begin this chapter with two suggestive example texts, one taken from a highly improbable real life and one from contemporary American fiction. Both, I would argue, employ building metaphors in a slightly different manner, participating in a symptomatic paradigm of appropriation and pseudo-resurrection in American culture. It is a pattern one sees repeated throughout Paul Auster's poetry and prose.

The first example comes from a website named <u>Prairie Ghosts</u> and clumsily subtitled, "Haunted Arizona: Ghosts of London Bridge in Arizona!"

> Perhaps the strangest landmark in all of Arizona is located in the town of Lake Havasu. It is here that the fabled London Bridge now spans the water. In the early 1960's, officials in Great Britain began to realize that the famous bridge was beginning to sink into the River Thames thanks to the increased weight of modern traffic. In 1962, the span was put up for sale and an Arizona developer named Robert McCulloch quickly purchased it.
>
> The bridge was dismantled and the stones were coded with numbers to indicate how they were to be put together again. They were loaded onto boats and shipped halfway around the world to Long Beach, California. At that point, they were trucked into Arizona. Like a jigsaw puzzle, 40 craftsman [sic] worked from the coded diagram and the original 1824 plans to put the bridge together once more.

We are then told that "an authentic English village" has been built on the site. Regularly, ghostly figures in "old-fashioned British clothing" are seen crossing the bridge.

Although this may seem merely anecdotal, it does in fact exemplify the tendencies this chapter explores: that is, those impulses towards an empty, simulated form of cultural historiography which can be and have been called postmodern but which I suggest have a significant lineage. London Bridge in Arizona appears to epitomise Umberto Eco's assertion that "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake [. . .] falsehood is enjoyed in a condition of absolute 'fullness,' of *horror vacui*" ("Travels" 8). The falsehood stems from treatment of a past which is merely replicated such that it now exists in a condition of mythological eternal *presence*. Picking up on the psychoanalytic vocabulary employed in the previous chapters, I call this version of cultural appropriation "melancholic."

The second, equally melancholic passage comes from William Gaddis' Carpenter's Gothic (1986), in which an exasperated Billy condemns Paul, who is always trying "to get something going here" (52-53), for his attempt to reconstruct an old fireplace. Billy rants:

> all these stones he's got numbered and crated he says they were this ancestor General Beauregard's fireplace for when he rebuilds the old family mansion? Oh man, I mean for making things up? I mean I'm the one who's supposed to be making things up just to hurt Paul? (193)

Clearly the fireplace's significance, like the bridge's, extends beyond the material. Symbolising the attempt to reinstate a coherent family narrative, which the novel's action shows to be constantly in the process of disintegration and subject to the violent incursion of alternative, grim histories, this project, one can be sure, is

doomed to failure. Not only is it futile and based on a fallacious or at least idealised

mythology, it evinces the same paranoid impulse to "make things up" and the same

critical reflexivity as Flower and Stone's wall in The Music of Chance. In Gaddis'

text the protagonist betrays a desperate need to locate himself at the centre of an

authorising, ancestral, hypotactic story through the paratactic arrangement of stones.

For him, the stones represent the potential for a form of resurrection and hypostasis

which identifies the self. In this, they carry the same importance as Auster's words in

The Invention of Solitude: a revivification (but as we saw in chapter one a paradoxical

consignation to permanent absence) of the lost authority. Furthermore, the

arrangement of stones mimics the operations of memory itself as a regulating,

representational force. In the words of Saint Augustine, "by acts of thought we gather

together and collect as it were things that memory contained here and there without

any order" (10: 240). So what we dub memory is in fact the interaction of

concatenating present thought and fragmentary past images. We label those images,

crate them and re-produce them as narrative edifices, most characteristic of which is

(auto)biography, as we have seen. Yet these edifices, like London Bridge in Lake

Havasu, are haunted by the very scattered memories they aim to reconsolidate.

　　　Stones as resurrection, stones as memory, stones as words, "a language of

stones" (Select 61). Clearly stones, like the walls they build, participate in the

American, post-puritan symbolist tradition of polysemic signs. That stones, walls and

buildings carry numerous meanings in Auster's work can be ascertained very early on

in his career. As Auster has commented in relation to The Music of Chance, "[t]hose

stones had been standing inside me for years" (AH 319). (Indeed, Auster says that

there is an "autobiographical component" to his use of stone imagery, as "[he] lived in

a house that was down the road from a quarry" and every afternoon he would hear the

explosions at the rock face [Personal interview]). I would stress that <u>The Music of</u> <u>Chance</u> is best understood by paying close attention, which very few critics have done, to the archaeological images which abound in the earlier poems and plays. In the precursor to that novel – "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven," (1976-77) – a distinctly Beckettian play in which two eccentric characters attempt to build a wall in a field from huge stones, Hardy laconically states: "A wall can be many things, can't it?" He continues:

> It can keep in or keep out. It can protect or destroy. It can help things . . . or make
> them worse. It can be part of something greater . . . or only what it is. (<u>HM</u> 144)

Hardy's gnomic utterance displays an understanding of the inherent paradoxes of the wall. Monolithic and authoritative in appearance yet plural in construction and significance, it is a testament to open-endedness, in that any sense of "completion" is predicated on an arbitrary decision to stop and is thus haunted by the potential for the *endless* piling of stones upon stones (which in effect constitutes the action of Auster's play). So the apparent solid authoritativeness carries a trace of rupture and fragmentation which defies originary synthesis or closure. This temporal liminality – a dissolution of the categories past, present and future engendered by hovering on the border between finished and about-to-begin – is accompanied by spatial liminality. Like the frame or *parergon* discussed in the first chapter and expanded upon in chapter six, the wall purports to enclose, delimit or defend a space. Yet it is necessarily an undecidable, properly neither in nor out and thus attesting to just that tension between external and internal. Likewise, is it "part of something greater" (as Jerusalem's Wailing Wall used to be), or "only what it is" (as the Wailing Wall is, at least materially, now)? Consequently, it can never be clear, as Hardy recognises, precisely whose territory is being demarcated or defended and from whom. We can even ask – are the territories separated by the wall not merely arbitrary, despite their

authoritative appearance? The "Sea Wall Project" in <u>In the Country of Last Things</u>
(86) neatly encapsulates these paradoxes: is the wall being built to keep immigrants
out because they are not welcome or in fact because, as Anna Blume's narrative
amply demonstrates, they need to be guarded from extreme privation and
degradation?

Reading the Wall

A wall, clearly, is both constructive and, in a philosophical sense,
deconstructive. However, rather than engaging in an extended Derridean reading, to
which the wall is nonetheless very amenable, my aim in this chapter is to explore
walls and stones as emblems of constructed national identity. As the previous
example from <u>In the Country of Last Things</u> suggests, barriers and borders are both
arbitrary and epistemologically unstable. For Auster this instability becomes spatial,
temporal and figurative. I wish to return to the image of the wall in <u>The Music of
Chance</u>, via the manifold images of stones and walls in Auster's early poetry, in order
to examine more closely its centrality to an understanding of Auster's interest in the
workings of personal, cultural and national memory and the problematic aesthetics of
resurrection in relation to nation building. From there, citing examples from other
novels such as <u>Mr Vertigo</u>, I wish to expand upon this theme to investigate how
excavating the wall facilitates a critique of a brand of American historiography. Just
as the reconstitution of the fireplace in <u>Carpenter's Gothic</u> seeks to bridge the
unbridgeable ontological gap between European ancestry, personified by the figure of
Beauregard (who is presumably French or of French descent), and a peculiarly
American notion of historylessness, of tabula rasa, so Auster's walls, especially in
<u>The Music of Chance</u>, embody the ambiguities of the U.S.A.'s melancholic
relationship with its past and its geographical or cultural neighbours.

Stones are writing for Auster, "since he knows that for the whole of life / a stone / will give way to another stone / to make a wall," as a word will give way to another word and make a sentence (Select 61). So walls, like books, are there to be *read,* if indeed this is possible. Another piece from Disappearances (1975), underlines this crucial fact:

> It is a wall. And the wall is death.
>
> Illegible
> scrawl of discontent, in the image
>
> and after-image of life –
>
> (Select 62)

The effect of the initial "it" is to intimate the existence of the wall before the poem. Forbidden and foreclosed, the reader enters Auster's poem as it were *too late* to understand, facing the insurmountable, or, as the previous poem in the sequence describes it, "the monstrous sum / of particulars" (61). If one is to infer a narrative trajectory from the Disappearances sequence, one might believe that the "it" refers to the wall under construction in the former poem. However, given that each individual work is also a *particular* and is able to stand alone, a different conclusion is possible. Might the "it" be almost equivalent to the "it" of "it is raining?" Semantically empty, though syntactically vital, and tacitly understood even if evasive of articulation, this subject "is in fact nothing less than whatever it is that propels us into the act of speech itself" ("White Spaces," Select 84). It is the precondition of our being able to read the poem in the first place.

Yet it tricks us, for it is covered in "illegible" hieroglyphs, and cannot be read. We know from Daniel 5, "The Writing on the Wall," that the ability to decipher riddles and hieroglyphics may result in the profferment of riches and power, and more importantly, that to turn away from God in favour of "the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand" (Dan. 5.24)

leads to affliction with such coded messages. Likewise for the Puritans, the Fall

necessarily opened up the world to rampant signification and inscrutability. Indeed,

pre-lapsarian Eden lacked walls, to paraphrase Margaret Fuller (40), not simply

because it had no need of arbitrary divisions, but because there *was no meaning* in the

sense of signs to be interpreted. Things did not mean, they simply were. And as

Jacques Derrida asserts, "[f]rom the moment that there is meaning there are nothing

but signs" (Of Grammatology 50). Walls come into being at precisely the moment

meaning promises to emerge yet they automatically obstruct it. Similarly, as Auster

has suggested elsewhere, to carve words into the stone of the wall is to engage in an

inherently paradoxical activity:

> [. . .] the whiteness of a word,
> scratched
> into the wall. ("Wall Writing," Select 43)

A word written in this way is both presence and absence, as it is erosion which

renders it visible, and the resultant whiteness is as open to and resistant to

hermeneutic activity as Melville's whale, and just as terrifying.

If the wall is death for Auster (the death of intelligibility), it is also, like the

Tower of Babel, the birth of the *possibility*, however slight, of attaining significance.

It is both "discontent" (frustration and non-content) and the potential for content, both

the image of life and its after-image. After-image suggests a retroeffect, the idea,

posited by Bernd Herzogenrath (41) with reference to Derrida, that the dichotomy of

pre- and post-lapsarian forms of language can only be activated by metaphor, by

fallen (written) language, so that the primordial duality is itself untenable. In this

manner, Eden is not possible without the wall. That is why the wall must be the

beginning of the poem and why the opening monosyllables are themselves hard,

stony, promising not resurrection but emphatic death. Humans only subsequently

enter the poetic space:

and the many who are here
though never born,
and those who would speak

to give birth to themselves. (Select 62)

Language precedes identity, and the insoluble paradox here for the anonymous many

is that they are rendered mute as they arrive, and therefore unborn, unidentified,

presumably because they must confront the mortal impermeability of the wall. Once

again, the wall presupposes and prefigures an emergence into symbolic language (and

reminds us that *all* language is metaphorical) but immediately circumscribes its

effectiveness. We are born into a language we can never master or fully understand.

We *would* speak, but cannot, and we cannot read the writing on the wall.

Reflexively, the poem operates similarly to the trick photograph of Sam Auster

in The Invention of Solitude, by denying critical efficacy. A reader or critic, it

implies, is immediately cast as an outsider and approaches the wall filled with

trepidation and with little hope of breaking through the linguistic edifice. Auster

seems to be saying that the act of writing precludes a critical standpoint of empathy:

at the precise moment when re-creation of and immersion in the poetic moment

becomes available, the wall comes up and we are reassigned a distanced,

contemplative, analytical position. It is hard for us to transport ourselves into the

stance of the poem and to partake even of the spurious authority over language that

the writer originally possessed. Equally hard is it to ascertain whether the undoubted

"difficulty" of Auster's poetry (heavily influenced by Mallarmé) is a defence

mechanism against critical intrusion or in fact an expression of a personal, lyric

capability to at least try and overcome the distance between signifier and signified.

As we saw in the introduction, any Auster poem aims at a connection which somehow

precludes interpretation and almost inevitably fails due to our desire to interpret.

Thus, as subsequent chapters demonstrate, a cognitive, critical standpoint needs to be sacrificed in favour of something more affective.

If we take them as enacting something of a crisis of faith in mimesis, then the words of the poem can be seen as corresponding to Martin Heidegger's formulation of "the loss of rapport with things that occurs in states of depression" in his 1971 essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (157). The denigration of the self that depression entails is equivalent to Freud's description of melancholia, the pathological other of mourning. If mourning engages with the lost object in a conscious way, employing figurative substitutions in a bid to work through the loss (as I described in chapter one), melancholia describes unconscious loss, or "an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" ("M and M" 245). The radical turning inwards, self-loathing and lack of respect for others which result from this projection of the lost object onto the ego are tantamount to a loss of empathy. Heidegger, I suggest, might dub this a loss of the ability to *dwell* in the world.

For Heidegger, however, this state is fundamentally affirmative of our being:

> it would be wholly impossible if even such a state were not still
> what it is as a human state: that is, a staying *with* things. Only if this
> stay already characterizes human being can the things which we are
> also *fail* to speak to us, *fail* to concern us any longer. ("Building" 155)

In other words, the pre-eminence of the signified is substantiated by our distance from it and the implied yearning for its recapture. When we "come to our senses and reflect on ourselves" ("Building" 155) we realise, believes Heidegger, that the act of "thinking toward" a location or an object (154) constitutes a power to "persist through spaces" (155). Using the example of a bridge, he claims:

> If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg,
> this thinking toward that location is not a mere experience inside the persons present

here; rather, it belongs to the nature of our thinking *of* that bridge that *in itself*

thinking gets through, persists through, the distance to that location. From this spot

right here, we are there at the bridge – we are by no means at some representational

content in our consciousness. From right here we may even be much nearer to that

bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an

indifferent river crossing. (154)

Not only is thinking capable of traversing the distance between self and other, it

clearly operates reflexively as an advanced reading tool which facilitates deeper

understanding of a text by placing the reader pervasively within spaces instead of

isolated in him or herself. In this, it resembles an ideal of the psychoanalytical

transferential space. I choose the later work of Heidegger specifically because I feel

that he, along with Martin Buber, forms a bridge between the ontological questions of

Freudian analysis and the secularised metaphysics of Paul Auster. Heidegger's

emphasis on "thinking" makes him more concerned with cognitive processes than the

affective ideals of Buber, but they are nonetheless both concerned with dialogue or

connection.

A critical stance of identification requires this conscious turn, yet such a

metaphysical act ironically returns to a familiar philosophical hierarchy by privileging

thought over language. For Heidegger, language "retracts the real meaning of the

word" by masking "the primal nature" of definitions ("Building" 146). In an

extended etymological analysis of the verb "build" (in German *bauen*), Heidegger

reveals that our conventional understanding of building as construction has obliterated

the wider significations of the word. Fundamentally, building "is really dwelling"

which, in broad terms, involves a "sparing," a leaving of "something beforehand in its

own nature" (147). Heidegger continues:

To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve,

the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental*

character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving. (147)

Building properly does not demarcate or block space, it enables it and so to by-pass the abstracting effects of language and return to a proper understanding of what it means to dwell or to build is both the central aim and the impossibility of the essay. For the primal senses are available to us and to Heidegger only *through* language. Auster shares these concerns: can writing as building become in any way writing as a "letting dwell?" In using language, can one ever enable a space for thinking to or connection with another? Embedded in these questions are historical, cultural and political issues which pertain to how a nation, specifically the. U.S.A., composes itself. It is a question of whether "Good fences make good neighbours" (Frost 33) by exclusion or inclusion.

Returning to Disappearances: having conceptualised the wall in rather abstruse metaphorical terms, Auster introduces a spatial aspect which, I would argue, permits us to begin to ascribe geographic and historiographic readings:

> He will learn the speech of this place.
> And he will learn to hold his tongue.
>
> For this is his nostalgia: a man. (Select 62)

For the third person "he," who can usefully be equated with the poet himself, is an immigrant. He is nostalgic for his past self, in the place from which the line is taken (Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry" 240) and where he was indeed a man, where he was able to speak and where his identity was centred on that ability. Arriving in "this place," confronted by walls and scrawls figurative or literal which he cannot decipher he feels the necessity to learn a new language, yet appreciates the precariousness of his status as "a stranger in his environment" (Springer 67) and declines to be too vocal. Thus the sea-change engendered by migration is less resurrection than (temporary) death, a holding of one's tongue. It is a poem which attests to the loss of

one's voice and the hope of acquiring a new demotic or poetic one in an emigrant land, and the inevitable harbouring of nostalgic ghosts for one's former life.

If Auster's poem seems to evince a peculiar sympathy for the immigrant, which is reflected in the immigrant experiences of many of his books' protagonists, (notably the Auster ancestors, but including characters such as Anna Blume, Master Yehudi and Hector Mann) it is no coincidence. Not only is the "he" configured as such but, as we have seen, the reader also experiences the frustrations of arrival. The suggestion is that language as an inherently inefficacious system dictates that we are *all*, in a specific ontological sense, immigrants. We are never truly at home with the words we speak. It is a sentiment echoed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari:

> How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language [. . .] How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? (Minor Literature 19)

For the postcolonial critic, however, this problem also presents the possibility of liberating transgression. In the words of Julia Kristeva: "Lacking the reins of the maternal tongue, the foreigner who learns a new language is capable of the most unforeseen audacities when using it [. . .] since he belongs to nothing the foreigner can feel as appertaining to everything, to the entire tradition, and that weightlessness in the infinity of cultures and legacies gives him the extravagant ease to innovate" (Strangers 31-32). Salman Rushdie has expressed similar sentiments: "The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier [. . .] Migrants must,

of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world [. . .] plural, hybrid, metropolitan" ("Location" 125).

In chapters four and five I consider the peripatetic tendencies of Auster's protagonists – firstly as detectives, then as variously hobos, drivers and stray dogs – and how the urge or need for peregrination partly serves to confront the immigrant difficulty by striving for fluidity in existence and vehicularity in language, to transgress frontiers with a look to tearing down walls. Suffice to state for now that the question of immigration has historically and culturally, from the Puritans onwards, been seen very much as the story of The United States. The frequently evoked and authoritative myth of the U.S.A. as a "new" country, one in which European immigrants could "undergo a religious experience of rebirth which would allow them to transcend the tension of the historical communities of the Old World" (Noble x), is one which requires rapid debunking and Auster, in novels such as <u>Moon Palace</u> and <u>Mr Vertigo</u>, has occasionally attempted to do this. Any enunciated notion of newness, of resurrection, is predicated on a violent repression of that which pre-exists and therefore threatens it. Violence is, as Helena M. Wall notes, an integral part of colonial historiography and needs to be foregrounded in any analysis:

> the more familiar forms of colonial violence, the conquest and subjugation of native peoples, the enslavement of Africans, and the military violence that accompanied over two centuries of imperial rivalry [. . .] are not merely susceptible to analysis within a broad colonial context; they are in at least some ways incomprehensible otherwise. (7)

It is to this aspect of American historiography that I wish to turn now, bearing in mind that our subsequent analysis of Auster's work must acknowledge violence in *various* forms, as a metaphorical raping of the past, as the mass death of civil war and as the potential for the exertion of brutal physical force within enslaving systems.

The Melancholic Landscape

Thomas Cole, in his influential article "Essay on American Scenery," first published in the American Monthly Magazine in 1836, promotes a myth of virgin land, "the yet uncultivated scene" where "poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil" (12). Sacralised, sublime and not untypically conceptualised as a new Eden, Cole's America is an inspiration and a moral arbiter for the future, replete with the "quickening spirit" (1) which purifies, edifies and highlights the "almost inseparable connexion between the beautiful and the good, so that if we contemplate the one the other seems present" (2). It seems, then, that the landscape can teach us how to be good, moral, poetic Americans. Yet if the essay functions as a paean to the landscape, it is also a jeremiad and an elegy for a majestic wilderness on the verge of destruction or irrevocable change. For we are told that "the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness" (5), that "the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God" (2) and subsequently that "the ravages of the axe are daily increasing [. . .] and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement" (12). Even if "cultivation" (in the senses of agriculture *and* fine feelings – this essay is nothing if not a product of Enlightenment) is acceptable to Cole as being

> important to man in his social capacity – necessarily bringing him in contact with the
>
> cultured; it encompasses our homes, and, though devoid of the stern sublimity of the
>
> wild, its quieter spirit steals tenderly into our bosoms [. . .] (3)

more extensive industry appears tantamount to rape. A John Bartram – the eighteenth-century Quaker botanist who was adopted in Hector St. John De Crévecœur's Letters from an American Farmer as the quintessentially American figure of the time, the everyman poet-farmer – could live in harmony with the landscape, but not the father of American railroads John Stevens.

The underlying insecurities of Cole's text riddle it with contradictions and expose it as a fetish, designed to obscure the lack or the desire at its heart. Chronological disjunctions and a crucial equivocality surrounding the term "associations" reveal the essay to be another deeply paranoid text, in two conflicting ways: both in the sense of willing diegetic narratives, and in the sense outlined in the previous chapter of fantasising an eternal present of absolute centrality. Influenced by the associationist psychology of David Hume via Archibald Alison, Cole uses "association" to mean not simply a linking of ideas, images or things, but a necessary because fundamentally consoling impulse toward what Susan Manning calls "a narrative character" (Fragments 40). In the fuller discussion of The Music of Chance I return to the notion of association, but it is useful at this juncture to quote David Hume on "the idea of necessary connexion" (Treatise 205) in order to shine light on certain *aporia* in Cole's essay:

> I turn my eye to two objects suppos'd to be plac'd in that relation [cause and effect]: and examine them in all the situations, of which they are susceptible. I immediately perceive, that they are *contiguous* in time and place, and that the object we call cause *precedes* the other we call effect. In no one instance can I go any farther [. . .] (205)

As will become evident, Cole is "*determin'd* by custom," (Hume, Treatise 205) like anybody else, to forge these contiguities and narratives, yet simultaneously fears their implications for an Edenic myth.

Scenery, like high art, facilitates a "grasping [of] the past, the present, and the future" and in so doing, Cole continues, serves to "give the mind a foretaste of its immortality" (1). Moreover, the implication is that this grasping – the rapaciousness of the word is itself significant – obliterates the chronological distinctions and results in an eternal beginning. As Cole is at pains to point out, "We are *still* in Eden" (12, italics added). Unchanging, unmoving, we will always try to stay in paradise. But

anxieties about the future threaten this idyllic present, as we have seen, and this despite the fact that unlike an Old World which is haunted by past associations, "American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future" (11). Gentle cultivation may inspire "domestic affections and heart-touching associations" (3), yet reading the text as a whole one cannot help but conclude that future associations (the demon improvement) may touch the heart in unforeseen and unwelcome ways.

Not only is the landscape inscribed with an anxious future, but its status as eternally pristine is aggressively constructed upon erasure of a past which could destabilise the myth. This present effect cannot come from a past cause; neither can it in turn safely lead to a future effect. What Cole appears to crave is a kind of arrested development, in fact. The emphasis upon the perceived lack of past association is articulated in terms highly significant for our reading of Auster's poetry:

> he who stands on the mounds of the West, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, may experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man.
>
> Yet American scenes are not destitute of historical and legendary associations – the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock has its legend, worthy of poet's pen or the painter's pencil. But American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future. Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that secluded valley [. . .] You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage – no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's offspring – peace, security, and happiness, dwell there, the spirits of the scene [. . .] And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower – mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil. (11)

Once again, the exact nature of this "futurity" is unclear, but more important is the historical freight carried by the seemingly innocuous expression "the great struggle for freedom." For of course there *were* outrages, there *were* ruins on the landscape at this time, there *had* been temples – Native American ones – and the struggle for freedom involved wars in which these architectural signifiers of a preceding civilization had to be destroyed in order to cultivate the story of the new Eden.

Complicit in this process, as Larzer Ziff points out, were those writers (for example Thomas Jefferson and James Fenimore Cooper) who treated "living Indians as sources for a literary construction of a vanished way of life rather than as members of a vital continuing culture [. . .] such writers used words to replace rather than to represent Indian reality" (172). So as certain signifiers are destroyed, other representations are created in their place and ruins themselves become merely markers of aesthetic value and, as Chateaubriand suggests, a nurturing ground for a myth of liberty (I.98). Gerald Vizenor has dubbed these representations "manifest manners," conventions of the cultural realm designed to accompany ideological notions of manifest destiny. Employing the language of psychoanalysis he says:

Manifest manners are the simulations of bourgeois decadence and melancholy.

This "evasive melancholy of dominance" (11) (evasive in that it actually repudiates the reality of loss in favour of promulgating the notion of a present in which the other is always-already obsolete) is what connects London Bridge in Arizona, the larger than life-size Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas and of course the wall in The Music of Chance. It is also one of the key themes in two novels examined in chapter five – Moon Palace and Mr Vertigo – both texts which interrogate American frontier myths and the alternative histories sublated therein.

In Cole's essay the landscape informs us of this eternal obsolescence.

"Recorded deeds of man" are significantly absent because, although flickering beneath the text, they are deliberately unrecorded as vital, living energies [1] Instead they are subsumed within Jeffersonian taxonomies of Indian tribes and burial mounds, a culture safely relegated to redaction and hence the past. "I know of no such thing existing as an Indian monument" says Jefferson, disingenuously (Notes 223). Thus they must be passed over in favour of contemplation of the glorious present and a future which oscillates in Cole's writing between equally glorious progress and shameful destruction. This destruction may of course be the inevitable outcome of the cyclical theory of history depicted in Cole's series "The Course of Empire," but it is one which he seems unable to countenance in this essay. Cole himself betrays the contradictions at the heart of the project when he asseverates, "[w]e are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly" (12).

The principle of association here reveals both its utility and its inefficacy: it is essentially a work of imagination (as Hume states in Book 1, Part 1 of his Treatise of Human Nature), a comforting tale, and as soon as one ceases to "acquiesce unceasingly in the fiction" and begins to "reflect on the process of this 'self-composition'" (Manning, Fragments 40), to suggest that achieving the harmonious whole *is* in reality dependent on struggle and not destiny, then that whole fragments and we are left with isolated ideas and real or metaphorical ruins. James A. Hillhouse, Cole's friend, displays greater honesty about narrative self-fashioning and the loss which permits and haunts it. Scenery, the writer stresses, imprints "on the mind the symbols of creative power, rather than mementos of departed human pride," yet while stressing "virgin grandeur [. . .] confirmed by the want of a national heroic or barbarous age" he acknowledges that:

> forests breathe upon us the freshness of primeval nature, or waft to the ear of fancy
>
> only the indignant yell of the dislodged and retiring savage [. . .] (97-98)

"Dislodged" means removed, driven from a secure hiding place and, most importantly, unhoused. Hillhouse comes closer than Cole to realising that a belief in "freshness" is founded upon the destruction of homes and societies.

A Poetry of Decay

So when we see a pile of stones in a field, as we do in <u>Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven</u> and <u>The Music of Chance</u>, is it a wall or some other structure about to be built, or the remains of a dwelling or monument recently demolished? Do the stones represent the optative view of a future civilization, or the elegiac fragments of a past culture deceased and available only as memory or myth? These are questions obliquely posed by several Auster poems. "Quarry," from the collection <u>Fragments from Cold</u>, is a poem which turns on the pun of its title. The poetic voice is initially plural, speaking for a generation or civilization, and suggests mining, industry and hence a kind of progress, but simultaneously the hunted-down and killed, the peoples always-already consigned to the past by that very notion of progress. Thus, if we consider a specifically American context, the poem could be said to reveal another side to the immigrant question. What happens to the indigenous inhabitants who themselves become marginalised, other, dispossessed of both voice and territory: in effect, unwelcome immigrants in their own land?

> No more than the song of it. As if
> the singing alone
> had led us back to this place.
>
> We have been here, and we have never been here.
> We have been on the way to where we began,
> and we have been lost.
>
> There are no boundaries
> in the light. And the earth
> leaves no word for us
> to sing. For the crumbling of the earth
> underfoot
>
> is a music in itself, and to walk among these stones
> is to hear nothing
> but ourselves.

> I sing, therefore, of nothing, (<u>Select</u> 80)

The precise nature of this singing is important. Walt Whitman's performative singing, which in its "childlike simplicity of character" is the culminating expression of the poet's quest for absolute yet multitudinous identity with the subjects of his verse, is thus a return to "the original language of natural signs through which the poet's character is expressed" (Irwin 40). It is, as Amy Kaplan has observed, the gathering together of scattered, Ossianic Old World fragments into a radical new wholeness, a trope which acquires particular resonance in relation to <u>The Music of Chance</u> ("Between Empires"). The song in "Quarry" is exactly the opposite: not a song of "association and accretion" (Manning, <u>Fragments</u> 230) or a building of America, but a song of disintegration into a preponderance of monosyllables, a return to fragmentation and "the crumbling of the earth." Ultimately it is a song of nothing, an absolutely dissipated "Song of Myself." Once again the "it" of the first line hangs tantalisingly, and we cannot know its referent. What is apparent is that the song has been detached from its object, rather than achieving a Whitmanian fusion with it, and the singer is left with the words alone, dispossessed of whatever they originally referred to. In this respect, it is a profoundly fallen song, a song divested of its original authority.

Paradoxes abound: "We have been here, and we have never been here" carries the painful simplicity of the erasure practised upon the poetic subjects in order for a myth of unsullied wilderness to be propounded. If "where we began" evokes the subject's own primitive past or foundational myth, it is a story likewise denied by outside influences which condemn the subject to the ambivalent, half-active, half-passive voice of "we have been lost." The ruined stones and the crumbling earth may carry the story of the song, but not the people who originally sang it. By forging such

a strong link between music and earth, the poem rehearses the nation-building

impulses implicit in an earlier Auster poem – "From the first step, our voice /

is in league / with the stones of the field" ("Unearth," Select 9) – an image taken

perhaps from the scattering of the Israelites' bones in Ezekiel 6.5. but also from the

casting of the stones in Ovid's myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha ("Giant's War"). One

should also consider Aboriginal "song lines," in which the length and versification of

particular songs is mimetic of the thousands of miles travelled by ancestors and the

tunes themselves are equated with the inseminatory power to create offspring from the

land.[3] Consequently, to be robbed of land is to be robbed of a voice with which to

sing about it, such that it is as if the land were never yours: "as if it were the place / I

do not return to–," in Auster's words.

In the concluding lines of the poem we encounter another set of paradoxes

which are centred on the multiple figurative possibilities of stones:

> and if I should return, then count out my life
> in these stones: forget
> I was ever here. The world
> that walks inside me
>
> is a world beyond reach. (Select 80)

Stones appear as signposts to past civilizations on the landscape and therefore, in

effect, appendant memories. Crucially, the very act of (to use Auster's word)

unearthing these memories, of quarrying or recuperating the stones through poetic

language, exposes them to the elements and accelerates their erosion. Preservation is

tantamount to decay, a paradox inescapable, says Susan Manning, in the Scottish and

American Enlightenment project of antiquarianism and recovery of ancient shards

exemplified by Macpherson's Fragments of Ancient Poetry. Memory as "a kind of

exhumation [. . .] brings the changeless objects of the past back into the realm of

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[3] For more information on song lines, see for example <http://www.aborginalart.com.au> and Bruce
Chatwin's The Songlines.

mutability [. . .] To exhume a language, or a memory, from its secure storehouse beneath the earth, is to expose it to change and, therefore, to imminent disintegration" (Manning, Fragments 173-74).[4] The Invention of Solitude partakes of the same anxiety about the decay from imaginative idea to representation of that idea. I argued in chapter one that such a biography is an act of mourning, of exhumation (or as William St. Clair argues in Mapping Lives, of archaeology) and simultaneously of decay as the layers of photographic and literary representation distance us from the object of loss. Digging up the stones of the field, entering the world of representation, may ultimately prove to be an act of radical forgetting of a "world beyond reach" where even Heidegger's "thinking toward" will prove incapable of bridging the melancholic gap ("Building" 154). Chapter five extends this idea, exploring the landscape of forgetting imagined in In the Country of Last Things, where the logical but devastating consequences of building are witnessed. Here, arbitrary frontiers are built from rubble (6) and man-made demarcations are constantly disintegrating.

Knowledge for Auster has a chthonic, tacitly understood stage commensurate with Heidegger's "primal nature." This stage is pre-articulation and pre-human intervention, when the stones (representative as we have seen of language), remain beneath the soil, unexhumed. It is an idea with a notable American ancestry. Chapter four of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" intimates a similar notion: "Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance" (Selected Writings 193). Words originally respond to objects in nature, and the conventional invocation of the metaphor "root" suggests that the Adamic language is *of the earth* prior to being exposed to the vicissitudes of human discourse. Arguably, one should acknowledge the influence of

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[4] A similar idea is implied in Linda Hutcheon's dicusssion of historiographic metafiction: to represent

the Quakers, whose emphasis on the "seed" of truth and their persistent deployment of horticultural imagery likewise earths language in spiritual certitude within the landscape.

Described in the prose poem "White Spaces" as "a landscape of random impulse, of knowledge for its own sake – which is to say, a knowledge that exists, that comes into being beyond any possibility of putting it into words," the chthonic stage demands of us that we "abandon ourselves to the supreme indifference of simply being wherever we happen to be" (Select 82). By extension, the necessity of putting something into words arrives with the unearthing of the stones and their subsequent use in constructing the walls and the monuments which demarcate space. The verse series entitled "Unearth" narrates exactly the processes of disinterment, exposure to the eroding air and their sorry consequences – refracted meaning, distance from the signified, alienation from each other. Whether called "the massacre / of stones," "the violence of the wall," "the work of sabotage" or even "the Babel-roar" (Select 11, 7, 19, 13), the disturbance of the earth's equilibrium results, like colonial invasion, in alterity and a harrowing diversity of tongues in which understanding threatens once again to be lost. Auster goes as far as to personify the pre-linguistic knowledge as it is unearthed: "[. . .] with imbecilic hands, they dragged you / into the city, bound you in / this knot of slang, and gave you / nothing [. . .] you cant the stones of unseen earth" (Select 7). The stones are "canted," tilted, made angular and, of course, rendered hypocritical or equivocal as they are subjected to the babble of the developing urban.

Yet Auster cannot be unaware of the fundamental paradox at work here: that the poetic description of this pre-lapsarian landscape is only possible through the language unleashed by the digging up and utilisation of stones. Our voice has to be in

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the "archival traces" of the past is to expose them to "textual refiguring" and therefore corruption (80).

league with the stones of the field, and once they are exposed, they immediately become material for building not just edifices but poems. Thus the opposition between a landscape of equilibrium and its disturbed other is untenable, and like the signifying wall which re-appears throughout Disappearances, a metaphorical disposition is what *enables* any mourning of lost innocence and silence in the first place. Simply by writing about a lost antique civilization, Auster seems to be saying, he is complicit in its destruction. It is a dilemma expressed by the Scottish poet John Burnside, who shares similar concerns and literary influences to Auster, notably the Transcendentalists, when he talks of "imposition" ("Dwelling"). Although Burnside's analysis takes a more ecological and mystical turn, (he has a fascination with the magical, unspoken boundaries such as lay lines which were recognised by ancient peoples like the Celts), he shares a desire to create poetry which attends to the earth without scarring it, emerges organically and could be described as, in Auster's words, "barely / written" (Select 7). Both writers are surely aware that the very act of writing makes this desire effectively unrealisable. The dilemma, or the "plight" in Heidegger's terms, is that people "*must ever learn to dwell,*" the suggestion being that we are only ever *on the way* to a barely achievable end. Poetry is part of the journey, but can never substitute for pure dwelling. Neither, one can surmise, do the politically imposed boundaries of nation states. Interestingly, Heidegger regards "homelessness" as "the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling" ("Building" 159). Homelessness as the possibility of finding dwelling in Auster's world will feature in the proceeding chapters.

The Music of Chance: A Barrier Against Time

If "Quarry" is a poem which reinstates the stones denied by the ruinous

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Once again, postmodernism seems merely to pick up on issues at stake long before its emergence.

mythology of American Eden, and "Unearth" implicates the poet in the stones' decay, The Music of Chance uses like imagery to different, and much more satirical, ends. While all these works can be seen as enacting a "fort-da!" drama of loss and retrieval (the stones, whether materially or as chunks of language, keeping alive while exacerbating past-ness), the novel, rather than referring obliquely to the loss of native societies, chooses Old World authority for its salvage operation. I have previously argued that the wall is a reflexive symbol of puritan-capitalist paranoia and narrative building, but I intend now to extend my analysis to encompass its value as a mocking symbol of melancholic American historiography and, if we take the argument to logical extremes, of American postmodern culture in general. First, it is useful to provide an overview of some of the historical and literary antecedents to Auster's wall which must surely have played a part in its inception.

In The House of Morgan: A Social Biography of the Masters of Money, Lewis Corey amusingly describes the collecting fever which was rife at the turn of the twentieth century among the millionaire bankers, industrialists and would-be philanthropists who had prospered in the preceding decades. J. Pierpoint Morgan purchased "the relics of Marie Antoinette, including her fan and a lock of her hair set in crystal" (231). Other wealthy patriarchs set about buying obscure titles for their daughters, acquiring ancestors ("which is an easy thing to acquire" sneers Corey [236]) or buying extravagant mansions, opulently furnished in the old style. Arguing that these millionaires collectively formed a new "aristocracy of money" in the U.S.A., Corey continues:

> The trappings of culture are indispensable to aristocracy. Millions were acquired
> overnight: why not culture? The aristocracy of money transformed its mansions
> into art galleries, plundering Europe of its paintings and sculptures, its furniture
> and tapestries, occasionally transporting castles stone by stone and re-erecting them

in the American scene. They sat in the chairs of royalty, these pretenders to

aristocracy [. . .] (236)

Clearly, money alone was not enough to distinguish these men from each other –

some Old World cultural kudos was required. Yet the reasons for this "vulgar

wholesale appropriation of European art and architecture regardless of period or

country" run deeper (Doctorow, Ragtime 36). Corey suggests that the veneer of

sophistication served to mask the almost feudal brutality (in fact, was its inevitable

corollary) which enabled the wealth in the first instance:

> Art collections adorned the masters of money, but beneath was an emptiness of
>
> creative cultural life, the scars inflicted on nature by ruthless exploitation, the
>
> squalid factory towns, New York City's vile slums, Pittsburgh's steel hells [. . .] (239)

The implication is that these bought trinkets lack the dynamism which characterises

true culture: the exhumation and transplanting of these treasures results merely in

fossilisation and hence the potential for that same representational decay suffered by

Auster's poetic stones.

Whether meretricious or not, the almost pathological urge to amass treasures

serves a profound need. Keith Mears convincingly argues that the American Civil

War re-acquainted the States with the grim realities of mass death and hence, at least

potentially, with history as a destructive force. However, "the appropriation of God"

on both sides, coupled with "the need to feel that *every* casualty of war would be

granted eternal salvation" (167) actually resulted in a deferral of history and a

displacement of death in favour of a cultural and theological paradigm of forgiveness.

Therefore, a substitute was required which, says Mears, turned out to be "the

American infatuation with the Old World" (167) and the perception of a more

reasoned, safer historical acceptance of the past: a past where death, as in

Hawthorne's The Marble Faun, could be to a certain extent aestheticised. I would

augment Mears's argument by contending that the Civil War can be seen as exposing

the limitations of a Puritan paradigm of a virgin, historyless land, and that the grand

tours and antiquarianism were an attempt to, as it were, get some supposedly

authoritative history quickly.

Arguably, the violence of the Civil War and the genocide of the Native

Americans both contributed to the development of the Wild West Shows which

became hugely popular throughout the States and Europe at the end of the nineteenth

century. Alan Gallop's recent biography Buffalo Bill's British Wild West, whilst

staying shy of analysis, at least describes in anecdotal terms the evolution of Buffalo

Bill from "real" frontier hero, engaged in battle with the savages, to hero of Ned

Buntline's dime novels, to the (distinctly postmodern) portrayal of *himself* in blood

and thunder stage plays (Gallop 10-16). More tellingly, it was deemed necessary to

incorporate the Native Americans themselves into the Wild West shows and the

"frontier safaris" (12) which preceded them to erase the very real brutality which

marked their subjugation. Sitting Bull's transformation from prisoner of war to

pantomime villain (33) goes unquestioned by Gallop, but Auster fictionalises the

situation in Mr Vertigo, paying attention to the attendant violence. Ma Sioux

appreciates that working for William Cody "probably meant the difference between

life and death" (MV 74) as the battle of Wounded Knee soon afterwards ("a wholesale

slaughter of the innocent" [74]) signals the incursion of history once more. Mr

Vertigo features in chapter five, but it is clear that it displays parallels with The Music

of Chance in associating the mining of the past with violence.

In "Pages for Kafka: on the fiftieth anniversary of his death" Auster writes,

"he who would quarry the earth becomes the spokesman of its surfaces" (CP 304).

As well as predicting the content of the poem "Quarry" (that to dig up the language of

stones is to render their meanings canted or superficial), this statement references

Kafka's own "The Great Wall of China." As Aliki Varvogli has observed, the

"piecemeal construction" (Kafka, "Great Wall" 142) of the wall precludes the

possibility of ever knowing the divine or imperial authority which sanctions it (World

110), but more important for this argument is the violence which attends the

construction – "forests being cut down to become supports for the wall [. . .]

mountains being hewn into stones for the wall" (141). This violence is as much an

influence on The Music of Chance as Modernist questions of epistemology.

Moreover, Kafka's story suggests that the wall is purportedly being built to protect the

southern Chinese from "the people of the north" and "the cruelties which they commit

in accordance with their nature" (147). Yet as the narrator admits, "I come from the

south-east of China. No northern people can menace us there" (147), which

emphasises the futility of the exercise and implies that in a Foucauldian manner, the

discourse of building tautologically *creates* the need for protection. In other words,

the wall is its own ideology, irrespective of any apparent exophoric meaning.

The Music of Chance brings together the aestheticisation of the past and

violence, and doubly satirises the U.S.A.'s simultaneous desire "to start over again"

(84) by ransacking prior histories for meaningless monuments. Flower and Stone, the

millionaire lottery winners who manage to defeat Nashe and Pozzi in a poker game at

their mansion (which, portentously, feels like a "mock-up" [69]), lament the

Americans' attitude to history just before the fateful poker game takes place. In

Flower's words:

> We Americans are always tearing down what we build, destroying the past in order
>
> to start over again, rushing headlong into the future. But our cousins on the other
>
> side of the pond are more attached to their history, it comforts them to know that they
>
> belong to a tradition, to age-old habits and customs. (84)

Clichéd phraseology, notably "our cousins on the other side of the pond" and soon afterwards "[t]o make a long story short" (85), provides a clue to what comes next. If a cliché is essentially borrowed language which rings hollow through being divested of its original illocutionary force (again one might say in Walter Benjamin's terms its "aura" [223]), then the project to rebuild the Irish castle as a wall also has the air of damaging cliché. Cliché first because it repudiates inventiveness. (The need for constant reinvention in language and relationships is a major theme of the next chapter). As Malcolm Bradbury makes clear, such projects have become almost commonplace in the States, and Flower and Stone's idea thus lacks the inventiveness they ascribe to it:

> it indeed is no accident that London Bridge now stands in the Arizona desert,
> linking nothing with nothing, the *Queen Mary* of my blessed memory is now a
> hotel at Long Beach on the Pacific [. . .] and Forest Lawn proudly displays Italian
> certificates proving the "authenticity" of its copies of the masterpieces of
> Renaissance art [. . .] (Pilgrimages 465)

Cliché secondly in the way Nashe immediately dubs the wall "a Wailing Wall" (86), casually ignoring the fact that the latter does maintain an identity akin to wholeness, being a preserved part of a larger structure. It is, in a sense, a recognisable quotation of what existed before, whereas Flower's structure is merely disengaged bricolage. Nashe's attribution of spiritual gravity belies his attitude of suspicion and attests to his and, if we recall the reflexivity of the wall discussed in the previous chapter, the *reader's* inability *not* to read significance into symbols. For him, any wall would probably be a Wailing Wall simply by virtue of its being a wall.

Cliché thirdly, and most importantly, resides in the double abstraction at work in the conveyance and transformation of the stones, the decay engendered by the two acts of destruction which describe their history. Flower continues the story of their

provenance:

> It was no more than a heap of stones, really [. . .] The owner was an old codger by the
>
> name of Muldoon, Patrick Lord Muldoon, and he was naturally quite reluctant to sell.
>
> Some persuasion was required on my part, but money talks, as they say, and in the
>
> end I got what I wanted [. . .] Just think, gentlemen. A fifteenth-century Irish castle
>
> destroyed by Oliver Cromwell. An historical ruin of major significance, and Willie
>
> and I own it. (85)

Already having suffered one deed of colonial violence, and thus having been divested

of its original function – to defend or to protect – the castle is ignominiously robbed

of its status as "historical ruin" by the coercive force of capital and brought to a field

in Pennsylvania. Returning to this thesis' central metaphor, we can say that the

narrative describes a gradual diminution of authority. A castle, symbol of military or

feudal authority, is sacked and razed by a more powerful authority; attains "major

significance" (in the sense of importance and, of course, its custody of historical

meaning); and then, contrary to Flower's belief, the clearing of the geographical space

it occupied, like the clearing of Native American sites, represents the death even of its

symbolic authority as testament to historical change.

A dirge, properly speaking, is a song of mourning and respect for the departed.

Flower and Stone, it seems, are themselves uncertain about the wall's true

significance or its relationship with the past. Not only is their stated intention to

reconnect with the past contradicted by Flower's assertion that the wall constitutes

"some enormous barrier against time," but the declaration that it is "a memorial to

itself" (86) persuades us that far from being an act of resurrection, Nashe and Pozzi's

efforts will be self-regarding and moribund from the outset.

A dirge, properly speaking, is a song of mourning and respect for the departed.

Latterly, however, it has acquired the sense of something excessively downbeat,

monotonous or dull. I would argue that Flower's description of the wall as "a

symphony of resurrected stones" which will "sing a dirge for the past we carry within us" (86) gravitates closer to the latter connotation, despite his ostensibly noble intentions. For as an activity it is indeed profoundly monotonous. Moreover, as "a memorial to itself" it is self-absorbed, as a metaphor for reading and writing it is infinitely self-reflexive and, as we saw in the previous chapter, it is paranoiacally bound up in notions of punishment by an unseen authority. By thus referring to nothing *but* itself, the wall is less about the past or an optative future than the controlled drudgery of the paranoid eternal present. In short, like the walls in Disappearances, or Thomas Cole's new Eden, this wall arrests development and is always-already dead. Additionally, it is only superficially akin to a "symphony," a collection of various yet related elements aspiring to a harmonious whole. The narrator's observation that the labour of building the wall constitutes a "bewitching conundrum: all the stones were identical, and yet each stone was heavier than the one before" (129) adumbrates a more accurate assessment – the amassing of stones as *iterability*. They are not identical: like a signature, they are unique yet repeatable and thereby testify to their *lack* of individual signifying authority, and so as Nashe begins to realise like the narrator of "The Great Wall of China," each stone placed in the wall takes him paradoxically further away from realisation of the totality. The distance from what the wall supposedly represents (the past, an Old World legacy, history itself, a signifying authority) is emphasised as each empty symbol assumes its position, divided from itself and connected only by arbitrariness.

In all these aspects the wall resembles a state of Heideggerian depression or Freudian melancholia, which includes:

> profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the
>
> capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to

a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. ("M and M" 244)

As we have seen, mourning aims for figurative substitutions to replace the lost object; the end of the process confers an appreciation of reality upon the ego once again, some kind of harmony with the world. Here, all activity toward an end which could transcend mere mindless drudgery itself is inhibited. The narcissistic, melancholic repetition serves constantly to reiterate disharmony and distance from the Old World and the past. Importantly, though mourning too emphasises lostness, its project is connection, reconciliation with the idea of loss, thinking across the gap. Melancholia makes no such attempt: it actually refuses to accept loss, and so any figurative substitutions are in fact doomed to remain in an indulgent eternal present (commensurate with a myth of eternal Eden). For all Flower's grandiose claims, the wall testifies not to history or the banishment of Old World authority but to the refusal to acknowledge them as contributing to its construction. That it is apparently endless is symptomatic: to reach the end would signal the need to recognise the loss, a dilemma expressed in The Invention of Solitude in relation to the act of writing (65).

Devoid of any recognisable function, demarcating no particular space and protecting nobody from nobody, the wall exists now as pure aesthetic, pure signifier. Indeed, it is not even a wall, it is a "monument in the shape of a wall," (86) a metaphor only for itself. It is as "a work of art" (86) that it is most banal and deathly. As art, it is exhumed and consequently decayed almost to the point of nothingness. So clearly the wall can be envisaged as a Jamesonian "pastiche" ("Consumer Society" 5, Cultural Logic 25) which, as Aliki Varvogli has observed, "comes charged with Jameson's critique of the depthlessness and ahistoricity of postmodernism" (109). Inhering within Auster's pastiche, in addition, is a critique of manifest destiny and of belief in a providential new empire which leaves no ruins. Indeed, ahistoricity

precedes postmodernism and is an integral feature of the Edenic myths promulgated by Puritan settlers and American artists such as Thomas Cole. And as this chapter has been arguing, real or metaphorical violence inevitably accompanies it like the sinister foreman Calvin Murks' gun or Jack Pozzi's unexplained beating (MC 144, 171). The previous chapter showed that Murks is the policing representative of the mystified authority who embodies the divisiveness of the system and its omnipresent threat of violence on those who oppose it. Moreover, it is worth observing in the context of this argument that the reifying system works partly by begetting violence in those subjugated by it. Hence Nashe's irrational and almost homicidal hatred of Floyd Junior, Murks' grandson (184). The system can remain closed and functioning if its servants police and discipline each other, a point suggestively made by Tim Woods ("Aleatorical" 152).

Auster's achievement in The Music of Chance is to distil in one powerful image – a functionless monument enabled by the power of American capital and the potential for violence – a critique not only of postmodernism's vacuous aesthetic, but also its mythological ancestors and, therefore, the whole question of an inward-looking ideology and historiography of separateness and unilateralism. Auster achieves this critique through the viewpoints of his protagonists. It is Pozzi who perhaps unwittingly reveals in his extended schtick for the prostitute that the building of, for example, "a life-size Eiffel Tower to fit over a ranch house in the New Jersey suburbs" (158), which he pretends is one of their recent projects, constitutes mere "historical reverberation": in other words, an effect which simulates historicity but bears no real relation to it. In this novel the narrative voice does not allow Auster to be as explicit or vehement in his criticism of postmodernism as his wife Siri Hustvedt who, in What I Loved, has her first-person narrator savage the trashy postmodernism

of the conceptual artist Giles as "reveal[ing] nothing [. . .] simulacra excreted from the culture's bowels" (203). Yet I would stress that his obvious antipathy to the empty aesthetic of the wall and like projects and, as I indicate below, Flower's collection (82), casts serious doubt on the legions of critics who have queued up to dub the majority of his work nihilistically postmodern.

To borrow an Enlightenment term: the wall represents a failure of cultural and national *sympathy*, of connection and contiguity with others. Stone piles upon stone in a "monstrous sum of particulars" rather than a true symphony, which we have seen achieves not the necessary figurative substitution which completes the mourning for and re-connection with past authority but a narcissistic self-referentiality. In short, it is divisive, isolating and deathly. Although Auster has articulated suspicion at what he perceives as the excessive and constraining rationality of inherited eighteenth-century thought (Pace, "Interview"), this suspicion nonetheless reveals awareness of its influence on American culture, including his own writing, an influence which has prompted James Chandler to posit that Auster may well be "a sentimentalist" in the Enlightenment sense of someone who embraces the idea of reflected, second-order emotions ("Chronotope").

Books two and three of David Hume's <u>A Treatise of Human Nature</u>, as Susan Manning has stated (<u>Fragments</u> 62-63), are about the necessity of living as a social being, of reaching out sympathetically to objects and others and eschewing excessive self-scrutiny. Auster's work, I would stress, is about precisely the same thing. We have seen that paranoia (which we know the wall also enacts) is an essentially self-regarding narrativisation, an artificial positioning of oneself at the centre which is isolating and megalomaniac and runs the risk of deteriorating into melancholia or decontextualised postmodern reflexivity. Thus it is exactly the opposite of a

sympathetic impulse which is truly federative, rather than incorporative of other elements. In historical terms, the urge to amass largely unrelated objects from disparate pasts and cultures, the urge shared by J. P. Morgan, the builders of Las Vegas palaces and, in a sense, Buffalo Bill Cody, is profoundly unsympathetic in denying any real contiguity, proclaiming instead the power of capital to incorporate the past by force into an illusory, empty present.

Flower's collection of "historical memorabilia" (MC 82) contains, among other curiosities,

> A pearl earring worn by Sir Walter Raleigh. A pencil that had fallen from Enrico Fermi's pocket in 1942. General McClellan's field glasses. A half-smoked cigar filched from an ashtray in Winston Churchill's office. A sweatshirt worn by Babe Ruth in 1927. William Seward's Bible. The cane used by Nathaniel Hawthorne after he broke his leg as a boy. (83)[5]

(It is significant that Hawthorne should appear here, as the idea for the museum is patently derived from his short story "A Virtuoso's Collection," which in turn owes a debt to the Earl of Shaftesbury's observations on the "*monstrous*" nature of collections unconnected by sympathy or taste [III: 97]). These objects lack authority by virtue of their authenticity being unverifiable, like the stones in Paul's putative fireplace in Carpenter's Gothic or the "thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy" in Donald Barthelme's "At the Tolstoy Museum" (City Life 43). Nashe realises that they have "nothing to do with history, nothing to do with the men who had once owned them. The fascination was simply for the objects as material things, and the way they had been wrenched out of any possible context [. . .] It was the isolation that haunted Nashe, the image of irreducible separateness" (84). They are divested of a

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[5] It is noteworthy that many of these items are connected with war, perhaps the ultimate arena of fragmentation and asympathy. But to see such connections is perhaps beside the point or worse, occasioned by the reader or critic's paranoid impulse to see meaning in the meaningless.

sense of association, like the stones in the wall, and remain locked in their own world of closed signification. Here we have another succinct image of how a particular form of historiography results in isolationism and in an empty postmodern discourse which refuses to speak beyond itself to an outside world of real contiguities, associations and mutual effects.

Susan Stewart's analysis in <u>On Longing</u> of the collection as a non-representational category is particularly useful here. Taking as her starting point the subjugation of the past as an aesthetic realm to the needs of the collection, she continues:

> The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality [. . .] The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context [. . .] The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority [. . .] The spatial whole of the collection supersedes the individual narratives that "lie behind it." (151-53)

Stewart's comments are especially illuminating in highlighting the relationship between forms of capital and aesthetic forms. Endlessly elastic and potentially limitless in its acquisitiveness, Flower's collection is globalising and at the same time totally lacking in nostalgia for the geographical, cultural or temporal origins of its contributing objects, a trait which Stewart associates more with antiquarianism (153). It is a reified and reifying closed system of "extraction and seriality" (Stewart 153) which mirrors the decontextualising exchange processes of capital itself and is as Ilana Shiloh states a form of accountancy (507). (Again there are echoes of Robert Coover's Universal Baseball Association, as well as Nashe's own bookkeeping of the

stones as they mount up [203]) Moreover, in its collectivity and singularity, it presents the same oxymoronic qualities as the very notion of American-style democracy, a subject I deal with in the next chapter. Participating in this ideological project is the aestheticisation of the taxonomy itself, the drive to catalogue, epitomised as I have remarked by Jefferson's Notes, which renders peoples and relics as textual ghosts.

Some qualification is required at this point. To describe the collection as decontextualised or meaningless, one should be careful to distinguish between the meaninglessness of *chance* which, as previous chapters have stressed, Auster cherishes as a proper reflection of reality, and the meaninglessness of a taxonomy which is reifying and as much to do with the dictatorial, acquisitive power of the collector himself. It is meaningless in offering an arbitrary or at least purely constructed category of meaning. Derrida, in Archive Fever, explores the etymology of the word "archive" to stress that an archive or a collection is not just about meaning or gathering, but is also nomological – concerned with law (1-5). In other words, collection is a system of control.

Returning to Flower's collection: Auster's deployment of the verb "haunt" is important. An appreciation of how these items are ghostly is pivotal to our understanding of how they represent melancholy, not mourning. Susan Manning, discussing ghosts and ghost-writing in Scottish Enlightenment texts, says:

> the voice of tradition, like that of a ghost, may fall victim to melancholia (in the Freudian sense of refusal to accept that the dead are really dead, properly and actually lost to life) [. . .] the ghostly Ossianic self is liminal: an ambassador from the edge of cultural memory, a remembrancer to the present. (Fragments 167)

Despite representing on one level a link between past and present (a link which is celebrated by Michel de Certeau in his essay "Ghosts in the City" as activating

"interchanges between foreign memories [. . .] urban polyphony" in the "'old stones'"
of the city [137]), these ghosts are in fact deeply conservative like much
postmodernism, in a way which Susan Manning has also noted (Fragments 164). By
being co-opted into the paranoid ever-present (described in the previous chapter in
relation to postmodernism and here in relation to Edenic mythologies), such ghostly
objects only superficially appear transgressive or chaotic, as T. J. Lustig observes
(247). In fact, they are incorporated into an undynamic, static monument which pays
tribute only to their essential disconnectedness and their eternal significatory decay.
Ghosts are thereby robbed of their historicity and their authority, becoming innocuous
attractions for tourists like the ghosts on London Bridge or the Native Americans
rehabilitated in the Wild West shows. For Auster, who realises that writing-as-
mourning always flirts with the descent into melancholia, *words themselves* acquire
ghostly characteristics (can indeed become a "language of ghosts" [CLT 10]), in that
though absolutely mandatory, they embody the very disconnectedness they aim to
overcome. It is a dilemma explicitly tackled in Ghosts, the second story in The New
York Trilogy and dealt with in the next chapter.

We return, in a slightly different form, to the question posed in chapter one: to
what extent might the loss of a hypotactic authority, be it God or the Old World,
facilitate the unsympathetic ransacking of the past and result in the ghettoising
division of tasteless, ghostly virtuosity (or postmodern eclecticism)? What is it that
connects us post-authority? As Heidegger suggests, homelessness and itinerancy
inculcate a spirit of striving toward dwelling, that is, the allowing of space for
ourselves and others *to be* and thus a form of sympathy. For Auster, the fixed and
alienating demarcations of the wall disallow dwelling in this sense, and it is in
movement across boundaries – be it the movement of the pen across the page or the

movement of the hobo across America – that sympathy might be re-acquired or at least approximated. One figure in particular has traditionally held out the possibility of renewed intersubjectivity by attesting to every member of a community's possible involvement in affairs, and it is to this figure I turn now – the detective.

4. A City with No one in it but Me:
the Detective and the Space of (Non)Relation

Detective fiction, then, is never just that, but always something more. (Briggs 213)

Maybe God did exist and maybe He didn't, but somewhere in that city there were sure a

lot of guys who were going to try and keep me from finding out.

 (Woody Allen, "Mr. Big" 145)

The New York Trilogy holds a mirror up to our own madness – the assumption of our

hermetic individuality. (Alford, "Madness" 20)

Reading the Detective

In "The Writer as Detective Hero," Ross MacDonald asserts that "[a] close

paternal or fraternal relationship between writer and detective is a marked peculiarity

of the form" (179). If one accepts this statement, as Auster critics like Carl

Malmgren, Madeleine Sorapure and Jeffrey T. Nealon have done, then one might also

be inclined to accept first that the detective wields a special brand of authority, and

secondly that the detective narrative has *always* to some extent operated on a self-

conscious, self-reflexive level and provided a vehicle by which authors can dramatise

their own creative processes and attendant neuroses.

For example, regardless of whether Auguste Dupin was created to stave off

Poe's embryonic insanity, Bernd Herzogenrath is correct in emphasising the

characteristic duality of the Frenchman, the combination of rational and Romantic

which reflected Poe's own contradictions and was inherited by Sherlock Holmes (16-

20). Raymond Chandler's correspondence provides ample evidence of his Romantic

identification with his fictional familiar:

> P. Marlowe and I do not despise the upper classes because they take baths and have
>
> money; we despise them because they are phoney. (Speaking 215)

By the time of Paul Auster's City of Glass, Dupin's volatile duality and

Marlowe's knight-errant idealism have been repressed into Quinn's factitious belief in

the perspicacity of his creation Max Work (a belief which the ensuing narrative

denigrates and which, I will show, Auster cannot share). For Quinn, at the beginning of his adventures, "the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eye" (CG 8). It is as if both structurally and epistemologically the detective's imbrication with the writer testifies nominalistically to the transparency of the writer's ambitions and to the reader's ability to witness them. The detective and the prescribed safety of his genre, for Quinn, ensure that the writer can say what he means and has the luxury of absolute authority.

Yet, as the ensuing action of the novel shatters this luxury Quinn, like Auster himself in The Invention of Solitude, "must learn all over again, step by step, that the author is a construct, a false endpoint of reading" (Zilcosky 196), that "the person who is most conspicuously absent from the texts of Paul Auster [is] Paul Auster himself" (Barry Lewis 53). It follows that the *detective's* assurance is also a construct, and any solution may be such "a false endpoint." Perhaps wary of this, Paul Auster declares of The New York Trilogy that "they're not detective novels" (Personal interview), although he recognises of course that Blue is at least a detective professionally.

It may well seem self-defeating to begin a chapter on detection with this quotation. But such a dogmatic assertion on the part of the author only partially effaces the complexities of the issue, raising as it does a number of questions. Why *are* there detectives or writer-detectives in The New York Trilogy? (Auster's assertion that his hand was forced by the phone call he received asking for the Pinkerton agency is interesting, a trifle convenient and not entirely satisfactory [CP 263]). How would Auster characterise detective fiction? Would he define it according to its formulaic imperatives only? To what extent do his tales conform to *anti*-detective fiction as treated in chapter thirteen of Roy Porter's The Pursuit of

Crime, texts "committed to the task of defamiliarization, often by means of a more or less explicit parody of the detective genre" (245), but nonetheless a genre themselves? Part of this chapter's project is the answering of these questions.

Perhaps most importantly, if they are not detective novels, why then is the majority of the scholarly material devoted to them predicated on the assumption that they are, albeit in a metafictional, deconstructive manner? The New York Trilogy has attracted a wealth of critical and scholarly attention, much of which has strived, with slight shifts in emphasis, to register it as an exemplar of a certain kind of anti-Aristotelian postmodernism which deconstructs positivistic notions of causality in the way William V. Spanos describes in his 1972 paper "The Detective and the Boundary." For example, Andrew Crumey describes The New York Trilogy, far from untypically, as "a metaphysical thriller that brilliantly inject[s] postmodern trickery into the hardboiled detective genre" ("Oracle" 5). I should state at this juncture that my analysis does not attempt an exhaustive account of the preceding criticism (this in itself would require a book) but cites the most rigorous readings with a look to exposing what I feel are their common weaknesses. These include a willingness to ignore older influences than modernism or postmodernism and a reduction of Auster's work to an exemplar of certain fashionable theoretical practices such as deconstruction. This is not to say that there is anything intrinsically unworthy about such practices – after all, as Peter Brooker notes, deconstruction is "a method of critique" (New York 13) not merely an exercise in nihilism – only that one must not view the presence of "detectives" in the work as an invitation *only* to focus on reflexivity, *différance* or scopic reflections of our precious intellectual work as interpreting readers. If this correlation is pushed too far it eventually becomes as generic and as stale as the wholly expected red herring in the classical mystery.

Interestingly, Alison Russell's "Deconstructing the New York Trilogy," despite its title, largely avoids the pitfalls I have been describing, by paying attention to Auster's literary antecedents and by hinting at the possibility that The New York Trilogy reflects on American national identity and the "artifacts" which contribute to it (78). This is something I explore presently.

One cannot completely disregard the similarities between The New York Trilogy and anti-detective novels such as Robbe-Grillet's The Erasers and Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, in which the (surrogate) detective is divested of any epistemological privilege and the familiar teleology of the form is radically disrupted. If any "detective" text has been an influence on Auster, I believe it is Pynchon's, not only because of the puritan-paranoid sensibility already discussed but also, as this chapter elucidates, because of the rather critically neglected historical and political specificities of Oedipa Maas' environment. Whether or not Auster chooses to deny accusations of metafictional postmodernism, The New York Trilogy undeniably is, like Lot 49, a text *about* reading practices which are (unlike the majority of articles about Auster) more or less explicitly ideologically, spiritually and politically freighted. We shall discover that "reading" for Auster and his protagonists (along with writing), is a supremely complex issue. Whilst implicating observation and interpretation in its mechanisms, it aspires to an idealistic and fully relational utility which operates effectively only *out of* the solipsistic vacuum of theorising. Reading, in other words, is a necessary step on the road towards the fullness of *being*.

So where I would unreservedly agree with Auster is in his denunciation of those critics who have attributed an entirely illusory theoretical strand to the novels themselves. William Lavender's article on City of Glass, for instance, celebrates "the central position it assigns to theory in general" (219). Ignoring the fact that the real

Paul Auster is an essayist, and that an essayist is also simply someone who *tries*, he weakly cites as evidence for his focus on critical theory the fact that "the author's namesake" writes essays (224). Here he outlines the thrust of his argument:

> Auster poses the question, How many of the normally assigned qualities of the novel, especially those that have become attached to it through critical exegesis, formulation and application of theory, and scientific or semiotic analysis, can be abandoned, mutilated, ruined in and by a narrative that remains identifiable as a novel? (219-20)

Whilst Lavender's subsequent investigation of the function of character is admirable (although I will argue that it is in fact much more germane to the ciphers which inhabit Ghosts), the tautology of the quotation above, taking as its starting point supposed novelistic characteristics dictated by theory and from that suggesting that Auster employs theory to dismantle them, misses the point completely. To remark "[it] could be argued that Auster's seemingly obsessive engagement of theory reduces the novel to an academic enterprise," even if Lavender then justifies his reading by asserting that "[t]he value of the novel of critical engagement is that it clears a space where representation can again close with politics and society" (238-39), is to ignore one crucial fact. Identity in Auster's work may well not be substantive but in constant negotiation; language may well be inadequate in expressing the world and thus jeopardise relations between speaking subjects; protagonists may well find themselves floating in a landscape of flux without the comfort of metanarratives; reality may well be almost impossible to authenticate: all this is true, but for Auster none of these are theoretical, critical or even literary points, they are humanistic and ultimately practical questions of, to deploy the last chapter's terminology, *dwelling* in the world. They aim at, in fact, as accurate a reflection of his world as Auster can manage. As he says in an interview with Chris Pace: "The funny thing is that, in the end, I'm not interested in literature at all as an artifact. I'm just trying to rediscover the real world,

the real world that I live in, no matter how fantastic or crazy or uncontrollable it might seem." (A classical notion of art mirroring the real world, despite Auster's sentiments, is shown to be deeply problematic in Ghosts, I argue later.)

Thus, for all its complexity, Lavender's thesis is ultimately reductive. It partakes, I feel, of the kind of postmodernism which "is too often associated with the merely stylistic features of self-conscious play and parody for it to serve the broader radicalising purpose ascribed to it" and "[a]t its most extreme [. . .] becomes a celebratory or fatalistic aestheticism, a self-ratifying denial of any effective cultural politics" (Brooker, New York 15). Although we should hesitate to dub Auster's work "radicalising" (it is only in an oblique sense), Peter Brooker's term "new modern," which "retains the sense of a world of lived social, cultural and economic relations" (New York 15) seems much more apposite. In City of Glass the central agon, if we can be so binary at all, is not between theory and literature, or criticism and reality, and certainly not between novelistic tropes and their ruination, but between, basically, connection and disconnection in a contemporary urban environment. Moreover, it is the *failure* of criticism which if anything preoccupies Auster, the lack of confidence in any applied theory or world view satisfactorily to cement the subject's position in the universe. If The New York Trilogy is metafictional, it is so in the sense that it serves as an admonition *against* the straitjacket of critical engagement, which is, like the Freudian narrative diagnosis, tantamount to a kind of paranoia. It is not so much that detection constitutes "an unworkable confrontation with a reality whose dubious significance cannot be credibly decoded" (Bernstein, "Question" 135), but that any attempt systematically to decode in the first place divorces one from the reality of being.

Chris Tysh aims a pre-emptive strike at the kind of criticisms I am making.

Contending that "Auster's literary productions" are "squarely within the pomo camp,"
he continues: "The eager facility with which we frame the writer is not so much a
question of academic legitimacy or even a crude form of intellectual sponsorship
meant to pigeonhole someone [. . .] but merely an occasion to remark an evident
congruence, a certain meshing of motifs and effects" (46). This is an admirable
sentiment, and one which I might employ to defend my use of psychoanalytic
vocabulary and strands of existential philosophy, yet to speak then of "musical-chair
games of being" (48) in City of Glass in no way acknowledges the genuine sadness or
ethicality which accompanies Auster's treatment of loss and isolation. Inadvertently,
Tysh's musical chair metaphor seems to return us either to the parlour where the
classical murder mystery is played out, or to the room where the critic sits, madly
theorising.

Locked Rooms

S. E. Sweeney convincingly argues that the conventional "locked room"
motif, made famous by Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," symbolises not only the
seemingly insoluble problem which the master sleuth alone has the capabilities to
crack, but also "the self-reflexivity of narrative" and "the inevitable solipsism of
interpretation – including narrative theory itself" (11). Referring to the previous
chapter, the construction of elaborate theory fails to enable space for human existence,
but like a wall delimits, imposes boundaries and hermetically seals off the reader /
critic from the object of his endeavours. That is why Blue finds himself trapped in his
Brooklyn room in Ghosts and why the final part of the trilogy, the story most
preoccupied with the crippling effects of exegesis, is named The Locked Room. The
problem is, as my first chapter's analysis of the trick photo in The Invention of
Solitude illustrates, that all interpretation (including my own, of course) runs these

risks, but they are risks that should not be exacerbated by slavish adherence to a codified theoretical practice.

So if we return to our initial difficulty, Auster may deny that these texts even are detective novels because traditionally detectives have utilised just the kinds of totalising critical framework he is suspicious of in their pursuit of the criminal. Dupin's and Holmes' scientific empiricism is but the most renowned example. Crucially, it demands their isolation from others as acute observers, voyeurs and expert analysts: Dupin, for example, from a mixture of poverty and "the fantastic gloom" of his character, has "ceased to bestir himself in the world" ("Murders" 248). Auster, in contrast, offers us isolated individuals who happen to act as detectives and who must somehow jettison their debilitating positivistic, generic or even post-structuralist theories and strive to re-enter the world of felt, if intangible, human modalities. Suffice to say that City of Glass and Ghosts in particular *are* in my opinion detective texts, but it is the protagonists' desperate desire for an explanatory system which makes them detectives and their potentially tragic weakness is therefore their status *as* detectives. Detection, as paranoia rendered professional, is a symptom of a wider malaise – a tendency to misrepresent the world as it really is. In other words, Auster portrays detectives who must be "cured of investigative impulses" (Saltzman, Designs 62), must cease to be detectives in order to live.

In this chapter I investigate the symptomatic detective in relation to Paul Auster's Squeeze Play (under the pseudonym Paul Benjamin, 1978) and the three short novels which comprise The New York Trilogy. (At this stage it should be noted that I do not regard The Locked Room as a detective novel in any generic or broad tropological sense, but as I have suggested, its adoption of the image of the locked room merits its inclusion in my argument here and that is the image I will concentrate

on.) In the previous chapter I contended that The Music of Chance offers a critique of

a melancholic and solipsistic postmodern aesthetic. Here I insist that The New York

Trilogy in particular, to reformulate Scott McCracken's persuasive argument,

ritualises the fear of a *post*modernity under which ethical and human relations are

sacrificed to the exigencies of abstracted theorising or a standpoint of critical

remoteness. As I have been suggesting, Auster undoubtedly deploys post-structuralist

and postmodern tropes and techniques, yet his sympathies (I use the word very

deliberately) lay elsewhere, in the Enlightenment Science of Man, (post) puritan

semiotics and, as he has made explicit in interview with the author of this essay, the

philosophical writings of the thinker, essayist, translator and occasional novelist

Martin Buber (1878-1965).[6]

It is Buber who, for Auster, most cogently propagates a theory of "the world of

relation" (I and Thou 13) by drawing on a Kantian distinction between the

phenomenal and the noumenal, suggesting that the former is the gateway to the latter

and, even if the other (in the realm of the noumenal) cannot be experienced or

articulated as such, there is a kind of practical faith which enables some meeting of

self and other. I discuss him in more detail later in this and subsequent chapters,

suffice to say for now that primary issues for Auster – love, solitude versus isolation;

the limitations of interpretation and experience; and the self-absorption which has

variously been described here as paranoia, melancholia and solipsism – are informed

by his division between the worlds of "It" and "Thou." Although the perceived

Manicheanism of Buber's primal relations has been questioned by several critics,

including Marvin Fox, and despite his relative unpopularity in academic circles now,

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[6] The only other scholar I am aware of to have made the connection between Auster and Buber is Peter Brooker in his analysis of dialogic community in Smoke and Blue in the Face (Modernity and Metropolis 127-40).

it is clear that for Auster there is a fluidity to these relations which is mediated by the imaginative operations of the work of art. Additionally, there is a political undercurrent to Auster's reading of Buber which lifts the philosophy beyond the revival of Jewish religious consciousness it originally espoused, and for which Buber became renowned. Reading him at the same time he was protesting against the Vietnam War at Columbia, Auster may have seen in Buber's dismissal of a self viewed as normative, one which incorporates the other rather than meeting it, a description of American foreign policy.

For this chapter's argument, I would contend that Buber's positing of a space of pure relation, free from the debilitating effects of an individualistic subjectivity, can help explain Auster's dedication to a relationship with his literary antecedents which necessitates, as City of Glass and The Invention of Solitude demonstrate, a partial abnegation of self (not a complete denial) in order to enter a relational, historical space quite distinct from a hermetically sealed intertextuality.

The same abnegation is required of the detective. Quintessentially puritan and paranoid, the Austerian detective finds himself in an ostensibly postmodern environment where signifying and moral authorities have disappeared (primarily God) and is burdened with tremendous responsibility. He must avoid melancholia and the retreat into interpretive isolation or mere textual play and instead attempt to re-establish paratactic links between members of the narrative world and, by analogy, wider world he inhabits. This is not necessarily to argue for a return to consoling meta-narratives, a move which, with scant regard for the dialectic or for postmodernism's potential for becoming meta-narrative itself (see Eagleton, Illusions 26), Philomena Mariani rejects. She states that "nostalgia for the surety of master narratives – Family, Nation, God, Progress, or even the Class Struggle veils a desire to

escape the complexity of historical and cultural realities exposed by oppositional postmodern practices" (12). Rather, the Austerian detective figure must strive for a humanistic determination to encounter and fully witness the other (not to be confused with the more egotistical "humanist narrative of the divine self" [Little 134]) and create the potential for dwelling without filtering perception through the prism of codifying theories. That he often fails to fulfil these responsibilities, and become "the man who looks out from himself into the world" (CG 8), by no means renders the questing process less laudable.

Effectively, then, I agree with William Spanos' analysis of the "well-made cosmic drama" (150) of western philosophical tradition, and his adoption of existentialist discourse to claim that the detective epitomises man's attempt to fabricate objects of ontic concreteness, scapegoats for his dread. Where I would differ is in his rejection of a Heideggerian (or Buberian) notion of "letting Being be." He states that the detective has "usurped the place not only of God but of Being too as the abiding presence and, therefore, has first to be confronted" (167). An Auster detective, whether he realises it or not, is precisely engaged in a process of striving for Being or dwelling and, to borrow Spanos' Freudian term, is already in a state of "unhoming" (167). I would contend that Auster does believe we can find a home, even if it is intangible, indefinable, provisional. That home is not located in the self, but in between self and other. The less experimental novels such as Timbuktu clarify this position.

I wish now, in parenthesis, to focus on another novel which reflects constructively on Auster's detectives and broadens the argument to include the enduring *political* implications of the contrast between sympathetic connection and remoteness. My reading of Ghosts in particular depends on these implications, but it

is also my intention to underline the fact, as I have been doing throughout this study, that a reading of Auster from this viewpoint has analogues in other works of literature and in other discourses, too. Auster's work, remember, claims to be not about itself, but about nothing less than what it means to be human.

The Politics of Reading

"'Why,' Driblette said at last, 'is everybody so interested in texts?'" This quotation, from The Crying of Lot 49 (53), effectively summarises both the narrative of the novel and the sixties borderline modernist / postmodernist milieu in which Oedipa Maas and the reader find themselves. That this is a text peculiarly obsessed with hermeneutics and the inadequacies of certain styles of reading practice has become axiomatic in analyses such as John Johnston's. And as chapter two noted, imbued with a puritan, paranoid craving for epistemological certainties, it is ultimately a quasi-religious soteriological text concerned with eschatology, holy mystery and the receding possibility of authority. What must also be acknowledged, however, is the coalition of social and political forces which have rendered Oedipa's exegetical skills inefficacious within her historical context.

As she wanders through the Berkeley campus she muses on the vibrant pluralism of the student body, "students in nose-to-nose dialogue" (71), and compares it with her own educational experiences in locutions of extraordinary prescience in regard to the current political climate in the United States:

> She moved through it carrying her fat book, attracted, unsure, a stranger, wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much of a search among alternate universes it would take. For she had undergone her own educating at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them, this having been a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places only death had had the power to cure, and this Berkeley was like no

> somnolent Siwash out of her own past at all, but more akin to those Far Eastern or
>
> Latin American universities you read about [. . .] the sort that bring governments
>
> down [. . .] Where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear
>
> daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth? [...] Among them
>
> they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps
>
> for marches and sitins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts.
>
> (71-72)

Incapable of direct dialogue, forever it seems destined to retreat into the relative

safety of representation as opposed to activism, Oedipa's passivity and insipidity are

symptomatic of the fear inculcated by the authorities during the McCarthy era, as

Patrick O'Donnell has noted (84). The Manichean, paternalistic fifties zeitgeist of

"[o]nes and zeroes" (126) or them-and-us left no room for the questioning of

constitutionally enforced polarisations, could not countenance liminality, hybridity or,

as Pynchon famously describes it, "excluded middles" (125). To challenge national

ideologies was to run the risk of being implicated in the nebulous "plot" being

hatched by the enemies of the state. Oedipa subsequently accepts plotting as the

default state of being and inevitably *must* become a kind of detective. Inverarity's

legacy, she comes to realise, is America (123), but there is a choice between an

America "with the chances once so good for diversity," or the "great digital

computer" operating binarily, forcing the user into a stark (and very Austerian) choice

between "a transcendent meaning, or only the earth" (125). Predictably, Oedipa is ill-

equipped for true diversity, and is conditioned as a detective to accept the latter:

> if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and
>
> manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into
>
> some paranoia. (126)

In short, Oedipa's reified consciousness informs her reading strategies, which offer a

proliferation of signifiers but outcomes limited to binary oppositions. It is evident

that Pynchon conceives this as a political limitation, a relaxing of the critical faculty precluding positive or dissident action.

Oedipa, like the leftist academics Richard Rorty rather schematically but persuasively derides in Achieving Our Country, is doomed to theorising and "spectatorship" as opposed to agency (Rorty 105), a specularity which has profound political connotations for being, ironically, largely apolitical. Whilst Paul Auster's narratives are never explicitly political (with the possible exception of Leviathan, as we have seen), the opposition between the requisite spectatorship of the (pseudo) detective and a nose-to-nose dialogic involvement with the other underpins the three parts of The New York Trilogy and adumbrates a conception of subjectivity and democracy which is obliquely, but productively, political.

The Democratic Detective

Before proceeding with discussions of specific Auster texts, it is useful to pursue the idea of interconnectivity or its absence a little further in relation to some true detectives. Although the detective, within both the classical and the hard-boiled traditions "rarely has ties to the community" (Robin Woods 19) and has invariably required some degree of remoteness from society in order successfully to carry out investigations, it is also vital to emphasise his intersubjective function within that society, a function that Slavoj Žižek would argue he shares with the corpse ("Two Ways" 59). For although they may live alone, unless occasionally accompanied by a Doctor Watson or Dupin's anonymous friend, outside their apartments the detectives' work attests to the possibility that disparate souls are connected by the crime either as suspects, unwitting victims or vital witnesses. As Robin Woods says:

> Crime is by definition a social issue and specifically refers to a community: people
>
> cannot rob themselves, or punish themselves for that robbery. Even so-called
>
> victimless crimes are regarded as criminal because they are not committed in a

vacuum, but in a web of social exchange. (15)

(One of the idiosyncrasies of The New York Trilogy is that crimes as such are not

committed; they only hover as potentialities, thereby increasing the troubling sense

that social exchange itself in the time of the narrative is only potential, not actual.)

In much conventional detective fiction, and particularly in the classical

country house murder mystery, the very maintenance of suspense relies on our

acceptance of each character's plausible motive and means. As many critics have

observed, only the denouement's protracted exposition allows the identification of a

scapegoat and thus a safe return to pre-lapsarian, guilt-free existence, what W. H.

Auden calls "the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden" ("Vicarage" 158).[7]

As Michael Holquist suggests, some of the "easy reassurance" of the classical

mystery during a Modernist period in which "the limits of reason" (147) were

constantly interrogated, resided in the neatness and inherent rationality of the

scapegoating, and therefore absolving, explanation. David Grossvogel contends that

"the mode of the detective story is to create a mystery for the sole purpose of effecting

its effortless dissipation" (15). Franco Moretti goes as far as to observe that detective

fiction, by reconstructing events prior to the murder "abolishes narration": it is, in

effect, "anti-literary" and an act of regression (148). Both Grossvogel and Moretti

overstate the case: the dialectical nature of the detective's retelling cannot lead simply

to a return, and expresses the very difficulty of imposing a linear narrative on

seemingly irrational events. What is important is the externalisation and hence

defusing of intersubjective guilt – as Žižek explains, "the detective's act consists in

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[7] There are exceptions, of course. Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade's detections are frequently less concerned with ascertaining individual guilt than with the stain of collective guilt which remains over society at the close. William McIlvanney, a writer whose detective fiction owes a lot to the American hard-boiled tradition, begins his novel Laidlaw with a Brechtian twist – we immediately know the culprit. This precludes the possibility of indulging in our own detective work, piecing clues together in a self-gratifying act of sleuthing. The twist objectifies the event, and distances us from the

annihilating the libidinal possibility, the 'inner' truth that each one in the group might have been the murderer" ("Two Ways" 59). So the detective tale raises the spectre of collective guilt only to exorcise it in the final act of revelation, a quasi-religious function noted by Nicholas Blake:

> It consoles us by offering up a scapegoat, the murderer, to carry the guilt of our
>
> private and communal sins. (Omnibus x)

While admittedly I have been subjecting the genre to a rather schematic analysis, it is nonetheless possible to contend that the potential for intersubjectivity in the mystery novel resides mainly in the precincts of formal, syntagmatic construction. The crime as *structural* element forces us to acknowledge social connections at least until the absolution of the detective's exposition. What one needs to establish in reading Auster's detective fiction, especially the New York Trilogy, where no crimes as such are committed and hence no dramatic revelatory denouement is possible, are other ways in which the protagonist might highlight the necessity of living "in the world of others" (CG 9) rather than pretending to be "the best man in his world" (Chandler, "Simple Art" 333). Can the close fraternal relationship between writer and detective signal the stirrings of a broader fraternity, rather than indulging fantasies of authority?

I have been attempting in these extended introductory observations to draw parameters within which a discussion of Squeeze Play and The New York Trilogy can best be accomplished. It will be clear that I regard reading as a crucial trope for the Austerian detective and that the reading activity involved reaches far beyond mere code-breaking to imply the potential for an intersubjective scheme which merges the intellectual, social, political and spiritual. Moreover, the proceeding analysis of these

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investigation such that we are forced to acknowledge instead the societal and historical processes of power and interconnectivity at work.

texts illustrates that the detective, acting with varying degrees of efficiency within this scheme, is a vehicle for a description of an Austerian notion of *democracy*, a concept inevitably tied in with American character and the relation of inner and outer lives. "Everybody has an inner life which is just as valid as any other," states Auster, attempting to define the term, adding "everybody is equal under the law" (Personal interview). Democracy, then, somewhat precariously balances indissoluble, internal individuality (a potential for solipsism, as John P. McWilliams suggests [9]) with external institutions and their abstract conceptions of egalitarianism and collectivism. Philosophically and politically, this inner and outer balance lies at the heart of Auster's detective novels. Is the detective truly "part of the collective American fantasy of the self-determined man" (Walker 396); to what extent does he, as a structural imperative, also determine society's formations and how can he maintain his inner life in the service of the hegemonic institutions by whom he is employed?

<u>Squeeze Play</u>: The Last Man

<u>Squeeze Play</u>, written under the pseudonym Paul Benjamin (Benjamin being Auster's middle name), was purely a money-making scheme, conjured up in a moment of desperation after the failure of Auster's "Action Baseball" card game. Anticipating Quinn's ascription of "plenitude and economy" to the genre (<u>CG</u> 8), Auster expresses his admiration for certain practitioners in a way which casts serious doubt on Julian Symons' diatribe against his "self-congratulatory" and "disagreeable" experiments with the form (321):

> The best ones were humble, no-nonsense writers who not only had more to say about American life than most so-called serious writers, but often seemed to write smarter, crisper sentences as well. (<u>CP</u> 237)

Thus <u>Squeeze Play</u> was supposed to be respectfully derivative, "an exercise in pure imitation" (<u>CP</u> 237). Yet in a significant conventional sense, it is original. Auster explains:

> One of the conventional plot gimmicks of these stories was the apparent suicide that turns out to have been a murder [. . .] I thought: why not reverse the trick and stand it on its head? Why not have a story in which an apparent murder turns out to be a suicide? As far as I could tell, no one had ever done it. (<u>CP</u> 237)

Murder, necessarily private in action but public in its ramifications, is transmuted into the apotheosis of Romantic individualism, "a poem sublime in its melancholy" (Balzac, qtd. in Lieberman 612) – suicide, but a suicide which as we shall see is disguised in order to exert maximum influence on society, such that its solipsistic disconnection forces a perverse connection.

Simultaneously the negation and affirmation of the inner life, the suicide twist at the climax (which I return to) replicates the contradictions at the heart of the novel. <u>Squeeze Play</u>, "a border text, a moment of transition" (Walker 396), has an inner life of its own which occasionally transcends the prescriptions of the genre, thereby revealing their shortcomings, and emerges in characteristically Austerian tics. These tics assume a greater importance than one might initially expect: in fact my aim here is to demonstrate that they serve to undermine one's confidence in the detective, in detection as a reading principle and in the straitjacket which form can become (Todorov 52), and to set up debates about the self in or out of relation which <u>The New York Trilogy</u> renders more sophisticated.

Our hard-boiled detective hero has a name which embodies the contradiction between contact and isolation: "Max Klein" is macro and micro, global and local (*klein* being the German and the Yiddish for "small"). Idiomatically he is also rather schizophrenic. His propensity for generic wisecracking in the Marlowe mould – for

example, he observes upon entering Charles Light's private office that it was "roughly the size of the state of Rhode Island" (72) – is offset by a tendency to launch into epistemological disquisitions worthy of his author's later work. For instance:

> Looking at a microfilm gives you an eerie feeling. Everything is reversed [. . .] it makes you think of an X-ray, as if you were looking into the insides of time, as if somehow the past were a secret dimension of the world that couldn't be recovered unless you lured it out with tricks and mirrors. It's a little like discovering a fossil. The fern leaf has disintegrated millions of years ago, and yet its image is sitting in your hand. It's somehow both there and not there at the same time, lost for ever and yet found. (18-19)

Whilst almost laughably superfluous to the usual demands of a police procedural or a gumshoe novel, such ruminations betray a subconscious agenda which partly stems from Auster's inability totally to abandon his poetic preoccupations, and partly from a latent suspicion of detective practice. For the past, only ever available as representation, disallows empirical certainty even as it holds out, like the fossil, the tantalising prospect of presence regained. Having to resort to "tricks and mirrors" betrays the essential futility of the detective's task. He can only represent, always falsely, and the mirror hints at the solipsism which becomes so central to <u>Squeeze Play</u> and to the evolution of character in <u>The New York Trilogy</u> (especially <u>Ghosts</u>). When looking to recover the past, Klein suggests, you inevitably end up gazing at an image of yourself. Above all, detection feels very much like mourning here. Simultaneously the investigator is dredging past evidence whilst striving for its liberating consignation *to* the past. Again, the temptation to internalise, to slip into melancholia, is omnipresent.

Further challenges to his profession arise from his more esoteric passions. This is a private eye tough guy who listens to classical music and has nine

reproductions of Brueghel's "The Tower of Babel" on his walls because "[t]he painting never failed to make me think of New York" (16). Indeed, despite his use of another biblical image, it is evident that Max *lives* in Babel:

> I lived in one of those classic West Side buildings, a kind of Noah's Ark that
>
> housed almost every New York species in existence. There were white people,
>
> black people, yellow people, and several shades in between. (29)

On one level we have a picture of the heart-warming diversity which has prompted Auster to insist on the South Bank Show that New York should become a separate republic, on another the omnipresent threat of mutual incomprehensibility.

For New York, as City of Glass impresses on us, is radically polyphonic, a contemporary urban babble where the need for translation to facilitate collective communication is pressing but ultimately impossible. In such a cacophonous environment – the "New York Babel" which inspires Louis Wolfson's "system of transformations" between languages (CP 330) – a need arises for a mediating, catalytic figure to sift through competing narratives and voices in order to unearth or fabricate a definitive story. Thus just as the bewildering hieroglyphic networks of Oedipa Maas' San Narciso *necessitate* her becoming a reader / detective, so Max is coerced by his urban and literary environment into the profession. However, it is just this complex and contested environment which ensures the failure of the detective project, whether or not the case is ever "cracked." As a minor digression, it is interesting to note the inherent deconstructive tendency within the word itself. "Cracked," colloquially, means solved, but it also signifies the rupture of meaning, its breaking apart, which is taken up again in City of Glass in the image of Humpty Dumpty.

Faced with such uncertainty, the private eye becomes reader, decoder, urban geographer and, as we shall see in due course, psychoanalyst:

> It's all a matter of details, coincidence, the chance gesture, the unconsciously spoken
>
> word. You have to be alert at every moment, on the look-out for the slightest note of
>
> discord [. . .] You go off in one direction hoping to find one small thing and instead
>
> find another thing that sends you off in yet another direction. If you're not careful,
>
> you can get lost in the labyrinth of other people's lives and never find a way out. But
>
> those are the risks. Once you get involved with human beings, there are no straight
>
> roads any more. (26)

We know from previous chapters that the detective is the paranoiac *par excellence* and

that paranoia is tantamount to megalomania. Fixating on plot, as generically he is

impelled to do, the paranoiac, figuring himself as subject *to* the endless vicissitudes of

the narrative, conversely teeters on the brink of becoming the pre-eminent subject,

invested with an extraordinary power to shape events according to his perception.

Grimes, the cop, hints at this when he admonishes Klein: "The mistake you're making

with this thing is that you want it to be too complicated. You think it's all part of a big

plot that goes back to the moment Chapman was born" (113-14). This is an

admonishment echoed by Nashe in The Music of Chance: he tells Pozzi that belief in

a "hidden purpose" is "a way of avoiding the facts" (139). So lost in the labyrinth of

other people's lives, inevitably the detective must write his own narrative to escape.

Solipsism thus imperils him at every turn. Where Squeeze Play diverges from

the traditional hard-boiled is in its dramatisation of the descent into the self, on the

part both of Max Klein and, it turns out, the victim unmasked as a kind of villain –

George Chapman. Using a rough psychoanalytical sketch, we can observe that the

conscious of the text describes an outer life of relation, collective implication and a

linear, eschatological narrative trajectory toward solution. Yet the unconscious battles

against this by revealing through distinctly political dreams of absolute power a

conflicting impulse:

> I was dreaming of a city with no one in it but me. Everyone had vanished because

> of a strange and devastating power that had taken hold of my voice. Whenever I
>
> spoke to anyone, he would disappear. All I had to do was open my mouth, and
>
> everyone around me would be gone [. . .] Eventually there was no one left. I had
>
> become the last man in the world. (111)

(Klein's dream is echoed in <u>City of Glass</u> when Quinn, attempting to inhabit the thoughts of Max Work his fictional detective dreams that "he found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall" [9]). So the first-person narrative voice (literally) strives to be unequivocally the first and last person, disavowing any pretence at producing a Buberian dialogue or a democratic city. Irrupting into the conscious world in the form of the ditching of his familial relationships, notably with his estranged wife Cathy (182), the drive to be the last man is what connects Klein with Chapman. Jettisoning of private relationships is almost a precondition of the hard-boiled genre, but Auster reveals the point of connection between hero and villain to be only the desire to *dis*connect. Thus is effected on a subconscious level the identification between detective and villain espoused by Auguste Dupin ("Purloined" 472), an identification based on distance which can only ever be at the level of hypothesis, of textualising the observed object without ever being privy to complete or authoritative knowledge.

David Grossvogel situates the concept of mystery within a theological paradigm of incomplete knowledge. Paradoxically, God, whilst remaining utterly mysterious to man through our lack of comprehension, "represents only man's most strenuous effort to overcome mystery" (4). The ramifications of this idea become clearer when we come to <u>City of Glass,</u> a novel more obviously concerned with biblical and linguistic mystery, but for now one particular consequence deserves attention. "Western fiction," Grossvogel observes, "is less interested in describing a world beset by the mystery of ultimate realities than in describing the effect of that

mystery upon an individual consciousness" (12). While it would be easy to dispute

the generalising tone of this assertion, Grossvogel neatly articulates the threat of

solipsism in its various manifestations – paranoia, melancholia – in terms which have

peculiar resonance in Squeeze Play:

> The failure to apprehend the unapprehendable turns into a speculative brooding about
> the limits of the self. (12)

Former baseball hero and now Democrat candidate for the Senate George

Chapman, who at the outset consults Max Klein over a possible death threat,

augments this ontological brooding with decisive career action, we discover.

Baseball, in common with games such as poker, represents for Auster the chiastic

interplay between order and chaos and, significantly, between individual talent and

the exigencies of team play. Moreover, "the very unreality" (4) of its "pastoral

universe" (176) suggests that not only does it provide "metaphors of the case" (181)

for Klein (including the "suicide squeeze" which gives the novel its title), but it is also

to some degree a *literary* space. Here the tribulations of contingency and chance

characteristic of detective genres themselves are enacted in, as Freud argues in

"Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," a phantasy environment where the hero may

feel invulnerable (150). Ensnared in the "continual confrontation between order and

chaos" (Walker 400), Chapman struggles to negate the second term of the chiasmus

by betting on his own performance during matches, running up huge gambling debts

with the gangster Contini in the process. Feeling "detached from himself, somehow

separated from his own life" (SP 117), and mystified and imprisoned by the God-

given "monster" of his enormous talent (SP 158), Chapman signs "a pact with the

devil" (157). He attempts to wrest control from the forces of chance, impose himself

upon the universe like Jack Pozzi or Ben Sachs and in so doing position himself at its

core.

Joseph S. Walker's Foucauldian analysis, which asserts that "[m]any of Auster's most compelling characters attempt to use rigorous self-discipline as a tool of resistance that allows them to counter the external discipline placed upon them" (390) is persuasive, but only partially explains Chapman's actions. He wants to construct and play by his own rules, to feel that he is not subject to the same randomness as others, but above all his desperation to ensure that only his performance counts is an eschewal of dialogue, of interaction, and is the paranoid imposition of self-centred plot on a (possibly godless) aleatorical world which recurs in Auster's work right through to Sidney Orr in Oracle Night.

Remembering Auster's declaration that "[i]f my work is about anything, I think it's about the unexpected, the idea that anything can happen" (AH 333), one can argue that both Chapman and Klein are engaged in a mission to maintain the generic values of absolute explicability, self-centredness, presence and agency in a mysterious world which is fundamentally inimical to those values. In short, they aim to reinstate *authorship*, not chance, as definitive quality. Chapman's suicide (which is mirrored by Judy's lover Briles' [192]) is the logical extreme of this mission. Disguised to look like a murder (191), it masks its consummate retreat from society with a conventionality which apparently positions it within a genre tradition while simultaneously exposing the limitations of the genre for revealing deeper truths about human connection. It marks the wilful formation of a personal mythology within a text purporting to be dialogic. That the eventual possibility of Judy Chapman's engineering of her husband's suicide (200) feels deeply unsatisfying, is to do with the sudden recourse to the hackneyed femme fatale motif, but also with the uncertainty it fosters. Klein has merely constructed a theory which is neither confirmed nor refuted. As a detective he is obliged to do this, and the last image is of Klein in the generic

space of his office, all familial, romantic and professional relationships abandoned, clutching Judy's lighter and "staring at it so hard" that eventually he "couldn't see it any more" (201). It is an apt symbol of the detective's plight: the light of meaning and the remnants of human relation, made invisible by the act of obsessive reading and interpretation which leaves only the isolated self.

The novel has symbolically offered a chance at redemption. Klein cracks the case on a crowded subway train after the baseball game, in the thick of humanity. He says, "I stood in the middle of a pack of sweating, beer-breathed fans, not bothering to reach for a pole, since there was no way I could possibly fall with so much flesh padded up around me." It is here, supported by others, that the hope of liberation from the paranoia-inducing co-ordinates of the detective narrative gleams momentarily, as Klein muses, "I had ventured out looking for pious truths and all-encompassing answers, and I had discovered that the only things that really mattered were of no apparent consequence" (181). Yet, on the very next page Klein blows his "last chance" to redeem his relationship with Cathy and Ritchie, instead cursing the loss of his gun and thereby returning to the world of genre and the all-encompassing explanation.

The Space of Love

Carsten Springer, a little ambiguously, remarks of Squeeze Play that "as a solution for the crisis [Klein's identity crisis], Auster's model only points at the establishment of contact and communication with other people, not the voluntary breaking off of contacts in order to assume a role" (81). He is right to note the restrictions of the generic role, but it is an easy thing to talk in general terms about intangibles such as "contact" or, as I have been doing, "solipsism," "connection" and "relation." It is far more difficult to envisage or to conceptualise exactly *how* any

relation might be achieved and in what realm (imaginative, emotional, philosophical) it might subsist. If <u>Squeeze Play</u> dramatises the inadequacies of detection from within the genre, <u>The New York Trilogy</u>, as a far more sophisticated and cerebral work, attempts to parse the grammar of human relation through a corruption of the detective's world view.

Although any attempts to simplify the three novels are otiose, we can at least contend that the overall trajectory begins where <u>Squeeze Play</u> ends and describes the transition from melancholia and absolute isolation to the utopic "hole between self and not-self" (<u>LR</u> 232) where love may be located. The narrator of <u>The Locked Room</u>, having "broken the spell" of his literary obsession with Fanshawe by destroying the notebook, is in a position to resume real relations with his family (Personal interview). Thus we have at least the possibility of closure, or of a "happy ending." My assessment of <u>The New York Trilogy</u> looks along the torturous route from isolation to love, attempting to define these slippery terms in the process by using a major contributor to Austerian thought, Martin Buber, and addressing the key terms of this essay – authority, melancholia, paranoia, connection, dwelling – in the light of his work, chiefly <u>I and Thou</u> (1937).

Of course, the digressions, diversions and philosophical speculations which litter the path from isolation to love are actually integral to the journey, encompassing as they do insights into the very substance of "character" and where it might intersect with personal or national identity in negotiation with other. Indeed, I posit that <u>Ghosts</u> functions as "the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance" (Brooks, <u>Reading</u> 104) which untangles its scopic webs of mirrors, readings and literary precedents to allow some notion of how character becomes "rounded." Additionally, and rather paradoxically, I argue that the generally accepted concept of

"individuality" – a set of linguistic, autobiographical, object-related and psychological markers which demarcate a literary space inhabited by a recognisable character – is in fact to some extent sacrificed in Auster's work. This sacrifice, experienced most plainly in Ghosts, can be recognised primarily as a sacrifice of authority of the type first seen in The Invention of Solitude. It leads on a simplistic level to the feeling that Auster does not really deal in characters or that his narrative voices "are little more than types" (Homans, "Blue's Clues") but more profoundly to an appreciation of how a human only relates by becoming "a being that neither merely belongs to him nor merely lies outside him" (I and Thou 52), a description which also aptly describes Auster's relationship with his literary influences. Far from a bleaching of identity, this drive for transcendence is hypostasising (essence *is* relation), and reaches its apotheosis in love.

Conceived of as a mystical space beyond feeling and certainly beyond rationalisation (although this of course is what The Locked Room's narrator attempts for our benefit), love for Auster closely follows Buber's model, which in turn employs Heideggerian terms:

> man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not
> cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content,' its object; but
> love is *between I* and *Thou.* (I and Thou 19)

Such love, denying a Cartesian subject and object distinction, is non-acquisitive and perfectly democratic, perfectly relational. A subject that foregoes the need or even the concept of a direct or indirect object enters a realm which, if not entirely asyntactic, proposes an idiom free of subordination, one of parataxis rather than hypotaxis. Importantly, and this is a process seen throughout Auster's oeuvre, entering this realm requires a *negation* of belief in the primacy of self which is the ultimate affirmation of the self's humanity. To achieve love is to relinquish a belief in one's authority, to

relieve oneself of an individuality grounded only in the world of objects (the "It") and to take up a position of alterity to oneself which confirms and embraces a worldly totality. This is why the narrator of The Locked Room feels able to say of his love for Sophie Fanshawe that "I began to feel as though I belonged to everyone else as well" (232). It is also why so many protagonists, as the proceeding chapter shows, become hobos, eschewing as far as possible all material possessions. For the moment it is necessary to observe that the detective, imprisoned as he invariably is within a narrative fortress of his own construction which incorporates others as mere narrative content (in the psychoanalytical sense outlined in chapter one), is singularly ill equipped to attain love.

For love is impossible to achieve in isolation. Isolation, a profoundly negative condition in Auster's world, usefully accords with melancholia, paranoia and solipsism as key terms in our argument. All of them pertain to a state of being alone which is to some extent willed and disallows connection, even of an imaginative or intellectual kind, with others. As Carsten Springer says:

> At the point where contact with other people would be helpful, the protagonist
> consciously isolates himself by breaking off contact with other people and by
> refusing to enter any exchange with society. (26-27)

Compare with the "productive kind of solitude, the solitude of a vicar or an artist, or a daydreamer" (South Bank), which resembles a Heideggerian "thinking across the gap" *toward* the other or, as it was described in the previous chapter, a sympathetic solitude. A truly creative solitude should empower and illuminate because:

> you don't begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone. And
> the more intensely you are alone, the more deeply you plunge into a state of
> solitude, the more deeply you feel that connection. (AH 315)

This is the kind of solitude which connects Auster and Thoreau (Ford 205), and which

both enables and is described by The Invention of Solitude. What City of Glass demonstrates, however, is that the productivity or otherwise of one's solitude depends on the kinds of activity the self is engaged in while alone. Also there is a tacit hierarchy of artistic forms and reading styles, some of which precipitate a fall into paranoia and "the stronghold of isolation, where a man conducts a dialogue with himself," some of which grant "purification, necessary even to the man who is bound in relation" (Buber, I and Thou 80).

City of Glass: Losing Oneself to Find Oneself

When we meet Daniel Quinn at the start of City of Glass he is an unloved and isolated figure, his wife and son having died: "he no longer existed for anyone but himself" (4). Indeed, Auster has claimed that the novel is a "love letter" in the negative to his wife Siri, a fictionalisation of "what would have happened to me if I hadn't met her" (AH 306). Moreover, the third-person narrator reinforces Quinn's isolation by releasing only the bare minimum of biographical details (an evasive strategy recapitulated in Ghosts), thereby precluding any immediate readerly identification:

> As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance [. . .] We know that he had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead. We also know that he wrote books. To be precise, we know that he wrote mystery novels. (3)

Doubly abstracted, living behind both his pen-name William Wilson and his detective persona Max Work, Quinn mourns not only the deaths of his wife and child, but his own authorial / authoritative presence ("he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote" [4]) in a world which might be designated "real." The replacement of the material with memorial-textual substitutions has consumed him to such an extent

that all connection with the real world has been lost, leading to melancholia and the casting of doubt on the very existence of any reality. "He had, of course," we are informed, "long ago stopped thinking of himself as real," and significantly it is only Max Work, a fictional creation, who continues "to live in the world of others." In short, Quinn has been reduced to the wholly textual, firing his gun into the symbolic blank page (9). He has yet to realise, as Auster characters always must, that "significance in the world must emerge as the consequence of the relation between one's self and another" (Alford, "Spaced" 617).

If this sounds suspiciously like a Baudrillardian world of reality elided under a profusion of simulacra, then our fears are confirmed when we are told:

> Like most people, Quinn knew almost nothing about crime. He had never murdered anyone, had never stolen anything, and he did not know anyone who had [. . .] Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned form books, films, and newspapers. He did not, however, consider this to be a handicap. What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories. (7)

Immersed in intertextuality, Quinn can only ever raid the image bank for ideas, and the question which the ensuing narrative goes some way to answering is, to what extent *is* this a handicap, regardless of what our "hero" feels? Stephen Bernstein may be right to stress that intertextuality throughout The New York Trilogy is not only compositional but also psychological ("Question" 135), as Quinn's mindset, his entire existence at this stage is textually constituted. Nevertheless, far from celebrating this fact, whether or not it facilitates a "refutation of meaning" or a critique of a "holistic response" to a fractured and aleatorical reality ("Question" 136, 137), Auster instead elicits our sympathies for a man who has effectively become a postmodernist.

This requires some qualification. As I have shown in the reading of The

Invention of Solitude, intertextuality as a generative "mosaic of quotations," a text's "absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, Desire 66) is neither inherently postmodernist nor inherently questionable. The dissolution of Auster's substantive authorial subjectivity in the web of his writing (to borrow Roland Barthes' metaphor from The Pleasure of the Text [64]) by, for example, the fictionalisation of "Paul Auster" and the use of Poe's name "William Wilson" as Quinn's pseudonym, does not strive for an implosion or a retreat into an empty play of citation. Rather it presupposes an anterior but dynamic historical community through which the author diffuses himself in order to transcend individual authority, show awareness of how he himself is culturally and historically produced and, most importantly, enter into relation. Combining negation and affirmation, Austerian intertextuality is in fact a Buberian act of love.

Quinn's, on the other hand, is not. Ideally suited to a socially disengaged and addictive appetite for paranoid interpretation, detective fiction contributes to his entrapment. We are specifically told "it was the form that appealed to him" (8) and there is no sense in which he is engaged with a historical tradition, only with a series of conventions, the "consolation of form" (Varvogli 36). As my analysis of Squeeze Play insisted, detective genre rules or conventions dictate patterns of protagonists' behaviour and precipitate a fall into solipsism on the part of the detective hero. Here, the *reader* (and writer) Quinn is made obedient to the easy assurances of genre and form to the point where (remembering Richard Rorty and Terry Eagleton's criticisms of postmodernism), his critical faculty is downgraded:

> it was the rare, unspeakably bad mystery that he would refuse to read [. . .] with these
> works he showed almost no discrimination whatsoever. When he was in the right
> mood, he had little trouble reading ten or twelve of them in a row. It was a kind of
> hunger that took hold of him [. . .] (8)

A facile consumption of the familiar, allied to a paranoid belief in the closed circuitry

of the detective text, a world "seething with possibilities" in which "[e]verything

becomes essence" (8), results in the kind of logocentrism which William Little

astutely identifies as "eliminating waste from the body of the text" (135). In fact,

Quinn's assertion that in the "good mystery there is nothing wasted" (8) testifies to his

desire to close off the possibility of chance, difference and social connection and to

immerse himself only in the economy of a text which the detective as stand-in for

mourned authority resolves into authoritative explanation. But City of Glass reveals

that waste (or excess) is everywhere: in Stillman's broken objects (77), in the faeces

that has to be expelled and retains an element of the self, however unwanted (116),

and in language's refusal to confine itself to the requirements of the detective plot and

its solution. Waste is not negative, necessarily: it connotes the world beyond the self

and the text which cannot, and should not be ignored.[8]

The case, the following of Peter Stillman Senior, represents a chance for

Quinn finally to get back into the world, to "pass from himself into Work" (6). As

Jeffrey T. Nealon observes, this phrase not only expresses Quinn's desire to become

the detective hero but also to escape "the always idling stages of composition" for

"the meaningful metaphysical realm" (94). However, the terms Quinn employs to

conceptualise this quest alert us to the inevitability of its failure: as intertextual as

ever, he imagines himself as a modern-day Don Quixote. Not only does "imagining

himself as Auster [. . .] become synonymous with doing good in the world" (51), but

he entertains a "chivalric hope" (63) that his romantic endeavours will win the heart

of Peter Stillman Junior's wife Virginia. So the restrictive codes of detective fiction

are embroiled with the equally inappropriate and outmoded literary codes of the

knight errant. Besides, <u>Don Quixote</u> can be read as an exercise in pure artifice, Cervantes' attempt "to test the gullibility of his fellow men" (100). If we are to believe the essayist Paul Auster's reading, it is diametrically opposed to the world of work as Quinn sees it.

The failure of Quinn's chivalric enterprise pivots, I would stress, on one crucial scene which itself depends on the inevitability of waste. Armed with a photograph of his quarry, Quinn waits on Grand Central Station. In a scene which echoes the subway scene toward the end of <u>Squeeze Play</u>, he finds himself surrounded by the "mob" of humanity as the passengers disembark (54). As he so often is in Auster's work, our protagonist is offered an opportunity to dive into the sea of relation.

Bizarrely, the choice he faces is made starker by an unexpected mitosis – the arrival of *two* Stillman Seniors, the contrasting descriptions of which throw the existential distinction into relief. Dressed in "a long, brown overcoat that had gone to seed" the first Stillman epitomises solipsism and disconnection: his facial expression appears "midway between a daze and thoughtfulness." Moreover, "[h]e did not look at the things around him, nor did they seem to interest him" (55). The second Stillman, however, "dressed in an expensive blue suit," has "the shrewd look of a man of the world" (56). Condemned to arbitrariness and to the wasting of one line of inquiry, Quinn nonetheless instinctively feels that the shabby Stillman, "so broken down and disconnected from his surroundings" must be the correct one (56).

Of course, narratively, we could argue with Auster that "he picked the right one but he didn't know it at the time" (Personal interview). Indeed, the pursuit of the first Stillman permits the all-important disquisitions on the nature of pre and post-

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[8] I am indebted for certain of the ideas here to Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, as formalised in

lapsarian language and the futility of trying to recuperate a monolithic relationship between signifier and signified (CG 78). Yet the subsequent action only encourages Quinn's paranoid impulses and proves that the decision to become a detective was itself misguided. Extending the interrogation of the limitations of the genre first seen in Squeeze Play, City of Glass serves to undermine Quinn's assertion while conducting one of his conversations with Stillman Senior – "I can follow you perfectly" (86). Quinn is trapped within this pun: "follow" in the sense of "pursue" presupposes and relies for its efficacy on the maintenance of an observational distance which cannot but jeopardise the solidity of the alternative meaning, that of "understand." To follow is never to relate or fully to understand, only to come after and speculate, and it necessitates a form of reading which must fill the gap with interpretation masquerading as empirical truth. Quinn's mapping of Stillman's perambulations supposedly to form the letters of "TOWER OF BABEL" (70) is but the most extreme example. If we traditionally associate the detective with itinerancy, this kind of "following" is actually paralysing, leaving the follower static.

Quinn is intelligent enough eventually to realise not that he is unqualified as a detective (his solipsism makes him abundantly qualified) but that the methodology of the detective is always doomed to failure:

> He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results [. . .] But after struggling to take in all these surface effects, Quinn felt no closer to Stillman than when he first started following him [. . .] Instead of narrowing the distance that lay between him and Stillman, he had seen the old man slip away from him, even as he remained before his eyes. (67)

Powers of Horror. I return to it in the next chapter.

Where City of Glass differs from Squeeze Play is in its tendering of another approach

to the question of relation, far removed from the generic restrictions of detection.

After the case has patently collapsed, Stillman Senior having disappeared, and soon

after leaving Auster's apartment somewhat embittered by the cosy domesticity he has

been privy to, Quinn begins to write in his red notebook once again, but his musings

are qualitatively different now:

> what he wrote that day had nothing to do with the Stillman case. Rather, he con-
> centrated on the things he had seen while walking [. . .]
>
>> Today, as never before: the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag
>> ladies, the drifters and drunks [. . .] A clarinettist of no particular age...
>> To be inside that music, to be drawn into the circle of its repetitions
>
> [. . .] (108-9)

Apart from the fact that these observations are eerily prescient of Quinn's own period

of destitution in the alleyway, the important point here is that he has begun to notice

things (as Oedipa Maas does), to pay attention, to extend his range of observation

beyond the paranoid circuitry of detection and acknowledge the waste that lies all

around and the vagabondism so central to Auster's work. The gradual surfacing of a

wistful metaphorical style is not accidental. Neither is it accidental that the syntax of

the final sentence quoted above echoes The Invention of Solitude, for Quinn is

inexorably moving from a form of biography (the faithful recording of Stillman's and

consequently his own movements) toward a form of literature which at least attempts

engagement.

After his alleyway vigil, when he is homeless and decides to move into the

deserted Stillman apartment, the process reaches its apotheosis. Naked and child-like,

the solipsistic isolation of the case abandoned, Quinn's situation now more closely

resembles *solitude*, the state of being alone-but-not-alone which Auster, following

Martin Buber, regards as formative. Likewise, there is a further transformation in his

writing:

> For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it
>
> [. . .] Quinn no longer had any interest in himself. He wrote about the stars,
>
> the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him,
>
> that now they were part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake,
>
> or a flower. They no longer had anything to do with him. He remembered the
>
> moment of his birth [. . .] He remembered the infinite kindness of the world and all
>
> the people he had ever loved. Nothing mattered now but the beauty of all this.
>
> (130-31)

Quinn has become an artist and, at his absolute nadir when he is most truly alone, has

simultaneously effaced and affirmed himself, thus enabling an existential leap beyond

himself into a collective realm. And, as Martin Buber stipulates, the world demands

not observation, not empiricism, not theories, but innate *faith* (one must not lose sight

of the fact that Buber's thinking is for him religious, not simply philosophical). In his

words:

> he who merely 'experiences' his attitude, merely consummates it in his soul,
>
> however thoughtfully, is without the world [. . .] So long as a man is set free only
>
> in his Self he can do the world neither weal nor woe; he does not concern the
>
> world. Only he who believes in the world is given power to enter into dealings
>
> with it [. . .] (I and Thou 73)

Clearly, Quinn's experience does not reflect "the lived experience" of the

homeless (Jarvis 91): it is instead all about language. Quinn's words now are "real,"

conversely, because he recognises them as similitudes or metaphors, as resemblances

to a multitude of natural objects, not precise match-ups. Norma Rowen is correct to

emphasise that his ego has been sacrificed to his images, but this does *not* represent a

partial achievement of the quest to join words and things (231). It is more an acceptance that their beauty lies in their worldly (and wordly) itinerancy, a restless movement utterly at odds with the sterile "following" of the detective and, in readings of itinerancy such as Mireille Rosello's, the postmodern critic. In City of Glass Auster sets up an opposition between language which assumes authority, perspicacity and fixity of meaning and is governed by adherence to convention (the detective camp), and language which recognises its metaphorical nature and consequently can aspire to travel, like the author within his cultural tradition, beyond itself and into the relational world. Stillman Senior's reasoning is thus specious on two counts: first, because, as Bernd Herzogenrath explains, any strict opposition between pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian language is untenable precisely because language operates retroactively and is always-already metaphorical or fallen (40-41). Secondly, because "language is something we learn from other people" (Personal interview). To lock Stillman Junior in a room without human contact (isolated, not in creative solitude), will result not in a pure tongue, but in complete linguistic retardation. Language is kinetic, relational and as such requires relation.

We might be tempted to attribute a nervure of romanticism to Auster's upholding of art as release, but it is less self-important glorification than sheer necessity. If Quinn has escaped from a prison of postmodern textuality to a spiritualised reality, it is a reality which nonetheless is laced with difficulty, in which the subject is forced to acknowledge that the preferable option is also the more challenging – to embrace the plurality of words and of human subjects. And if the world actually *is* textual, in the sense that we author each other, then Quinn's remembering of the moment of his birth and the infinite kindness of others accepts this fact and reminds us that we are historically, socially, ethically and familially

constituted. The fraternal relationship between Quinn and Auster becomes apparent only after he has forsaken the world of detection and made good the distance by appreciating language as metaphorical and losing himself in the noumenal spaces where that constitution transpires.

So it is here that his artistic activity mirrors that of Auster himself, filtering his persona through the William Wilsons and Austers of his text to assume a relational position within a very American literary tradition, to realise that we "see the world through words, and we live through the lives of others" (Varvogli 20). To contend, as Chris Pace does, that Auster's protagonists must break free of the "tyranny of artifice" ("Tyranny"), to stop behaving as if they are characters in a novel, may be an original argument, but it serves only to reinvigorate their authority as they leave the text and enter the world. It is more a question of their ceasing, like Auster, to arrogate to themselves individual responsibility for the telling of any story. At the outset, Quinn is in a state of mourning for his authority which ineluctably becomes melancholia, whereas his freedom at the end comes from happily surrendering that authority to the world before the pages of the notebook run out (131).

Ghosts: Breaking the Looking-Glass

Just as the previous chapter demonstrated that Flower and Stone's various collecting projects (as well as their utterances) can be viewed in terms of cliché, so we can usefully recapitulate the course of City of Glass as the struggle to shake off cliché and discover an elastic language of reinvention. Cliché inheres within the form of the generic mystery tale and rests on a paradox. The repetition of such formal tics purports to offer authority through tradition, but the more they are reiterated, the further their original aura or authority recedes. So too with language. Quinn's "idiotic" repetition of the aphorism "You can't make an omelette without breaking

eggs" in Auster's apartment (97) marks the pivotal moment when, partly through his resentment at the settled home life of the writer, he begins to realise the futility of his detective endeavours. Cliché embodies not wisdom, but the potential for insanity. Moreover, as "mere conversational place holders" (Badia) clichés pretend to facilitate social relation whilst lacking both the necessary precision and the awareness of linguistic slippage which might truly allow correspondence. Quinn's final writings show that one must strive to seek a language of constant reinvention (though not in the manner Stillman Senior envisages), which struggles to find a niche in relational spaces.

Ghosts focuses on the same issues. Blue, who "has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember" (143), quickly comes to realise through his protracted observation of Black, that

> his words, instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the
> world, have induced them to disappear. This has never happened to Blue before.
> He looks out across the street and sees Black sitting at his desk as usual. Black, too,
> is looking through the window at that moment, and it suddenly occurs to Blue that he
> can no longer depend on the old procedures. Clues, legwork, investigative routine –
> none of this is going to matter anymore. (147)

In the light of these revelations, Blue has opted to (or been compelled to) reject detective clichés for storytelling masquerading as reasoned interpretation, and accepts that "these excursions into the make-believe would at least give some flavour of what has happened." Yet it is soon apparent that these particular stories cannot redound to the case's benefit. Instead, they immerse Blue in paranoid speculation: "This isn't the story of my life, after all, he says. I'm supposed to be writing about him, not myself" (147).

Offering both penetration and reflection, windows are the key image in

Ghosts, as critics such as Paul Jahshan have recognised. Another critic, Cameron

Golden, cites Hitchcock's Rear Window as the key influence, whereas it is more

likely to be chapter eighteen of The Blithedale Romance. A City of Glass materialises

language which "turns back upon itself [. . .] encounters something like a mirror [. . .]

giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits" (Foucault,

"Language to Infinity" 54): what is more it trembles with the omnipresent possibility

that the expectation of clear perception leads only to the multiplication of solipsistic

images of the self. These are, as Lacan asserts in "The Mirror Stage as Formative of

the Function of the I" and Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State

Apparatuses," always misrecognitions. Most importantly, in terms of Auster and his

influences, the city of glass is an encapsulating emblem of the difficulty of inserting

oneself in a tradition. To attempt to see and revive an antecedent in one's own work is

inevitably to superimpose one's own image in the process, such that, as Robert

Kiely's Reverse Tradition explicates, influence can in fact operate in both directions.

We cannot help but read Hawthorne differently after reading Auster. As Kiely

succinctly puts it, deploying a Pauline and Augustinian metaphor, "[w]e live with and

read both [. . .] the dark and clear glass" (35).

I wish in my analysis of Ghosts to limit my argument to how this problematic

specularity has ramifications for a notion of "character," both literary and, by analogy,

national. For the aforementioned tension between individualism and relation which

forever attends both Auster's writing and his sense of historical tradition has

throughout the last three centuries or more coloured debates about what it means to be

a democratic American. Stephen Fender's "collective singular" of American character

(163) inherits the self-divisions of puritan theology (as chapter two argued).

Moreover, it depends on a double-edged paradox: democracy, especially when filtered

through the ideology of the melting pot, requires, as Henry James recognised in The

American Scene, a bleaching of difference, a flattening out of the individualism which

otherwise is accepted as characteristic of American aspiration. Nonetheless, the

homogenisation of character cannot escape, in fact presupposes the reversion *back* to

the individual self and the projection of that self onto all other citizens. As John P.

McWilliams Jr. contends:

> Because America and the Americans were becoming vacant mirror images of one
>
> another, no one was quite sure whether the individual should be defined through the
>
> nation, or the nation through the individual. (6)

The latter option, which commentators from De Tocqueville (494, 589) to Emerson

regard as being the more likely outcome, results in a solipsistic creation of the world

in one's own image, examples of which are Emerson's "looking-glass business"

(Journals IX: 206), Hawthorne's "Monsieur du Miroir," or even the captive soul of

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

> [. . .] kept
> In suspension, unable to advance much farther
> Than your look as it intercepts the picture. (Ashbery 196)

And as Martin Buber declares, "one can stretch out one's hands to one's image or

reflection in a mirror, but not to one's real self" (Between 198).

Ghosts, I suggest, is a parable about reading (specifically reading

character) as a bid to locate oneself in relation and bypass the self-reflection and

specious authority of the mirror image. Without offering easy solutions to any of the

problems it poses, the novel implicitly dramatises the central contradictions of

democracy and, like City of Glass before it, proposes the activation of the creative

imagination and the awareness of language's inherent otherness as possible means of

address. To externalise one's immediate circumstances is to fall victim to projection,

whereas to embrace a pulsing, spiritual inner life is to free up one's being for relation. It is the infinitely subtle difference recounted by Martin Buber:

> The person says, 'I am,' the individual says, 'I am such-and-such.' 'Know thyself,' means for the person 'know thyself to have being,' for the individual it means 'know thy particular kind of being.' Individuality in differentiating itself from others is rendered remote from true being.
>
> We do not mean by this that the person in any way 'gives up' his special being, his being different – only that this being is not his observation-point, but simply there, the necessary and significant conception of being. (I and Thou 52)

Ghosts thus enacts the move from character / individual to person via a narrative obsessed with varying observation points.

What exactly constitutes character in a literary setting is highly contentious and demands far more space than can be dedicated to it here.[9] However, a schematic overview of character criticism evidences two contrasting schools of thought. First, the non-Theophrastan, idiomatic constellation of traits and attitudes which form what E. M. Forster would have called a "round" character, "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (106), is commensurate with the common conception of mimetic character. Opposed to this is a structural or poststructural conception which simply allows characters to be any "relatively fixed" points within a narrative work, "those primary substances to which everything else is attached" (Gass 49). Conceived of in this way, character is little more than a facilitator of action or history, rather as Lukács envisioned the Waverley novels to be (Historical 29-69). Hence it was possible for the "hero" of Thomas Bridges' 1770 novel to be a bank note. Here is a novel about

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[9] One of the most comprehensive treatments of the subject is Deidre Lynch's The Economy of Character. Although the period covered is the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the key arguments apply to more general discussions. Readers use "rounded" characters, she argues, to carve out space for themselves within market-driven social relations, to reinforce a sense of their own individualism and to reassure themselves of the sanctity of inner space.

circulation and exchange –literally currency – rather than the evolution of individuals.

Ghosts begins with a self-conscious denial of those ingredients which usually

inculcate an illusion that the reader is encountering rounded characters – that is, "real

people":

> First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before
>
> the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes,
>
> and when Brown grew old, Blue took over [. . .] The case seems simple enough.
>
> White wants Blue to follow a man named Black and to keep an eye on him for as
>
> long as necessary. (135)

As Alison Russell has observed, Ghosts feels like a "ghost" of City of Glass with the

flesh removed (77). The effect of this truncation is to reduce the plot and the

protagonists to the barest generic elements, to operate systematically at the level of

cliché. Presented to the reader, quite deliberately, is not a Platonic or Aristotelian

mirror of real life (Abrams 30-46) but a mirror of stripped-down conventionality

which precludes a deep identification or, importantly, a projection of the reader's self

onto rounded characters. As Manuel Aguirre states, the misrecognition of the mirror

can be viewed as a means of reflecting "the relevance of fiction to reality" (173); in

other words, "Realism" as we know it is not a descriptor of Auster's reality. Formally,

Auster's technique effects a kind of Brechtian alienation: by eschewing extraneous

details of plot or character, by focussing solely on generic staples, he perversely

distances us from the genre to reveal its status as masonry, not mimesis. We should

also note that ghosts, as the previous chapter noted, are inherently melancholic and

conservative, denying past origin and indulging the fantasy of eternal presence, a fact

which here combines with use of the present tense to focus attention on the mechanics

of the action. (In this, the subjugation of past to present totality, the narrative bears

similarities to Flower's collection.) As the proceeding argument makes clear, Auster

sets up an intentionally melancholic situation for Blue, offering the possibility of release for him later in the narrative.

Yet the temptation to view Ghosts as conforming to a Gassian conception of character as structural fixed point should be resisted. All in this novel is fluid, not fixed. Not only do White and Black turn out to be the same person, but Blue's protracted observations begin to trouble his identity. In one critical scene, we are told:

> with nothing much to see but a vague shadow by the name of Black, he finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before, and this, too, has begun to trouble him. If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term – speculation, for example – would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself. (144)

As chapter two suggested, there is but a short step from a post-puritan reduction of an inscrutable world to "vague shadow," to a transcendental projection of the self or the isolation which Tocqueville maintains is characteristic of the democratic individual (494, 587-91). One might go further and argue that the tendency to view the self as normative and the desire that others conform as mirror images dictates American foreign policy to this day. Character conceptualised in this way is paradoxically both fixed, in the sense of accepted as the one strategic viewpoint, and fluid in its imposition upon other ontological territories.

No doubt this is an undesirable situation for Auster. Yet as a stage on the road toward true being in relation it is also a necessary one, providing as it does the first opportunities for an investigation not of the empirical world, itself illusory, but of the inner life. In short, the solipsistic ideological misrecognition of the mirror character *may* provoke much more profound scrutiny of the person within. Thus, we witness a

glimmer of hope for Blue when he observes, immediately after identifying Black as

his *doppelganger,* that he "is now able to see things that have previously escaped his

attention. The trajectory of the light that passes through the room each day [. . .] The

beating of his heart, the sound of his breath" (144). A certain lyricism has crept into

Blue's world, as it did into Quinn's.

Just as <u>Moby Dick</u> turns on acts of reading and, as John P. McWilliams Jr.

contends, exemplifies the "mirror man" in the figure of Ahab (163), it is through the

reading of literature that escape from the straitjacket of the detective genre might be

achieved. Blue, as someone who has always believed that words "are transparent for

him, great windows that stand between him and the world" (146), needs to learn about

the productive aspects of language's virulent metaphoricality and instability, just as

Quinn eventually does. Having "never read much of anything except newspapers and

magazines" (163), he has consistently regarded reading as *knowing*, rather than an

interactive process of being. Reading Thoreau's <u>Walden</u> (a book expressly concerned

with a balance of inner and outer lives in a democratic state) provides an opportunity

for redemption, but, despite the occasional hint of understanding, Blue loses patience

and throws the book away:

> What he does not know is that were he to find the patience to read the book in the
>
> spirit in which it asks to be read, his entire life would begin to change, and little by
>
> little he would come to a full understanding of his situation [. . .] (163)

The narrator's interjection here forces us to countenance the hope that a certain kind

of slow, considered, generous reading can shine a light into the inner life and

consequently alter our observation point by opening a space beyond the self in which

relation can occur. Interestingly, we learn that Black is the one who appreciates the

value of literature, explaining to the disguised Blue in one of their meetings, "[i]t

helps me to understand things" (175). Once again, intertextuality reveals itself to be

not simply play, but a way of finding an historical and ethical position in the world and enriching our notions of what it means to be human.

It is no coincidence that Blue's casting aside of the book signals the beginning of his unravelling, the reinforcement of the detective tropes by which he is imprisoned and the point when, according to Richard Swope, he himself becomes the missing person (Swope 213). First, the breakdown of his societal and personal connections is completed when he bumps into "the future Mrs Blue" (164), whom he has failed to contact throughout the case, and her new partner. (Here one sees the similarity between Ghosts and the play which preceded it, Blackouts (1976). In this work, the detective called Blue laments that he "was a terrible husband. A terrible father" [AH 178]). Secondly, Blue resorts to donning a series of clichéd disguises – the tramp (171), the life insurance salesman (179), the "Fuller brush man" (183) – in order to make contact with Black. Finally, he is compelled brutally to beat his double, leaving him for dead in a bitter parody of the showdown between the detective and the villain (195). We know by this time that Black, far from being a villain, is a man finely attuned to the affective potential of literature, so we can only assume that Blue's behaviour is a desperate bid to exorcise the uncertainties Black represents and defend his detective paradigm.

Blue disappears from the text still a genre character, having failed to locate an inner life which would obviate the donning of disguises and allow him to encounter Black as a person activated into being through relation. As Martin Buber succinctly puts it: "All real living is meeting" (I and Thou 17). I would add that for Auster, all real reading and writing is meeting, constituting the "nose-to-nose dialogue" from which Oedipa Maas feels cut off. Therefore, despite disguising himself as a tramp called Jimmy Rose (after Melville) who resembles Walt Whitman (172), Blue's failure

to engage with this literary history is symptomatic of his overall failure to cement his position as a democratic American. In a novel which Alison Russell has noted "offers itself as a collection of signs that make up American culture, taken from baseball, popular movies, and the canonical texts and authors of nineteenth-century literature" (78), an American character is undoubtedly difficult to trace, but is vital and organic. It involves the appreciation and preservation of an inner, creative life (which the The Locked Room depicts as essentially unknowable but always to be respected), the activation of that life through art and hence the movement toward negotiation with one's fellow beings. Most of all, it militates against the elevation of the individual above the collective (and perhaps the national above the international) and the subsequent projection of self onto others. Ghosts enacts this both formally and diegetically by denigrating readerly identification with characterful individuals (a form of projection) and by dramatising the sorry ramifications for a detective who cannot move beyond the mirror.

There is another glimmer of hope for Blue, however. His exit from the narrative provokes a switch in narration to the past simple. "For we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood," the narrator advises, continuing, "I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. It is even possible that America was not the end of it" (195). Freed from an endless present, Blue is given the opportunity to re-enter history, to substitute the diachronic for the synchronic and thus to travel beyond the boundaries of an American frontier myth and explore the world. Whether he seizes this opportunity we never know.

Locked from the Inside

Just as an act of violence is committed to make possible Blue's escape from

specularity, so <u>The Locked Room</u> culminates in an act of textual, mirror violence as our narrator methodically tears the pages from his double Fanshawe's notebook (314). The real Fanshawe having been almost entirely absent, supplanted by the literary works and biographical snippets the narrator has pored over, this cathartic destruction signals, as I have noted previously, the potential for a return to the space of love he inhabits with Sophie Fanshawe, even if that love is itself complicated by its predication on doubling and substitution of a Gothic and homoerotic nature (Bernstein, "Sublime" 95). Biographical obsession has acceded to life, perhaps, and a life less inhibited by self-absorbed textual interplay.

The trajectory I have summarily described is in many ways similar to the previous two parts of the trilogy, as Auster himself acknowledges in one of his intrusive comments toward the end (294). Additionally, the open allusion to Hawthorne's "Fanshawe" (<u>AH</u> 272) disperses authorial identity once again into the relational, historically negotiated space I have previously described. For these reasons, I have no desire simply to reiterate these points in this new narrative context. As Aliki Varvogli has noted, even if the various philosophical or ethical questions posed in the trilogy are not conclusively answered in its final part, the "narrator is clearer in articulating these problems, while the author's position in relation to them also becomes clearer" (51). For example, the narrator is eminently capable of distilling Austerian epistemological questions into succinct statements, such that we believe there to be more of a fraternal relationship at work:

> He was there for you, and yet at the same time he was inaccessible. You felt there
> was a secret core in him that could never be penetrated, a mysterious centre of
> hiddenness. (210)

> We exist for ourselves, perhaps [. . .] but in the end [. . .] we become [. . .] more and
> more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another –
> for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself. (247)

My point of departure for this analysis is a possible explanation for this clarity, this heightened self-awareness on the part of our guide and the wholly positive consequences of this awareness. For it is my contention that this narrator begins at a point *beyond* the solipsism of the detective (despite a rather disingenuous claim to be one [282]), beyond the "deception" of projecting himself onto the other (247). It is perhaps a point of "disillusionment" (Varvogli 52), but nonetheless a shattering of illusions which facilitates a slightly clearer view of the essential problem of existence: how to deal with the locked room of the other's selfhood. Auster's adoption of a traditional detective trope for this ontological predicament is significant: if the narrator carries any residual paranoia it is in his subliminal desire to view the other as a puzzle to be solved, his need to enter the room by devious or unexpected means in the manner of Poe's orang-utan or the multifarious ingenious methods described by Dr. Fell in John Dickson Carr's "The Locked-Room Lecture" (Three Coffins 220-37). Fanshawe's greatest gift to him is his refusal to let him enter that room (305), thus precluding the gratification of the sleuth's desire for explication and providing an opportunity for existence by another means, that is, love.

If Ghosts proposes that one must try to interact with one's inner self in order to halt the projection of self onto other, and that it is art which facilitates this endeavour, then The Locked Room augments these ideas by further implying the importance of the imagination. There is indeed a core of hiddenness in every self which is destined to remain unknowable in an experiential or empirical sense. As Martin Buber stipulates, if a man "experiences" something no relation is enacted, for "it is 'in him' and not between him and the world that the experience arises" (I and Thou 13). For

Auster – and this is another aspect of his thinking which chimes with Enlightenment thought – experience of this nature must be superseded by "the force of imagination" (Hume, Treatise 413) to permit sympathetic relationship. Our imagination does not *produce* the other – as Martin Buber expresses it, a tree is "no impression, no play of my imagination" (I and Thou 14) – and neither can our imagination fully conjure that inaccessible core of inner life, but deployment of the imagination is imperative if we are to approximate an understanding of the other. If reciprocated, a space of relation can emerge from this imaginative work. Although I would argue that the importance Auster imputes to the imagination is greater than in Buber, the "bodying forth" (16) which Buber describes in I and Thou certainly tessellates with it. As we are imaginative, and to some extent imagined beings, the negation and affirmation, the putting forth of self into relational space is achieved through acts of imagination.

Fanshawe appears capable of such acts from an early age. A specific example is narrated at some length: Fanshawe's spontaneous offer of his birthday present to Dennis Walden, the boy with the "much harder life" who feels bad about not having been able to buy one (211). The narrator is stunned and inspired by the gesture:

> It was a piece of magic, a combination of offhandedness and total conviction [. . .]
> Fanshawe's gesture had opened up a whole new world for me: the way someone
> could enter the feelings of another and take them on so completely that his own
> were no longer important. (211-12)

Alex Segal is right to stress that the donation lies outside the realms of exchange (something which Fanshawe's mother's embarrassment fails to perceive [212]); it is "aneconomic [. . .] a truly moral act because it effaces itself" (Segal 242) and desires no return, not even gratitude. Dennis thus acknowledges the "wisdom" of the act (211) without gushing forth thanks, the fact of which indicates his own capacity for imaginative thinking. I would stress that imagination is a key element of Fanshawe's

act, a type of imagination which must be distinguished from the speculative reading based on appearances tested to its limits in Ghosts. This is imagination which ideally has investment from one's inner life, thus inspiring the confidence concurrently to negate and affirm oneself in the genuine aspiration toward being with the other.

So why, if he possesses this propensity for self-abnegation (it cannot strictly be called generosity) does Fanshawe jettison all familial connections, disappear from the world and ultimately subject himself to a Stillman Junior-like confinement in a literal and symbolic locked room? His declaration to the narrator that he "wasn't meant to live like other people" (312) is hardly revelatory. In fact, the clues are provided by the narrator immediately after the Dennis Walden episode. We are told that as remarkable as his behaviour was, "you always felt that he was detached from it [. . .] I realized that he was alien to me, that the way he lived inside himself could never correspond to the way I needed to live. I wanted too much of things, I had too many desires, I lived too fully in the grip of the immediate ever to attain such indifference" (212-13). In other words, the narrator is caught up in the world of "It."

"Indifference" here is subtly layered and fundamental to our understanding of both men. Despite the narrator's proclamation that the giving of the gift was a "truly moral act" (212), I would suggest that Fanshawe's imagination is deployed intellectually, rather than ethically, and that the heightened perception he displays is in no way commensurate with a Buberian act of love. (In this, he is a familiar Auster character type: others include Benjamin Sachs, as chapter two showed, and to a lesser extent John Trause.) His detachment, if I can crudely wield a detective analogy, is more akin to Sherlock Holmes' scientific approach than the civic essaying of the hard-boiled. He has "no stake in the thing he had done" (213), such that what initially appears to be a radical bodying forth toward the other reveals itself merely as an

exercise in experience. Put another way, his brief excursion into the world of sympathy is almost immediately subsumed into the world of things, of moral successes accumulated like trophies but not cared about. He retains these trophies within himself, and never quite succeeds in entering the space beyond himself. Thus the narrator's desire for such indifference betrays a misconception of how relation operates.

Again, precedents can be found in Buber for these ideas. Admission into the world of "Thou," that is, relation, "can never take place through my agency," but instead "meets me through grace" (I and Thou 17) as a religious event. (This is one of the tensions in Buber's work: that grace almost seems to be enabled by striving after it.) In contrast to the love which comes like a "revelation" between the narrator and Sophie (232), Fanshawe's act is agential and resembles more a talent than a meeting. His distance from the moment exemplifies the agonistic thread which runs through Buber's theory: that our lives constantly oscillate between the worlds of "I" and "Thou." "But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate," he states, "that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It* [. . .] As soon as the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the *Thou* becomes an object among objects [. . .] fixed in its size and its limits" (I and Thou 21). Like the work of art, the initial explosion into meaningful relation falls victim to the experiencing of the *form* of the piece, presupposing the extraction of its details from its worldly totality. As we have seen, this aptly describes both Quinn and Blue's initial unenlightened relationship with literature, and detective fiction itself.

What does all this mean for the protagonist? My aim has not been simply to adduce Fanshawe as a vessel for Buberian ideas, although I would go as far as to say that primarily he functions structurally, as the catalyst for the narrator's potential

reinvention. His latent awareness of the temporality of relation and the inaccessibility of the core of being leads to his withdrawal and his work as an unpublished writer. For the oscillation between "It" and "Thou" necessitates a constant striving for renewal and reinvention in language and being, in order to effect the radical but temporary crossings over into relation we see at the end of City of Glass, for instance. As a writer, Fanshawe recognises this need, and feels that to have the work published would be to reduce it to the status of objects to be dissected. I would argue that in this Romantic isolation he diverges from Auster, whose attitude toward the published work is, as we have discussed, more pragmatic: the creative act of the reader in conjunction with the writer aspires to the status of worldly relation and moral edification.

Finally, Fanshawe's most profound effect is felt in the narrator's movement from mirror image to (putative) person. Their early relationship is characterised by the narrator's mirroring of his friend:

> If Fanshawe wore his belt buckle on the side of his pants, then I would move my belt into the same position. (209)

As Carsten Springer's analysis stresses, the narrator's eventual loss of control, which involves an inability to use language creatively ("Words died the moment I lifted my pen" [244]) and culminates in his insane pursuit of the stranger in Paris (298), stems from his status as *doppelganger* (Springer 128). Or to recuperate the metaphors of Ghosts, the narrator has cast himself in the role of mirror image of Fanshawe's solipsistic self (whether or not Fanshawe is unaware of his power [209]), and thus is merely a projected character who, despite the authority he ostensibly exerts through holding the reins of narration, is doomed to remain flat and traduced until he can break free of the looking glass.

Ethically, particularly in regard to his wife and child, Fanshawe's likely

suicide (312) is as problematic but structurally and philosophically as necessary as Blue's brutality towards Black. Unlike the suicides in Squeeze Play, it attains the status of sacrifice, and turns out to be more truly an act of relation than his donation to Dennis Walden. For it is in the proximity to this ultimate self-negation that the narrator finally appreciates the egregiousness of his detective's search for ingress to the locked room. At this point, the mirror smashes. Auster interpolates:

> The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. (294)

Just as The Invention of Solitude requires mourning to create and, hopefully, to relate to the lost figure, so the narrator (and Auster) only finds the ability to produce art in that same arena of loss and connection, where objectification becomes acceptance, the detective's compulsion to know accedes to the need to be, and where his predilection for observation makes way for a new "*becoming aware*" (Buber, Between 12).

Although it is clear that Auster draws heavily on Buberian themes, it is worth noting that he diverges from him in one important respect. In outlining three different manners of perception – observation, onlooking, becoming aware – Buber states that "[a]ll great artists have been onlookers" (Between 10); that is, they move beyond a desire to note, to objectify and to capture the observed, into an involuntary realm where empirical details cease to matter. This is true for Auster also, but I would venture that if The New York Trilogy proves anything, it is that for him an artist is always trying to *become aware*, to enter into true dialogue, to give himself over to an other which, paradoxically, cannot simply be depicted.

The Detective is not at Home

I have been arguing that Auster's "detective" novels, including Squeeze Play, are in fact exposés of the fundamental inadequacies of a detective world view: that is, a paranoid fantasy of explicability which centres the hero in a world largely of his

design wherein certain linguistic, generic and critical laws are neurotically adhered to. An interrogation of the inner, creative life, coupled with an acceptance of the virtues of language's instability and plurality enables an emergence (which may only be temporary, as The Locked Room and Ghosts both illustrate) into imaginative relational spaces. Here, solipsism is overcome and a fallacious confidence in the self's substantive individuality or authority is jettisoned in favour of the realisation that, to repeat Martin Buber's phrase, "[a]ll real living is meeting" (I and Thou 17). In other words, we cease imposing ourselves upon the world and declare that all "character," – personal, literary, national – is negotiated, and a balance of inner and outer preserved as far as possible. This, for Auster, is love and it is also democracy.

So, to return to an earlier question, do these fictions subscribe to the stringent demands of the anti-detective novel?[10] Squeeze Play can be discounted immediately because although it reveals as we have seen an Austerian inner life which constantly tries to deconstruct its own genre, the imitative genre elements ultimately preside and the detective remains a detective. Several critics, such as Anne M. Holzapfel, have been willing to tick the anti-detective box in relation to The New York Trilogy. Her The New York Trilogy: Whodunit? correctly observes, providing a hint of the psychoanalytic in the post-structuralist, that the detective "vacillates between his inner conflicts and his need for rationality" (24). Certainly it is difficult to resist Dennis Porter's description of the anti-detective as "an art which embodies the perception of reality as extraordinary and even monstrous" or "stories which rediscover original strangeness" (245, 258-59). It is precisely our detectives' discovery that life and language are fundamentally strange which permits their profound movement into linguistic reinvention and relation.

Yet let me repeat that the narrative cul-de-sacs and epistemological frustrations of the anti-detective themselves instigate a kind of genre, albeit a protean one, and as I have been stressing, we should hesitate to restrict Auster's work to any such system even if that system purports to be non-systemic (as postmodernism does). Too often, as Carsten Springer has observed (7-8), Auster criticism succumbs to the temptation to view all his books as reworkings or deconstructions of particular genres. Bernd Herzogenrath is especially guilty of this, even going as far as to relate In the Country of Last Things to science fiction, an idea Auster rejects as "the farthest thing from my mind while I was writing it" (AH 284-85). Such pigeon-holing is convenient, in its own way paranoid and entirely natural, as desire for all plots is. But if this analysis has demonstrated anything, it is that relation will not happen unless a certain type of reading which brands, labels and does not accept that meaning will always be wasted and escape through the locked doors of our limited perception is militated against.

It is not necessary for me to highlight the congruities between psychoanalysis and detection. Scholars such as Ronald R. Thomas, Peter Brooks and Peter Brooker have adeptly done that. But if my assertions have relied heavily on terms such as "mourning," "melancholia" and "paranoia," whilst warning against the dangers of reducing either the *fabula* or the *sjuzet* of the detective narrative to a mirror of paradigmatic critical practice, then it is necessary to offer some qualification. As chapter one showed, Freudian analysis inevitably becomes a totalising hermeneutic framework, a paranoid striving for recovery of meaning in primal causes. However, Dennis Porter, in dubbing Borges "the great modern anti-Freud" (256) implies a division between its symptomatic theorising and the labyrinthine wanderings of anti-

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[10] It should be remembered that even the anti-detective can be sub-categorised. This is what Stefano

detection. This is to ignore Freud's own awareness of the pitfalls of his trade. His astonishing declaration in "Constructions in Analysis" (1937) that the "delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of an analytic treatment" (268) is tantamount to an admission of failure at worst, or at best of the melancholy of the analyst and the dialogic nature of therapeutic storytelling. As I have been emphasising throughout this thesis, therapy is, in effect, a loaded relational space. As Peter Brooks states, such analysis is endless, reliant on the transferential space and on conviction rather than truths ("Changes" 46-60). In the end, it cannot pretend to any unassailable authority.

To move away from cliché, from genre, from all-encompassing theory and from a comforting view of language's transparency is radically to defamiliarise one's world (in effect to remove God from the equation). To adopt Freudian terminology once more, it is to move from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich,* while showing due deference to the idea that the latter is a "sub-species" of the former ("Uncanny" 226). Auster's work, as Peter Brooker has observed (New York 156) is deeply imbued with the uncanny; or as Malcolm Bradbury expresses it, it is "a fiction of displacement" (Modern American Novel 260). Stillman Senior's mitosis, Blue's doubling as he stares from his window and the chance phone call which precipitates the whole trilogy are but a few examples. If the uncanny represents "residues of animistic mental activity" from childhood ("Uncanny" 241), it surely retains an element of the paranoid. However, by un-homing, by jolting the subject out of the familiar and the aetiological into the realm of the frightening, strange or dangerous (or all three), the uncanny is for Auster protagonists the first vital stage on the road toward relation and away from solipsism. It exposes the limitations of their accepted notions and renders

Tani attempts in The Doomed Detective (43-44).

these notions alien or minatory. Moreover, *language* becomes inscribed with an uncanniness which initially terrifies, but ultimately liberates. It is never wholly what it seems, a fact which allows art to happen.

I have in a sense been arguing that Auster's displacement of his own authority by proliferation and therefore authorial negation is an unhoming which acts positively to enter a historical arena of literary relation. One of <u>The New York Trilogy</u>'s many triumphs (and any critic's attendant difficulty) is to posit that the critic and reader are required to unhome themselves, too. They should surrender to the play of chance and language which precludes a desire for the strictures of form and does not, indeed should not result in nihilistic or self-perpetuating postmodernism, but in democratic, dialogic relation with the text and a more finely attuned awareness of what it means to be in the world. My starting point was the mourning of lost authority, but I have tried to show that the productive consequence of this loss is a laudable suspicion of authority itself – authorial, epistemological and by implication political – and a re-dedication to the paratactic. Whether I have achieved this in any measure is for my readers to decide.

For the time being, let us turn now to Auster's vagabonds and drifters, those who in eschewing the material and sentimental comforts of home, are nonetheless trying to locate a home in the world. <u>The New York Trilogy</u>'s greatest irony is that despite its precise references to geographical space, the ontological and political message it conveys is similar to that of the poems discussed in the previous chapter: that we are all immigrants, that we can never be said to be substantially at home in any one city or country, but that home exists between these artificial demarcations. "America" in novels such as <u>Moon Palace</u>, <u>Mr Vertigo</u> and <u>Timbuktu</u> is not a

monolithic landmass but a perpetual negotiation of immigrant identities and histories,

a constant breaching of frontiers.

5. Paul Auster and the Final Frontier

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the

frontier. (Turner 19)

He knows that his mortal life swings by nature between *Thou* and *It,* and he is aware

of the significance of this. It suffices him to be able to cross again and again the

threshold of the holy place wherein he was not able to remain; the very fact that he

must leave it again and again is inwardly bound up for him with the meaning and

character of this life. (Buber, I and Thou 45)

If frontier implies that what lies beyond it is strange, alien and unfamiliar, then

psychoanalysis is always perched on this frontier. (Erlich 2)

The unfree page

This chapter picks up on specific ideas introduced in chapters three and four.

My aim here is to synthesise major themes – storytelling and mythmaking; mourning

and melancholia; selfhood, other and national identity; historiography – within a

heterotopic space I call, with due regard for the associative cultural baggage the term

carries, the frontier. In using the term "heterotopic" – describing "a site or

intersection of power relationships" (Munslow 17) or a zone which "juxtaposes

worlds of incompatible structure" (McHale, Postmodernist 44), I am drawing on

Michel Foucault via Brian McHale in particular. In close relation to this, it will

become clear that like Edwin Fussell I apply the term "frontier" quite broadly to refer

to linguistic, ontological, existential and epistemological boundaries, and that my

interest lies chiefly in Auster's attempts to transgress bifurcating frontiers and thus the

authority of binary models. Fussell's influential study, Frontier, proceeds from the

assumption that one of the unexpected results of Frederick Jackson Turner's

bifurcating thesis is a frontier "metaphor" (17) which implies doubling, the

interpenetration of opposites and a profound heterotopic contestability of space and

idea. Consequently, the space cleared at the notional frontier (what has loosely been

called for expedience "the west") becomes heterogeneous and metastasising. It

becomes "a *mestizaje*" (Johnson 66) rather than a place of programmatic, linear

progression. Thus I include novels such as <u>Timbuktu</u> and <u>In the Country of Last</u>

<u>Things</u> not only because their themes of vagabondage and self-reliance are partly

inherited from an American frontier tradition, but also for the ways in which they

attempt to destabilise simple oppositions between, for example, man and beast, civil

and savage. Novels such as <u>Moon Palace</u> and <u>Mr Vertigo</u> more obviously participate

in a tradition of "western literature" – itself a contestable term.

Yet before the novels, Auster's poetry has frequently "turned inwards in search

of that new frontier" (Rushdie, "God" 390), that is, the consciousness shaped by

human language which, whether or not as Turner declared in 1893 a particular

geographical frontier has been reached, breached or "closed," continues to demand

the movement and intersubjective trading of *sense*. As Emerson acknowledges in

"The Poet," and I have been reiterating, "all language is vehicular and transitive"

(<u>Selected Writings</u> 344). By way of introduction, I will briefly extract the frontier

themes from verse XIV in "Unearth" (<u>Select</u> 20) in order to mark out a field for

subsequent analysis.

A historical and cultural legacy of destruction and its instantaneous

representation are the primary themes of the poem. This legacy is one we see

revisited in novels such as <u>Moon Palace</u>:

> [. . .] And in
> my hand – (as, after the night, – the night) –
> I hold what you have taken
> to give: this path
> of tallied cries, and grain
> after grain, the never-done-with
> desert, burning on your lips
> that jell in violence.

The poet as legatee addresses the pioneers who forged (or as is implied here, stole) a

nation at the expense of the land's prior history. This much is familiar from previous

chapters, as is the compulsion to record and account Jeffersonian taxonomies of the

deceased ("tallied cries"). Yet the poet's anxiety at the possibility of his own

linguistic collaboration in the rape of the landscape, expressed in harshly alliterative

images of erosion such as "scree-words / shuttled / by the grate of sand," is rendered

explicit throughout "Unearth," particularly in the opening section of this verse:

> Mirrored by the tent-speech
> of our forty-dark, alodial hued
> next year –
> the images,
> ground in the afterlight
> of eyes, the wandered
> images absolve you: [. . .] (Select 20)

If the poet's present revisits the itinerant images of the pioneer's past and, in so doing,

provides absolution for past misdemeanours even as the reins of responsibility are

taken up, then the "alodial-hued" future appears to confer total authority upon the

present generation. In looking ahead, albeit reluctantly, to a time when free land

becomes alodium, Auster, huddled in a tent somewhere on the frontier, observes the

relinquishing of past authority whilst acknowledging its continued haunting presence

in "the afterlight / of eyes." It is not insignificant that "alodium" is a term which

relates specifically to Anglo-Saxon land ownership in the eleventh century. Auster

therefore appears to talk chiefly about the proprietorial impulses of *white* settlers.

To take possession of space is invariably, for Auster, to take possession of the

page, and it is a form of wilderness test, hinted at in the biblical "forty-dark." The

poet's responsibility is the splitting open of the frontier and the considered use of the

equivoque to accommodate alternative voices and readings to the narrative of

masculine stadial linearity suggested by "grain / after grain." For Auster, like the

Quakers and Transcendentalists, the word is a seed, and the programmatic transition

from wilderness to arable farming and presumably then to industry implied here

intentionally sits uneasily with the rhizomatic nature of language. Moreover, the

attendant danger is the naturalization of the farming metaphor such that it renders

normative a cultural and material imposition upon a pre-existing space. That this

metaphor, and the metaphor of the desert which follows, are associated with "lips /

that jell in violence" shows Auster's awareness of the danger. Judith Butler, in her

analysis of Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, offers an acute

account of how language itself can exercise violence:

> Language remains alive when it refuses to "encapsulate" or "capture" the events and
>
> lives it describes. But when it seeks to effect that capture, language not only loses its
>
> vitality, but acquires its own violent force [. . .] (9)

This capture is an incorporative and thus a melancholic move, the taking in to the

linguistically-constituted self of the other, of space, of purportedly objective

knowledge. It makes the other its "content."

By evoking "the never-done-with / desert," Auster employs ambiguity in an

attempt to stave off linguistic violence and keep language alive, in transition, in the

eternal *between* of relation. For the desert, as we know from previous readings, is

where the human (signifier) wanders looking for relation (textual antecedent,

meaning); it is never-done-with first because one must not forget its past, a past

constitutive of the present. Secondly, because, as we shall see, it is always a useful

metaphorical tool when America seeks a new frontier such as space or, as a recent

article in the University of Arkansas' Daily Headlines makes explicit, Iraq ("UA

Researchers"). Thirdly, because the solipsistic individual lacks co-ordinates and

roams a wilderness space *within* in search of connection, a connection which may

never be found or once found may soon be lost (as the Martin Buber quotation which

opens this chapter eloquently explains). Additionally, we should remember that as a

secularised Jew Auster is acutely attuned to notions of exile and wandering (aspects of

Freud's *unheimlich*), a point I explore in more detail later.

"Unearth" therefore reminds us that "frontier" carries not only a geographical or sociopolitical sense but also denotes the farthermost limits of knowledge or achievement and the confrontation between man and language. With this in mind, it is not too banal to argue that in effect the greater part of this thesis so far has been "about" frontiers. For in the repeated symbols of locked rooms, stones and walls, and in the constant reminders of the futility of detective quests for objective knowledge we have already seen in Auster's work, lies enduring testimony to the single most important frontier – the one between self and other. Here, where language intrinsically lacks respect for prescribed boundaries, but entertains the possibility of impositional violence, encounters between reader and text rehearse the edifications of dialogue or the enervations of its failure when our tendency toward solipsism and fixity in language reinforce ontological frontiers rather than dissolving them.

Martin Buber conceives of nation formation in dialogic terms at odds with the essentially individualistic strain in Turner's vision of a de-Europeanising frontier culture (Turner 20):

> Every great culture that comprehends nations rests on an original, relational incident, on a response to the *Thou* made at its source, on an act of the being made by the spirit. This act, strengthened by the similarly directed power of succeeding generations, creates in the spirit a special conception of the cosmos; only through this act is cosmos, an apprehended world, a world that is homely and houselike, man's dwelling in the world, made possible again and again. (I and Thou 46)

One could contend that the shadow of essentialism hangs over claims to an originary moment (and Moon Palace's tragicomic depiction of paternity attests to this), but Buber is not talking here about a cataclysmic or emblematic mythological event. Rather, he is referring to a simple meeting of spirits which by its ineffable nature must be "continually renewed," for to articulate it always risks its erasure. "If a culture

ceases to be centered in the living and continually renewed relational event," he continues, "then it hardens into the world of *It*, which the glowing deeds of solitary spirits only spasmodically break through" (<u>I and Thou</u> 46). In other words, in a dialogic cosmos the lone hero becomes effectively inoperative.

Now the heedless surrender to the world of "It" results in the ascendance of "smooth causality," which is allowed to become "an oppressive, stifling fate" adverse to "the wealth of meaning in the cosmos." This requires elucidation. True meaning exists, for Buber, in a higher realm of dialogue, beyond space and time and certainly outside man's tendency to delimit those concepts. Causality, ironically, precludes a view of the meaningful totality of man's actions and their repercussions. It blinds us to the *karma* which dictates first that we can be held accountable for past actions and secondly that "what we do in this life raises us up for a future life in higher spheres." Effectively, it shuts us "in a prison we cannot break in this life" (<u>I and Thou</u> 46), condemning us to a present fantasy of process. "And no matter how much is said, [. . .]" argues Buber, "of teleological development and organic growth, at the basis of them all lies possession by process [. . .] The dogma of gradual process is the abdication of man before the exuberant world of *It*," that is, the world of scientific rationalism and assumed knowledge (<u>I and Thou</u> 48). Although Auster might balk at the more karmic aspects of this thinking, and history certainly plays a more significant role in his work, the idea of "possession by process" and the implied critique of concepts such as manifest destiny have tremendous implications for the portrayal of frontier negotiations in his work. The novels in particular deal with how man "misuses the name of destiny." As Buber puts it, "destiny is not a dome pressed tightly down on the world of men" (<u>I and Thou</u> 48).

For Buber a sense of nation arises from repeated meetings, through "genuine

dialogue [. . .] where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being." There is also a delusive alternative, "monologue disguised as dialogue," in which

> two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources. (Between 22)

One is reminded of the deliberate mistranslation of Sitting Bull's diatribe against the white settlers narrated in the introduction. The "own resources" here are linguistic (the closed circuit of language in no way approaching the other); the connotations are more broadly suggestive, and lead us again to issues of originality and assumed authority.

For when a critic such as Ray Billington argues that a spirit of "inventiveness" is a characteristic bequest of the frontier to American character (748), he means that the harshness of the environment on the westernmost edge of expansion required the pioneer precisely to fall back upon his own resources, to make use of his or her wits and the scant materials which lay round about. Wallace Stegner makes a similar point when he posits that "innovation happens when the edge of settlement strikes a new biological entity, a new biome" (Conversations 147). Underlying Billington's argument is the assumption that spontaneity and innovation stem from a lack of precedent. In the desire to be "the first," the pioneer cannot entertain the idea that his or her endeavour only continues a history of that territory, rather than starting it anew. Moreover, he or she refuses to admit that it is possible for other peoples to be engaged in parallel struggles with the wilderness, striving "to be in relationship with all that surround[s] them" (Simonson 147). Stegner concedes this point readily: "it happened not only to white settlers, but it happened to Indians" (147).

What is being described in all these examples except Stegner's is essentially the melancholic position described in chapter three, an internalised libidinal investment in tandem with "an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" ("M and M" 245). Without recognising what has been lost, or in refusing to countenance that loss, the melancholic patient is indeed thrown back upon his own resources in denigrating the ego, and as chapter two showed, paradoxically glorifying it by means of the "insistent communicativeness" of representation ("M and M" 247). In both Freud and Buber's thinking, as we have seen, this self-absorption supposes the incorporation into the ego of the other (the loved, mourned or hated object). My wish in this chapter is to translate this, as the allusion to Billington above begins to do, into similarly spatial terms. I am aware that given the sheer mythical and connotative weight of his thesis, it is impossible to employ the word "frontier" without regularly evoking Frederick Jackson Turner as I have been doing. My contention is, however, that Auster, though as enchanted as many other American writers and film directors by the wide open spaces of "the West," whether it lies "beyond the 98th (some say 100th) meridian" (Johnson 1) or elsewhere, brings his European existential and psychoanalytical influences to bear on those spaces, internalising them in the process. I have already touched on this in my analysis of "Unearth XIV." Of course, Auster shares this tendency towards internalisation with novelists such as Brockden Brown Hawthorne, Melville and Poe. For example, the ocean wilderness in Moby Dick denies co-ordinates in the same way Cooper's prairie does. Ahab's monomaniacal fixation on the whale demonstrates the psychological need to find orientation in a changing society. Thus, outer and inner mirror each other.

When exploring Auster's poetic and novelistic engagements with the idea of

the frontier as nation-building in the Turnerian sense, I argue that the progressive consumption (equivalent to Buber's "possession by process) of "free land" (Turner 19), mirrors the incorporation of the other into the self. It is in fact a form of colonization, both geographically and culturally, as New Western Historians like Brian W. Dippie have recognised, and ontologically ("American Wests" 114-17). The trick for Auster protagonists, as ever, is to internalise the frontier only as a prelude to achieving dialogue. To internalise, in other words, must not be to incorporate, to deny awareness of alterity. It must become a part of the artist's solitude and yet simultaneously other.

With this in mind, it is worth observing in parenthesis that the author's abstinent, asymptotic "Art of Hunger," a hunger experienced by frontier wanderers such as Marco Fogg, Mr. Bones and Anna Blume, is in some ways the remedy for an incorporative condition. Aliki Varvogli argues that the essay with this name about the novelist Knut Hamsun, is a useful reference point for In the Country of Last Things in particular (World 93-95). Certainly, the claim that intense hunger achieves a split in subjectivity, allowing the narrator to "become both the subject and object" of his or her text (CP 319) ties in with the notions of Jewishness and the abject I explore later. Similarly, waste – that which is left over when civilization itself begins to disintegrate, the part of the self we generally refuse to recognise as such, in Julia Kristeva's terms the abject – is inherently transgressive of a bifurcating mentality and assumes particular importance in In the Country of Last Things. This novel, as we shall see, takes urban "civilization" at the point it descends into "savagery" (Turner 19) and thus disrupts more subtly than the other novels I deal with – Moon Palace, Mr Vertigo and Timbuktu – the geographic and mythopoeic neatness of Turner's thesis.

First I would like to offer one more brief example of frontier imagery from Auster's poetry. Less obviously saturated with such imagery than "Unearth," it nonetheless demonstrates the negotiations of personal and national frontiers which become central to the later novels. I have already suggested how the at times asphyxiating, at times vatic quality of the poems attests to both the poet's inability to achieve sincerity of attention to the objective world, and nonetheless to the absolute need for "a steadiness of gaze, a purity of perception so intense that the effort, in itself, takes on the value of a religious act" (CP 373). Time and again in these verses the poet approaches the frontier between self and objects "locked / in the eye that possessed you" ("Reminiscence of Home," Select 70) only for the flawed perception of the eye to fail him once again. The characteristic enjambment which results can be seen as a *formal* linear frontier reflecting the tension between the gaze and the object.

The poem "Effigies" (Select 71-72) stands upon the symbolic boundary between land and sea (at which Marco Fogg arrives at the end of Moon Palace), party once again to the breakdown of the gaze:

> [. . .] And the boats
> moored in the jetty fog
>
> are invisible. And if they are there
>
> they are invisible.

If the fog recalls the Puritan imagery of chapter two, the disappearance of the boats reminds us that it is the very tautological manufacture of a binary frontier discourse which necessitates the always-already disappeared state of that which is considered alterior to the deployer of that discursive strategy. The failure of the eye, in other words, is predicated on ideological interests. In Thomas Cole's meditations on American landscape, for instance, we have seen an infatuation with Eden and a wilful ignorance of the ruins remaining there which surely contributes to Frederick Jackson

Turner's equally mythopoeic free land of pure economic potential.

As I have stated, Auster equates the concept of free land with the blank page in order to remind us that neither is ever in fact "free," that is, divested of consequence or past. For an author such as Auster, to believe in free land proclaims a degree of originality and authority profoundly at odds with his experience as a writer. To claim land and to plant metaphor upon it ("power in terms of eloquence" as Eric Cheyfitz describes it [23]) requires the destruction or incorporation of pre-existing narratives, the "regeneration through violence" which lends Richard Slotkin's renowned work its title and frames the action of "Unearth XIV." This violence may be physical, mythical or as we have seen linguistic. Lucy Lockwood Hazard couches her argument in slightly different terms which nonetheless imply violence. Hazard warns against the facile mapping of "frontier" and "freedom." From the "dictatorship" of John Winthrop's New England (14) through to the industrialised twentieth century, the frontier is characterised by "intolerance" (27) and represents freedom from one side only, a freedom which is inevitably counterbalanced by subjugation and violence.

"Effigies" strives to transcend a frontier mentality and achieve dialogue with the forgotten through poetic reclamation:

> Snowfall. And in the nethermost
> lode of whiteness – a memory
> that adds your steps
> to the lost. (Select 72)

Charged with narrative significance long before the poet's arrival, the landscape (the page) demands honest commentary without imposition and seeks an ideal of true correspondence between past and present. As chapter three demonstrated, this is far from unproblematic even for a poet of the most admirable intentions. But throughout this thesis, I have stressed that Auster's allusive relationship with his literary

antecedents aims at this correspondence. It can be viewed as "adding his steps" to those which already mark his pages, a project of rendering the lost found and locating individual freedom only in relation and with the support and orientation (the lode) afforded by artistic endeavour. Without this, the frontier space and the page continue to be, as the novels show, a place of disorientation.

Before embarking on an analysis of those of Auster's novels I am designating frontier novels, it is worth remarking that the ascetic strictures of his poetry are not obviously amenable to the treatment of expansive frontier themes. Yet I hope it has been apparent that it is in the very limitations of their imagery, metre and syntax that the poems reveal the restrictive metaphorical constructions of a mythology purporting to be about opportunity and freedom. The novels open up the frontier discussion into a Bakhtinian realm of characters in dialogue, and therefore begin to offer glimpses of ethical alternatives to an oppressive figurative scheme. Auster has stated that Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic imagination is "the one that comes closest to understanding the complexity and the magic of the form" and thus that the switch from poetry to prose "is a question of scope" (AH 303, 304). Moreover, Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic is an ethical one, inherited, as Maurice S. Friedman shows, from Martin Buber (Life of Dialogue 353-66).

Moon Palace: the Frontier of Credulity

In a New York Times review of March 1989, Joyce Reiser Kornblatt claims that Moon Palace (1989):

> is held together by unlikely coincidences. All the characters are eccentrics who
> border on caricature, yet their struggles are heartfelt and complex. The plot of the
> novel is so unbelievable, its narrator often has trouble being convinced by it himself.
> And the motifs are extremely familiar: the beleaguered orphan, the missing father,
> the doomed romance, the squandered fortune, the totemic power of the West, the

journey as initiation. Yet the story is, finally, so goodhearted and hopeful, so verbally

exuberant, that its obvious architecture, its shameless borrowings, may be forgivable.

(9)

Kornblatt's are not untypical reactions to the novel (see for example Gary Indiana's

"Pompous Circumstance: Paul Auster Indulges Himself" for a more vitriolic critique)

and even in her magnanimity she fails to appreciate, as Steven Weisenburger does,

that Auster's aim may well be "to push those [realistic] conventions over the top, into

a kind of metafictional counterpractice" (73). Weisenburger himself declines to

consider that the farfetched nature of Fogg's life might represent less a metafictional

modus operandi than an immersion in a literary-historical tradition of tall western

tales the consummate exponent of which, I would contend, is Mark Twain in accounts

such as Roughing It and The Innocents Abroad. It is no coincidence, and surely

evidences the unreliability of the national imaginary in the book, that one of the few

recognisable co-ordinates in the Utah desert where Solomon Barber and Marco

Stanley Fogg begin their search for Effing's cave, is a town called Bluff (287).

Bluff signposts the spirit of creative exaggeration inherent in the act of

travelling, of pushing back frontiers. Twain's anecdotes become increasingly

outlandish as he travels through the "relatively new and unformed West" (Florence

93) in Roughing It. One senses that as layers of history accrete history itself ceases to

be entirely credible. Likewise, The Innocents Abroad can serve up preposterous tales

such as Ephesus' "Seven Sleepers" and still profess, with something between sincerity

and irony, "I know it is true, because I have seen the cave myself" (314). The

inference must be that his progressive movement eastward (a mirror image of

Turner's westward expansion) is both a drive for genuine Christian antiquity and a

deliberate stretching of the reader's credulity as geography, genealogy and narrative

get more and more "out there." As the strata of history mount up, for example when

Noah's relatives supposedly show an exasperated Twain his grave (325), it becomes clear that genealogy and incredulity conflate.

Genealogy, linearity, the frontier as inevitable process, are constantly under pressure from incredulity in <u>Moon Palace</u>, and quite deliberately so. Part of Auster's project is to highlight, by so explicitly connecting the search for paternity with the mythical west, that the frontier as a nationalistic notion suffers from "double vision," in that as well as representing the transition from "Old World to New, reality to beatitude" the frontier is also "'earlier', and therefore the past" (Fussell 14). (It is in this sense that Twain's innocents abroad are participants in a frontier narrative.) This curious hovering between nostalgia and revisionism is partly responsible for the tallness of western tales, and it underpins all the novels I look at in this chapter. It is at its most obvious in <u>Moon Palace</u>, but also inspires atavistic father-son moments in the wilderness in <u>Mr Vertigo</u> and <u>Timbuktu</u> and is only successfully resolved in <u>In the Country of Last Things</u>.

<u>Moon Palace</u> wonders: can myths of America and American-ness, in simple terms, be *believed*? Does history itself depend to some extent on the unbelievable, leading to texts with a characteristic "centaurlike mythical-historical makeup" (Johnson 106)? And how have various discourses drawn the line between the inspiringly far-fetched, for example Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and that which is deemed excessively alien (Indians, new immigrants, Antinomians), breaching what Cheyfitz dubs "the frontier of decorum" (83)? Auster's sprawling and indecorous art, drawing on American visual art, tries with some ambivalence to breach this very frontier and re-introduce the other.

Solomon Barber, curiously connected onomastically to Martin Buber's grandfather Solomon Buber, is "so far-flung and extravagant, so flagrantly outside the

norm" (244) that he becomes the somatic manifestation of the inherent absurdity of patrilineage and the consuming desire to know one's origins. Although a tragic-comic figure, he performs the same function as the giant, oppressive portrait of Colonel Pyncheon in The House of the Seven Gables, a novel about the dangers inherent in the "strong prejudice of propinquity" (Gables 23). It is no coincidence that as a living embodiment of the tall tale, with his "egg-shaped monad" of a head, his morbid obesity and his eccentric hats (242-43), Solomon is bound up in the novel with the representation of the west. More correctly, as Bernd Herzogenrath illustrates through his lengthy analysis of the sublime (136-48), the novel is concerned with the *impossibility* of representing the west. I have chosen to concentrate on certain (mis)representations – Solomon's highly romanticised novel about mythical Native Americans, Kepler's Blood, written when he was seventeen; Marco's dream of Indians while sleeping rough in Central Park; the biographical western adventure narrative narrated to Marco by Thomas Effing (Marco's grandfather, formerly Julian Barber); and the Thomas Blakelock painting which forms the spiritual heart of the novel, "Moonlight." What all of these texts engage with is the need for "an equilibrium between the inner and outer" (58), a recognition that the west in its ineffable vastness becomes "a figment" (156) and that the attendant danger of this internalisation is incorporation, a melancholic view of the landscape and its peoples as mere reflections of the battles for and with authority taking place in the ego.

Solomon is haunted by the mysterious disappearance of his artist father out west, and it is this which dictates the content of Kepler's Blood. Written "in the sensational style of thirties pulp novels," the novel moves "from one improbability to the next, churning forward with the implacable momentum of a dream" (253), offering ever more implausible theories about Julian's absence to add to those which

already abound (250). At its heart lies Kepler's decision after abandoning his wife

and child in Long Island to turn native among the tribe known as "the Humans," who

rescue him when he falls off a cliff (254). Regarded as "the Wild Father who fell

from the moon, the Begetter of Human Souls" by the Humans (258), Kepler is

charged with the responsibility of regenerating the tribe after the decimation brought

about by the arrival of "the Wild Men" (256), who are patently allegories of white

frontiersmen.

> Fogg's reading of these episodes is revealing:
>
>> Barber indulges himself in a number of long and flowery passages of lascivious
>>
>> sexual fantasies [. . .] The women do not resemble North American Indians so much
>>
>> as Polynesian sex toys, beautiful, bare-breasted maidens who give themselves to
>>
>> Kepler with laughing, joyous abandon. It is pure make-believe: a society of
>>
>> prelapsarian innocence populated by noble savages who live in complete harmony
>>
>> with each other and the world. (258-59)

The desire for miscegenation has been evident from at least as far back as Thomas

Morton. Likewise, the romanticisation of the Native American is a familiar trope,

discussed at length by Richard Slotkin, for instance (59-60, chp.10), yet Marco's

broadly psychoanalytical reading astutely identifies the "complex dance of guilt and

desire" (263) underpinning these particular depictions. Containing elements of

laborious symbolism – for instance, Kepler Junior's patricide (259) – Kepler's Blood

reads like an originary Freudian drama reminiscent of Totem and Taboo, a series of

atavistic rehearsals of the moment of loss. (Such repetitions are a central part of Mr

Vertigo, as I make clear later.) This is of course fiction, and such indulgences are

always permissible, but the reader is then informed that "Barber's later scholarship

was devoted to exploring many of the same issues [. . .] and no matter how scrupulous

and professional he was in treating them, there was always a personal motive behind

his work, a secret conviction that he was somehow digging into the mysteries of his own life" (263). "History," Varvogli reminds us, "is experienced subjectively, made to mirror inner states and anxieties" (130). Thus it resembles Michael Johnson's "centaurlike" discourse (106), and Solomon's historiography certainly confirms this. Yet I would contend that it goes further than that: it risks the sacrifice of any historical actuality, no matter how hard that is precisely to locate, to a solipsistic drama which incorporates space and person as content and imposes metaphors of personal experience upon contingencies in such a way as to violently render the foreign uncannily domestic.

Though Fogg may reject the stereotypy of the young Barber's romantic fiction, his name warns us that his interpretive faculties may not be free from obscuration. Not only does he fail to appreciate that his own biography is just as tall a tale as Kepler's Blood, but also that despite his dismissal of his father's literary efforts he is prone to the same romanticising impulses. The best illustration of this is his fevered dream just before being rescued from Central Park by David and Kitty. As the sun comes out, heralding some unspecified revelation or transcendence, Fogg begins "to dream of Indians," conjuring romanticised visions which lead him to believe he is "closer to understanding the spirit of the forest" (70). Several boundaries are transgressed here – between past and present, civility and "savagism," and urban and rural. However, Fogg is connected by the multiple puns on his name and by his ancestors, to exploration and the archetypal crossing of the Atlantic, and so by analogy to the white man's violent appropriation of American space. Indeed, he conceptualises himself as "[a] bird flying through fog [. . .] a giant bird flying across the ocean, not stopping until it reached America" (3-4). For when David Zimmer and

Kitty Wu come to rescue Marco, his reactions are narrated in distinctly puritan

spectral (or foggy) terms:

> Kitty was the one I saw first, but I didn't recognise her, even though I sensed that she
>
> was familiar to me. She was wearing her Navaho headband, and my initial response
>
> was to take her for an afterimage, a shadow-woman incubated in the darkness of my
>
> dream. Later on, she told me that I smiled at her, and when she bent down to look at
>
> me more closely, I called her Pocahontas. I remember that I had trouble seeing her
>
> because of the sunlight (70)

Kitty connects several webs of imagery: her headband references the native history

which underpins the whole narrative, and her Chinese origin associates her with

melting pot immigration, the eponymous restaurant and the eyes of God, which in

Fogg's previous dream emerge from the twin 'O's of the restaurant sign (70). It is

clear that this image is also an intertextual reference to T. J. Eckleburg, whose "retinas

are one yard high" (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 26).

What is fundamental here is Fogg's misrecognition, which parallels Sidney

Orr's inability to describe Grace in Oracle Night. God has been watching, and echoes

of puritanism abound in the image of the "shadow-woman" incubated in "darkness."

Nowhere does she appear *real* to him: she resembles more one of Ahab's pasteboard

masks, and the sun – symbol of revelation, of knowledge, of the deity – only

exacerbates the problem, implicating religious ideology in the misrecognition of the

Native American. On a physical, cultural, historical and metaphorical level, he really

cannot see her. Instead, he has recourse to romanticisation and cliché (and another

miscegenation fantasy) by dubbing her Pocahontas. Auster is subtly pointing up the

paradoxical aspects of American historiography explored in chapter three – the need

to obliterate and yet to resurrect as safe representations. Fogg's dream dissolves in a

foggy parade of spectral images which exemplify memory, historiography and the

west as subsisting in the order of subjective representation or dreams, not uncontested

fact.

Throughout the novel, characters such as Marco's Uncle Victor enter the west

in search of some nebulous "truth" (12) only to discover first that it is a place of

violence, "a vast danger zone" (18), and secondly that it is "available only through

representation" (Varvogli 138). Just as Fogg's dream imagines nature and Indians as

irrevocably past, so the drive for mystical truth is essentially atavistic, a journey back

to the land of paternity which, as we know, ends in absurdity and Bluff. Profoundly

tautological, it is the very ineffability of the vast landscape which propels individuals

to increasingly outlandish representations of what is already beyond representation.

As a painter, Effing (In-eff-able?) at least understands this: "It's all too massive to be

painted or drawn; even photographs can't get the feel of it. Everything is so

distorted" (157). He also understands the consequence of this, that the west becomes

a repository of myth, ideology and willed distortion, as in the paintings of Thomas

Moran:

> The first painting of the Grand Canyon was by Moran [. . .] the first painting of
>
> Yellowstone, the first painting of the Great Salt Desert, the first paintings of the
>
> canyon country in southern Utah – they were all done by Moran. Manifest Destiny!
>
> They mapped it out, they made pictures of it, they digested it into the great American
>
> profit machine [. . .] Now here it was, all laid out on a pretty piece of canvas for
>
> everyone to see. (MP 149)

What Moon Palace does, with considerable ambiguity, is to posit an

alternative mode of ethical representation aimed at deconstructing the incorporative

"digested" instincts of artists like Moran, instincts attuned to the stadialism of

Turner's thesis. Living in the cave in Utah, Effing suddenly produces a series of

paintings filled "with violent colors and strange, unpremeditated surges of energy."

Strictly non-mimetic, these canvases are a direct result of eschewing the urge "to create beautiful objects" in favour of "finding one's place" in the world. Simultaneously, Effing has "internalized" the landscape while realising that "he belonged to the silent power of those gigantic spaces himself" (170). What he has achieved is the "equilibrium between the inner and outer" (58) which is <u>Moon Palace</u>'s aesthetic and political foundation. This equilibrium is antithetical to incorporation and equivalent to the "bodying forth" of the self to the piece of art described by Martin Buber (and dealt with in more detail in the next chapter)..

Steven Weisenburger's excellent article argues that such non-mimetic, stochastic art undermines the "metaphors of genealogy and progressive growth" (74) which support realist culture. Chance performs this function in <u>Moon Palace</u>, overturning linear plot by means of "contingent potentials" (75). Ralph Blakelock's painting "Moonlight" appears to operate on these principles and is, as Weisenburger stipulates, the "ideological center" of the novel (77). In the painting, the dichotomies upon which a frontier mentality is based – inside / outside, civilising man / savage wilderness – are erased. The Indians inhabit a landscape containing "[a] sky the same color as the earth, a night that looks like day, and all human forms dwarfed by the bigness of the scene – illegible shadows, the merest ideograms of life" (<u>MP</u> 139): in short, a landscape divested of any hero or symbolic frontiers where Native Americans "live comfortably in their surroundings" (139).

Yet there are several problems with this idyllic depiction, not least the fact that it is every bit as much a romanticisation as <u>Kepler's Blood</u>, despite its aspiration toward non-paternalism in style and content. And despite the rejection of a puritan or postmodern brand of paranoia which seeks to ask "am I in or out?" by merging inner and outer in "a landscape of inwardness and calm" (137), there is an inscrutability

about the human figures which betrays a crucially puritan anxiety about signification. Most of all, as a "memorial, a death song for a vanished world" (139), the painting emphasises capitulation and firmly consigns the other to the past, thereby reproducing a dichotomy of Native American as past versus civilizing settler as present or future. So the ethical heart of the novel still runs the risk of participating in the systematic metaphors and ideologies it aims to subvert.

Such ambiguity endures until the end. Clearly, the deaths of Thomas Effing and Solomon Barber (220, 298), as well as Kitty's abortion (281), enforce the idea that genealogy and paternity are no longer operative categories, and Marco's marathon walk from Bluff to the California coast represents his gradual liberation from their constraints. Yet in doing this he cannot help but retrace the iconic westward path taken by his father and grandfather. Upon arrival at the sea, he says:

> I had come to the end of the world, and beyond it there was nothing but air and waves, an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China. This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins (306)

As in the poem "Effigies," we have arrived at a final frontier. Unlike that poem, however, there is little sense here of Marco "adding his steps" to the lost. Instead, he is presented with the opportunity for "beginning over again" (Turner 19), a blank page upon which to inscribe a new biography. Despite the promised abolition of linearity and paternity, the protagonist buys into the ideology of the frontier until the end. At least in this concluding passage there is a reminder of Columbus' error in mistaking America for China. Moon Palace tells us, then, that national identity, for all its mythological seductions, is ultimately the greatest tall tale.

Mr Vertigo: Arrested Development

> But now we are all in all places strangers and pilgrims, travellers and sojourners, most properly, having no dwelling but in this earthen

tabernacle; our dwelling is but a wandering, and our abiding but as a

fleeting, and in a word our home is nowhere but in the heavens.

(Robert Cushman, qtd. in Fender 67)

I have shown how Ralph Blakelock's painting "Moonlight" forms the spiritual

heart of Moon Palace by attempting to show "the connection between heaven and

earth" (MP 139), and between inner and outer, necessary to transcend bounded

conceptions of space and existence. Mr Vertigo (1994) appears to take the notion

further, by introducing the reader to Walter Rawley, alias Walt the Wonder Boy and

latterly Mr. Vertigo. This individual can literally fly, and if his unique ability signals a

profound transgression of notional frontiers, it also causes interpretive difficulties

which have come to characterise the novel.

My aim here is to unpack some of these difficulties, arguing that the central

image of Walt's superhuman flight, emerging from a specifically western setting and

playing out against an America "transformed into a stage" (Varvogli 159), prepares an

ambiguous and ultimately unsustainable artistic and (a)historical manifesto. In

attempting to subvert and satirise foundational metaphors, Auster has to decide

between a biographically-centred version of American history with the aspirant

individual as its impetus (the American dream, in essence) or an alternative narrative

peopled with communities of outsiders and occluded others. If, as David Louis

Edelman has averred, Auster comes to "puzzlingly few conclusions about this

country," it is largely because he is unable to resist the pull of the "grand metaphor" at

the heart of the text ("Mr Vertigo").

Carsten Springer's misgivings provide a springboard for further discussion:

unsettled initially by the first-person narrative's use of vernacular and cliché, he

concludes that the novel hovers unsatisfactorily between "a credible background" of

"historical material [from] the early twentieth century" and "magical realism" (183,

184). Although Springer himself fails to comprehend the full ramifications of his criticisms, they are worth considering. When Auster himself remarks in an interview with Gerard de Cortanze that in Mr Vertigo he decided to work "against a certain ponderousness" in Leviathan ("Le monde" 18) and thus that levitation is an image of the novel's lightness of tone, it is apparent that there is something like a *metafictional* manifesto at work. So what is Walt, if not the very embodiment of the artist's dilemma – the need both to represent a reality and to indulge in flights of fancy?

Moreover, it is clear right from the beginning that the geographical specificities of the plains setting have a direct bearing on this dilemma. Master Yehudi tells Walt, with a knowing reference to The Wizard of Oz:

> Well, we're not in Missouri anymore, my little friend. We're in Kansas. And a flatter, more desolate place you've never seen in your life [. . .] There's nothing to tell you where you are. No mountains, no trees, no bumps in the road. It's flat as death out here, and once you've been around for a while, you'll understand there's nowhere to go but up – that the sky is the only friend you have. (10)

There are a number of ways to read this. Assuming that flying is a metaphor both for the blossoming of artistic creativity and for economic aspiration, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the disorientation engendered by the plains setting, with a lineage at least as old as Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, specifically inspires the kind of rags-to-riches tale Mr Vertigo undoubtedly resembles. Hence a rough and ready American art form arises from a frontier environment. Already one can sense the danger of reinforcing an exclusionary belief in the "peculiarly American tendencies" (Turner 21) of the west. Although Walt feels the need "to debunk popular legends" about the area (104), declaring upon his arrival in Wichita, "[w]here was Wyatt Earp? Whatever Wichita had been in the past, its present incarnation was a sober, joyless muddle of shops and houses" (28), the ensuing action only affirms the

west's special status as a backdrop for extraordinary deeds performed by extra-ordinary individuals.

If we consider in addition the religious connotations of Yehudi's statement, the implications are more troubling. For as the Robert Cushman quotation which opens this section intimates, it may well be that it is precisely this sense of profound dislocation that underpins Puritan expansionism and manifest destiny. A lack of earthly bearings bestows the right, one can assume, to indulge in the incorporation of land. Logically, when all the land is taken, man can resume his rightful place in the heavens. Seen from this angle, Walt's ascension is less a radical undermining of an incorporative strategy than its inevitable outcome.

Levitation, then, functions as a spiritual, artistic, socially and economically aspirant metaphor. Unlike Moon Palace, however, which uses the idea of heavenly orientation to illustrate the essentially ethical principle that "[a] here exists only in relation to a there [. . .] We find ourselves only by looking to what we're not" (MP 154), Mr Vertigo does not entirely succeed in eschewing the myths and discursive strategies that inform the American Dream. Walt's concluding comments reveal the extent of the conflict:

> Deep down, I don't believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. We all have it in us – every man, woman and child – and with enough hard work and concentration, every human being is capable of duplicating the feats I accomplished as Walt the Wonder Boy. You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that [. . .] You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground.
>
> Like so. (278)

This exhortation is a classic fanfare for the all-conquering potential of the common man. And it purveys, essentially, a cliché Auster's previous works have resisted – if

you work hard enough, you will get what you want. Walt rejects the "the old school" Puritan work ethic espoused by Master Yehudi (278) which equates guilt and suffering with redemption through work and motivates the extraordinary physical and mental ordeals Walt undergoes in Kansas (42). Yet clearly there is a residual puritanical strain in his sentiments. For the self-abnegation required of the levitator cannot be equated with a Buberian rejection of "individuality" as "differentiated from other individualities," a striving toward relation, in other words, by accepting that one is only an individual through that relation (I and Thou 51). Instead, Walt proposes the creation of an inner vacuum which re-asserts individuality in the transcendental act of flying. Once again we return to the paradoxical overlapping of self-abnegation and self-aggrandisement: flight emerges from a form of denigration.

Eberhard Alsen's need to locate a strain of "philosophical idealism" in the image of flying results in a decidedly unconvincing reading of the novel, not least the entirely arbitrary comparison with the end of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (Alsen 251). However, his assertion of the intervention of the "Godhead" in events (254) is more compelling, though not necessarily to be celebrated. For despite Walt's earlier remonstrations – "'Men can't fly because God don't want them to'" (45) – the eventual flowering of his special abilities, as I have already suggested, represents not a challenge to divine authority, nor even to the quasi-paternal authority of Master Yehudi, but a substitution for divinity which nonetheless confirms its original validity. No wonder, then, that part of the levitation act involves walking on water (111).

Moreover, Walt's first ascension is prompted, as Jay Cantor has also noted, by despair at the temporary absence of his mentor ("Some People"). Feeling everything from "belligerence to laughter, from snarling grief to vile self-mockery," Walt curses his supposed betrayal before experiencing "a placid wave of nothingness, utterly

detached and indifferent to the world around me" (58). At this point, he takes off. His surprise achievement is the first step towards "evolving into an artist, a true creator" (131), and the fact that it is inspired by (albeit premature) mourning for lost authority means it is yet another rehearsal in Auster's work of the catalytic moment of The Invention of Solitude. Crucially, however, that work advertises a confrontation with the paranoid possibility of megalomaniac, God-like creation, but opts instead for immersion in a pluralistic tradition of literary voices. As I have stressed throughout, the negative capability it proposes is neither total nor detached, but rather stems from a productive solitude through which the artist strives for attachment. Walt's indifference, which he shares with other Auster characters such as Fanshawe and Benjamin Sachs, coupled with his self-appraisal as "creator," lends Mr Vertigo a very different tenor. Invested with a Calvinistic, self-policing conscience which is reflected in the split between his youthful and his redacting self – the last stage of his training he describes as "the showdown between myself and myself" (49) – Walt's defeat of the aerial frontier, the overturning of the Fall, does indeed infer God-like status upon him. After all, Master Yehudi (whose surname, incidentally, means "God be praised" in Hebrew), makes Walt "in his own image" to be "the holy of holies" (53, 70).

What one must ascertain is to what extent Walt is able to transcend *history*, too. The plains setting serves as a symbolic blank page: the snowstorm in which Walt finds himself engulfed strengthens this view (28-29). It initially appears that Yehudi (and Auster) are writing a heterotopic history adversative both to manifest destiny and Turner's thesis, in the community which comprises Aesop, Mother Sue (or Ma Sioux), Walt and Yehudi himself. Here we have a microcosm of America's dispossessed, disenfranchised and enslaved. Aesop, rescued from horrific poverty, is being primed

by Yehudi for enrolment in a prestigious east-coast college so that he can become "a shining example to all the downtrodden black folks of this violent, hypocritical country" (18). Mother Sue has worked in the Wild West shows I treated as models of melancholic historiography in chapter three (MV 74). Together, they teach Walt tolerance of difference; a sense of community; a belief in the efficacy of Native American magic at odds with his street-style, cynical empiricism (32) and, in the case of Aesop, provide inspiration for the adult Walt's later incarnation as memoirist (84).

But crucially, the ability to fly totally derives from Walt's filial relationship with Master Yehudi. As Carsten Springer observes, this is ultimately the novel's only meaningful relationship (178). Tantalisingly, Auster creates a liminal frontier space which presents the possibility of recuperation of lost histories with the power to influence directly the course of the otherwise fairly conventional white orphan's *bildungsroman*. But genre wins out, and to its aid comes the omnipresent nightmare consequence of the American dream, epitomised by the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan's attack on the house, resulting in the murders of Aesop and Mother Sue, feels to Walt like "the end of the world" (91). Yet it literally and metaphorically clears a space for him to pursue his life of itinerancy and increasing fame and wealth with Master Yehudi, deepening the surrogate father relationship and allowing the continuation of the rags-to-riches saga. This is the inescapable irony of Mr Vertigo: the erasure of Aesop and Sue, though indicative of actual and metaphorical crimes of erasure in "real" history (the credible backdrop Springer yearns for), in this narrative context becomes necessary in order to play out the paternal drama to its tragic conclusion, that is, Master Yehudi's suicide in the Mojave Desert after the confrontation with Walt's Uncle Slim (211). In as much as the burgeoning of Walt's levitational abilities becomes a metaphor for the ascendancy of the subject-driven realist narrative, their

deaths allow Walt's tale – in all senses – to "take flight." History's violent incursions do not destabilise narrative linearity, as in Faulkner, or the genealogical imperative, as in <u>Moon Palace,</u> but in fact facilitate a series of trials for Walt in the shape of conventional western and crime fiction set pieces – the kidnap plot (141-52); the revenge killing (222); the rise through the ranks of small-time organised crime (225).

The trajectory thus described is essentially a paranoid one in the terms laid out in chapter two. History appears to be circumscribed and co-terminous with individual biography. In Auster's more sophisticated imaginings, as the proceeding chapter indicates, the dialogic moment may itself be historically constituted if one regards history not as a series of events but a flexuous realm of constant negotiation. This is not the case here. The impression one receives is that the allegorical reading of Walt's rises and falls constantly "eludes" detection (Varvogli 159) precisely because historical events themselves are treated as allegories of, and are therefore subservient to, the private vicissitudes of the paternal narrative. For example, although Walt's career-halting headaches do indeed coincide with the 1929 Wall Street Crash, as Carsten Springer notes (180), and the reader is therefore inclined to surmise that the financial gains derived from his performances are at least tangentially related to his fall, economics are by no means the primary factor. Instead, Yehudi locates the problem in the onset of puberty (190), thus swiftly returning the narrative to the inner realms of biology and biography.

So is one then to assume that artistic ability is threatened by approaching adulthood, the threshold at which the boy may become the man, the son the father, the Jesus child the god? If so, and the conclusion seems inescapable, <u>Mr Vertigo</u>'s narrative development appears profoundly arrested. What is enacted is a desperate series of attempts to return to the pivotal moment of the death of authority – that is, to

Yehudi's death in the desert. In other words, mourning is retarded in favour of

Freudian repetitions such as the murder of Uncle Slim (222) and Walt's ridiculous

plan to assist his baseball hero Dizzy Dean's suicide (256). Such repetitions derive

from a need "to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of

[. . .] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (Freud, "Beyond" 18). In

other words, melancholia. Whereas Moon Palace comically divests paternal authority

of its efficacy by satirising these repetitions, and The Invention of Solitude allows the

boy to become the man in a community of voices, Mr Vertigo keeps the artist as a

young boy for as long as it possibly can. What is more, it situates the primal moment

of loss in the American wilderness. If the desert west is where God died, it is also

where the boy flew, so the need to revisit that territory "and do the job that was never

done" (257) – that is, pull the trigger on the Master – is a fantasy of father rescue /

murder which is paradoxically both an atavistic retreat into boyhood and an attempt to

take over signifying authority, to take flight again. It also meets a *literary* need to

confront the wilderness shared by numerous American writers like Auster himself and

E. L. Doctorow in Welcome To Hard Times. Whereas Doctorow's text chronicles

"promise before destruction" (211) and utilises cathartic violence to all but wipe out

(and write out) the legends of the Old West, Mr Vertigo disables itself from moving

beyond the regressive / progressive dichotomy of the frontier I have already touched

upon, registering the foundational paternal / filial relationship as unfinished business.

Thus, genealogy proves inescapable and the desert is indeed "never-done-with"

(Select 20).

Finally, in a move completely at odds with the striving for relation seen in

texts such as The New York Trilogy, the older Walt is only able to regain his

levitational abilities when all close human contacts have disappeared and he finds

himself in isolation. All that remains for occasional company is the cleaning lady and her "wise-talking brat" son Yusef. The essential melancholy of the novel is summed up in the fact that Yusef's face "resembles Aesop's to an almost appalling degree" and his attitude reminds Walt of himself as a boy (276). Walt dreams of becoming the father, of teaching Yusef to fly, but he balks at employing the father's methods. Perhaps his reluctance to indulge in this further repetition stems also from the ghostly presence in Yusef's face of the narrative Mr Vertigo itself has colluded in wiping out.

Timbuktu: A Literary Hideout

At first glance, Timbuktu (1999) revisits familiar Paul Auster territory. For example, the "pure ontological terror" (4) the protagonist Mr. Bones experiences at the imminent death of his owner-companion Willy reminds us of Walt's despair after the suicide of his master, and reformulates the central question of this thesis in desperate terms: can the individual even *survive* when authority departs? In addition, choosing to pursue the thoughts of a dog, "a voice that cannot truly speak" (Kellman 227), allows Auster to re-frame questions of the ineffable and the elusiveness of meaning. Willy himself, like so many characters before him, is a "logomaniac" (6) and an artist in largely self-imposed adversity, his somewhat sententious "lifelong philosophy" being "[t]he more wretched your life was, the closer you were to the truth, to the gritty nub of existence" (14-15). Moreover, themes of tradition and literary community are touched upon again as Willy and Mr. Bones arrive in "Poe-land" (46), Edgar Allan Poe's residence in Baltimore. As Carsten Springer observes, the hope Willy invests in this arrival is symptomatic of "a delirious delusion of unification" (206) between his European ancestry and his American literary heritage. Finally, and this is the point I want to elaborate upon, Willy and Mr. Bones join the roll call of Auster's itinerants and immigrants.

What sets Timbuktu apart is the ontological perspective of the narrative voice. If Moon Palace and Mr Vertigo deliberately test the reader's credulity in order to explore foundational myths and the American dream, Timbuktu takes us one step further, into the realm of sentimental fantasy. Employing free indirect discourse, written, as he admits in an interview with Bill Goldstein "in a rather odd language at times," Auster takes the reader into the consciousness of Mr. Bones the dog and therefore beyond all pretence of a mimetic or metonymic treatment of reality. Instead, what is offered is wholly metaphorical and associative, an alternative world which nonetheless one instinctively feels has some connection with one's own.

In the same interview the author develops this idea:

> Mr. Bones is confined to a dog's body and he is a dog, objectively speaking, but nobody really knows what dogs think, do we, and if we could listen in on a dog's thoughts I'm convinced, one hundred percent convinced that those thoughts would not sound anything like Mr. Bones. I mean, he's half-human and half-canine [. . .] the perspective of the narrative is walking this tightrope between things that are true and things that are impossible.

Furthermore, Willy G. Christmas is described in the novel, with a nod to Mikhail Bulgakov, as "a man with the heart of a dog" (30). I wish to argue that the key to understanding Timbuktu, and indeed to recovering some of its merits from the manifold and often excessively harsh criticisms it has attracted, lies precisely in the liminality outlined in the above quotations. For in several ways this is Auster's most transgressive novel, "a book that straddles realms" (Kellman 227). It consistently breaches binary oppositions and, as "a book about feeling [. . .] a pure, unadulterated, unironic form" of storytelling (Goldstein interview), enlists the help of readerly emotion to form attachments outside the traditional parameters of Turnerian frontier thinking. In other words, the occasional mawkishness, the "unapologetically

sentimental" tone which has so often been vilified (Varvogli 161), may well be Auster's most effective weapon. By making Mr. Bones' central aspiration the attainment of a place in "Timbuktu," Willy's pet name for the afterlife, or the "oasis of spirits" (49), Auster knowingly offers us an "essentially nonrational and religious" vision of togetherness (Slotkin 7) which forces us to confront what we might call the "Hollywoodisation" and bourgeoisification of the frontier myth.

As part of this vision, it should be noted that Willy (and Auster) has a tendency to spoon-feed the reader when it comes to extrapolating the meanings of "dog": "Dog as metaphor, if you catch my drift, dog as emblem of the downtrodden," "[p]eople get treated like dogs, too, my friend" (57, 123). This prompts Jim Shepard to suggest that "[s]uch moments seem more committed to providing answers than to fully interrogating questions" ("This Dog's Life") and provokes James Gardner into questioning Auster's "imaginative stamina" ("Timbuktu"). Yet such laboriousness can be justified if we view it as participating in a self-conscious process of myth-making to which Willy in particular is susceptible, of "reasoning-by-metaphor in which direct statement and logical analysis are replaced by figurative or poetic statement" (Slotkin 7). As in Mr Vertigo, a framework for a myth which links the earthly and divine is built up, centred on the figure of the "angel come down to earth in the form of a dog" (36), only for it to be bathetically pulled down at key moments. For instance, Mr. Bones arrives at the sanctuary of the Jones' house, and we are told that he "had entered the promised land," just as "his intestines betrayed him" in the bushes (137).

First, we need to examine a specific way in which the text can be said to be transgressive of boundaries and thereby situate itself at an abstract frontier. Clearly, the highlighting of the propinquity of man and beast disrupts a Puritan or

Enlightenment idea of providential or stadial progress and what is more is achieved without recourse to the depictions of atavistic violence seen in the novels of, for example, Zane Grey or Mickey Spillane. In such genre texts, there is typically, as Cynthia Hamilton observes, a masculine, civilising idealism which distinguishes the western hero from the other – animals, Native Americans, criminals – and is therefore fundamental to the putative society (Hamilton 20). Here that idealism belongs to a mangy animal who is "a hodgepodge of genetic strains" and an "immigrant" (5, 6). Like Moon Palace and Mr Vertigo, Timbuktu underlines the illusory nature of origins and purity, as well as the centrality of immigration and the notion of the melting pot to American identity.

However, Mr. Bones' experiences with unsympathetic authority figures such as Mr. Chow undermine the idealism of the melting pot thesis by suggesting that shared immigrant experience is no guarantee of communal solidarity and by association that the immigrant never truly earns acceptance. "[W]hat good was a home," the reader is asked, "if you didn't feel safe in it, if you were treated as an outcast in the very spot that was supposed to be your refuge" (116). In a novel obsessed with finding a home, what is presented is a sentimental *unheimlich*, a permanent sense of strangeness and exile rendered in fairy-tale tropes and exacerbated by the defamiliarising "vantage point of a canine mind" (Kellman 226). That this is a peculiarly Jewish theme should not be forgotten (Willy G. Christmas is, after all, William Gurevitch, child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants [13-14]), but I postpone further discussion of this until my analysis of In the Country of Last Things, where it is made more explicit.

Timbuktu thus chronicles the transition from a nomadic community of bohemians to a society increasingly atomised into sites of bourgeois individualism

and intolerance of difference. Self-reliance gains the ascendancy over a sense of connection and in this shift is exposed not the degradation of the frontier mentality but "the bourgeois nationalizing myth of American exceptionalism" which always lies at its heart (Munslow 17). Seen in this light, Timbuktu resembles a less dark and brutal version of Donald Antrim's Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World, in which the violent individualism of the frontier finds its contemporary home in the suburbs. When Willy first "set forth on his career of vagabondage," the United States "was crawling with dropouts and runaway children, with long-haired neo-visionaries, dysfunctional anarchists and doped-up misfits" (27). But before long "[t]he runaways had crawled back home to mom and dad; the potheads had traded in their love beads for paisley ties; the war was over" (27-28). (The synecdoche used here cleverly mirrors the absorption into the structures of authority of the erstwhile rebels.) Willy's refusal to "blend in" (28) or to abandon his itinerant existence and anti-authoritarian stance, leads inevitably to persecution.

What is more, Mr. Bones' subsequent experiences as a "bourgeois dog-about-town" (146) at the Jones' house (the epitome of aspirant normality) risk marking out the same trajectory from wilderness to garden for him. His horror at being chained up when the family go out inspires some of his most blatantly allegorical ethical pronouncements:

> he needed to be touched and spoken to, to be part of a world that included more than just himself. Had he walked to the ends of the earth and found this blessed haven only to be spat on by the people who had taken him in? They had turned him into a prisoner. (144)

Clearly, his imprisonment in the garden neatly symbolises the contemporary consequences of an agrarian or pastoral myth, the enslavement disguised as freedom outlined in the epilogue to Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden (354-65). Yet the

attendant comforts of Mr. Bones' new life as "Sparky" begin to wear down his resistance:

> Now that Mr. Bones was on the inside, he wondered where his old master had gone wrong and why he had worked so hard to spurn the trappings of the good life. It might not have been perfect in this place, but it had a lot to recommend it, and once you got used to the mechanics of the system, it no longer seemed so important that you were tethered to a wire all day. (163)

Here Auster offers us a succinct summation of the reified (puritan) consciousness demanded by capitalism, one prone to accepting the bifurcations of "inside" and "outside," of normative self and aberrant other.

Moreover, the justifiable sentimentality which I have noted forms an integral part of Willy's myth complex, spills over in this setting into Hollywood-style schmaltz. Alice, the Jones' daughter, tells Mr. Bones, "I was born with little holes in my heart, and I almost died a couple of times when I was small [. . .] I have an angel breathing inside me, and that angel is going to keep on protecting me for ever" (136). One might infer that Willy and Mr. Bones' sentimental attachment, based on shared outsider status, honesty and a love of language's vehicularity, becomes unsustainable in an environment based less on true sympathy than on secrets and the superficial signifiers of success. Despite acting as a "sounding board" for Polly Jones' monologues of marital strife (159), Mr. Bones is denied the dialogue he achieves with Willy in his dreams (120). Sympathy here is not mutuality but the attenuated and conventional sense of feeling pity, which still relies on casting the other as inferior.

That the dog eventually escapes and Auster "answers No! in thunder to bourgeois complacency" (Kellman 231) is hardly unexpected given the importance in Auster's work of restlessness and constant vigilance in forging relation. Yet Mr. Bones' implied suicide on the freeway, his bid to join Willy in Timbuktu (186), is

complicated in a number of ways. First, and most profoundly, Willy's original

decision to become a benevolent vagabond is inspired by an hallucination of Santa

Claus admonishing him from his television set during a commercial. "[T]his absurd

display of hokum in the red jacket, [. . .] Santa Claus in all his Madison Avenue glory"

demands that Willy "turn himself into a saint" (21, 22). So a symbol of rampant

consumerism provides the catalyst for a life of anti-establishment evangelism. The

contradiction is obvious. What Santa's intervention achieves is the dismantling of a

simple opposition between bourgeois settling down and frontier subsistence.

Operating retroactively upon cherished notions of freedom, self-reliance and pioneer

spirit, the Santa myth, with all its connotations of consumption and fake togetherness,

turns out to be the inevitable endpoint of these notions. Although Willy may rail

against the nationalistic celebration of "junk" (56), he and Mr. Bones both find

themselves incorporated into the system and the myths which produce it.

Finally, for all its ambitious attempts to expose the fallacies behind certain

American ideals, Timbuktu offers few solutions to this bind. Death appears to be the

only escape. With the motorway on which Mr. Bones surely meets his death

presented as "a spectacle of pure radiance" (185), it is impossible to avoid the quasi-

religious atmosphere of his reunion with his master. (Indeed, following Slotkin's

definition of myth, the religious component is essential.) In heaven, it is suggested,

one can find peace with the original father figure. Like Mr Vertigo before it,

Timbuktu reinstates masculine authority, no matter how deranged, as the prime

signifying source.

It is a curious move, given the suspicion of the legitimacy of lost authority

evinced in most of the previous novels, but it does reveal a tension between

knowingness and unblinking sincerity which Auster's most recent work The Brooklyn

<u>Follies</u> only deepens. On the one hand, the author feels compelled to question every assumption in "an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers" (<u>CP</u> 323). Yet his ethical preoccupations are always attended by the risk, especially in such a novel of emotion, of seeking sanctuary in cosy, otherworldly realms, or as Martin Buber calls them "hideouts" (<u>Way</u> 6). Perhaps the greatest irony of the novel is that after all the wry comments on the bourgeois implications of America's cherished myths, the sanctuary of Timbuktu itself lies "in the middle of a desert somewhere" (48). So Willy and Mr. Bones return to the wilderness just like Walt the Wonder Boy and the spiritual journey again becomes regressive, a repetitive fantasy. What escape we can effect from the system takes us right back where we started.

<u>In the Country of Last Things</u>: Nowhere to Hide

> Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. Every man hides for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for his life, he turns existence into a system of hideouts. (Buber, <u>Way</u> 5-6)

I have deliberately chosen to disrupt the chronology of publication by focussing on <u>In the Country of Last Things</u> (1987) last. This is because it provides the most engaging and illuminating integration into a thoroughly compelling text of the themes I have been treating. In fact, it may well be Auster's most satisfying novel overall, but this is surely not because its narrative offers immediately seductive coincidences, like <u>Leviathan</u>'s, or the comprehensive pleasures, however absurd, of the picaresque or *bildungsroman*, like <u>Moon Palace</u> and <u>Mr Vertigo</u>. In fact, it is the narrative itself which initially seems most rebarbative by virtue of its sheer outlandishness.

So, briefly, what *does* happen in <u>In the Country of Last Things</u>? A woman

called Anna Blume arrives in the city to look for her brother William, who has

disappeared. Faced with the appalling degradation of her surroundings, she is forced

into scavenging amongst the waste and rubble in order to survive. After saving her

life, Anna moves in with a woman called Isabel and her partner Ferdinand.

Ferdinand's initial resentment at Anna's presence turns to lust, and one night he tries

to rape her. Anna strangles him, and together with Isabel pushes him off the roof of

the apartment building. Eventually, Isabel dies after a long illness. Anna leaves and

ends up in the city library, where she begins an affair with a man called Sam. After

falling for a confidence trick, Anna narrowly escapes being butchered and eaten by

leaping from a window. She is rescued by Victoria Woburn, who takes her to Woburn

House, a temporary sanctuary for the destitute in the heart of the city. The novel ends

with Anna and the other Woburn employees planning their escape from the city.

The poverty of thorough analysis in the critical work testifies to the difficulty

of the narrative. Aliki Varvogli's analogical approach, which relates the hardships of

Anna Blume's city to accounts of the Warsaw Ghettos (World 89), is absolutely

convincing but nonetheless largely descriptive of narrative action. Critics such as

James R. Giles and Padgett Powell feel the need to attribute historical and geographic

specificity to events. Both claim that the city must be New York (133, 162

respectively). (Tempting though this is, it is not one of my aims, because I feel the

novel operates at a broader symbolic level and explores the difficulty in any place or

at any time in history of achieving in Buber's terms a "cosmos" [a dwelling]). Bernd

Herzogenrath is correct in interpreting Anna Blume's desire to create new

"archipelagos of matter" (CLT 36) from the fragments of waste around her as a

metaphor for constructing "the signifying chain, the possible combinations of

signifiers that constitutes meaning" (Herzogenrath 102). Yet his admittedly highly

sophisticated post-structuralist reading stops short at speculating on exactly how the reader might employ his or her imagination to create some kind of ethical thread from the incidents I have schematically described – themselves "little islands of intactness" (CLT 36) – seemingly linked only by geography (itself an unstable category) and protagonist. Integrity appears to have nothing to do with narration, only with the evocation of character in adversity, and it is the consistency and minimalist elegance of Anna's voice which chiefly impresses. In this, In the Country of Last Things resembles Knut Hamsun's Hunger, about which Auster observes, "[t]he radical subjectivity of the narrator effectively eliminates the basic concerns of the traditional novel" (CP 318).

Describing one of the incredible incidents (Anna's leap from the window [125]), Padgett Powell suggests that such "heavy chords" are acceptable if we assume that Auster's intention is to "satirize narrative action itself" (163). This is true only to a point. The novel certainly resists facile (and paranoid) concatenation in a way none of the novels previously discussed in this chapter do. But where it succeeds so exquisitely is in distilling a variety of discourses – narrative, hermeneutic, geographical, ontological and existential – into one vital problem of dislocation and disorientation, and with far greater sophistication than the other novels of disorientation I have looked at. In a city which "robs you of certainty," where you "[c]lose your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone," where there "can never be any fixed path" (6, 2, 6), there can be only one honest question. That is, God's question to Adam, a question with profound ontological resonance: "Where art thou?" (Buber, Way 3).

What I will demonstrate is that the reader's quest to find his or her bearings in

the perplexing narrative reflects Anna's need to orientate herself and, to borrow Martin Buber's terms, find "The Particular Way" (<u>Way</u> 8) in a disjointed world where geography constantly shifts, where waste matter predominates and the only possible co-ordinates are ethical ones. Significantly, Anna's particularity as an "island" attains meaning only through her attachments to other individuals such as Isabel, Samuel and Victoria, in the formation of humanistic "archipelagos." So in answer to the question "Where art thou?" Anna must recognise that the key locations she takes temporary refuge in – Isabel's apartment, the library and Woburn House – represent not "a system of hideouts" (where the question itself is deflected) but unique steps toward a form of dialogue which will enable her in some measure to answer it in its more profound existential sense. Woburn House in particular, far from being "an enchanted realm" (like Timbuktu) is "in the real world," and it is a world where "looking out for yourself" is replaced by the need "to cooperate with a bunch of strangers" (140). That the majority of its temporary residents find this an insurmountable problem testifies to the inherent difficulty of crossing from the world of "It" to the world of "Thou" expressed in the quotation which opens this chapter. In frontier terms, as we shall see, it equates with a tension between self-reliance and social responsibility.

Martin Buber's question provides another perspective on the central concern of this thesis. An effective mourning, in which one is able to reconcile the loss of authority and regain one's place within the world of relations, provides an appropriate answer. Melancholia, with its solipsistic withdrawal, offers only a hideout in the form of the ego. <u>In the Country of Last Things</u> is Auster's consummate text about the approach to loss and mourning. It could be argued that <u>The Invention of Solitude</u> begins the process which this novel takes to logical extremes: in the former the loss of paternal authority becomes an authorial and linguistic lacuna; in the latter "[n]othing

lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you" (2). "It's not just that things vanish" Anna continues, "—but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well [. . .] Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked" (87, 89). In other words, representation itself, which as we recall facilitates mourning in The Invention of Solitude, is under constant threat.

Therefore, the potential for melancholia exponentially increases and memory becomes "the great trap" (38). For if even memory itself as a mode of representation disappears, then the concept of a *shared* memory, and, by extension, of a national myth, is rendered increasingly untenable. After all, memory is simply too subjective to sustain such a myth: "What still exists as a memory for one person can be irretrievably lost for another, and this creates difficulties, insuperable barriers against understanding" (88). What In the Country of Last Things dramatises so expertly is the crippling, eventually fatal effect of the desperate desire to *fabricate* a shared memory. In fact, the novel highlights the danger of the regressive fantasies Mr Vertigo and Timbuktu seem more readily to embrace. The most resonant example is those citizens who "fill the empty spaces with dreams" by indulging in group descriptions of luxurious meals in the vain attempt to stave off hunger (9). "There are even those who say," comments Anna, "there is nutritional value in these food talks" (10). This "language of ghosts" (10), related to the haunting of Flower's collection in The Music of Chance, is Auster's finest depiction of the melancholic, incorporative instinct. It is anodyne and fixated on "implementing literally something that has only figurative meaning" (Abraham and Torok 126). In radically demetaphorising language, the consummate substitution of the word for the desired thing, it refuses the very linguistic vehicularity which as we have seen opens up the potential for relation,

choosing instead to lock the word into a monadistic hideout of its own. Thus it is

fundamentally *non*-imaginative, a characteristic of life in the city I shall return to.

Most of all, the language of ghosts relies on the belief that "[t]he farther you

go back, the more beautiful and desirable the world becomes" (10) thus evoking

collective, inauthentic nostalgia for a glorious utopian time, which "has never existed

except as narrative" and is "[h]ostile to history" (Stewart, Longing 23). This is one of

the many ways in which the novel is able obliquely to tackle national myths –

specifically the frontier – so successfully. Infinitely regressive and prelapsarian, in

the same manner as Solomon's depictions of Native Americans, such a longing aims

to evoke a factitious foundational moment free from the complicating heterogeneity

of history as it unfolds.

The rituals of fake ingestion are indeed "insuperable barriers" – they reinforce

individual isolation by passing off as reciprocal what are merely incorporated

elements. They epitomise Buber's "monologue disguised as dialogue" and return us

to the tension between self-reliance and co-operation. This reminds us that the

frontier as both internal / psychological and external / material idea is central to the

ethical movement of the novel. All the characteristic tropes of frontier mythology

can be found, but inverted, transformed from figures of hope and progress to signs of

degeneration and horror. For example, although Katharine Washburn's assertion that

"the western exit, in all the indices of folklore and mythology, is synonymous with

death" imposes too pessimistic an interpretation on the climactic events of the novel

and it is by no means clear that "Anna's doom seems imminent" (64), she is right to

associate westward movement not with "the record of social evolution" (Turner 23)

but with an asymptotic trajectory, "what happens when there is nothing" (CLT 29).

The asymptotic is familiar enough from other Auster texts: even The Story of My

<u>Typewriter</u> betrays anxiety about what will happen when the ribbons, no longer in production, run out (<u>CP</u> 295). Yet here, as the novel's title suggests, it is the very substance of the text, and therefore repudiates any notions of progress or providence.

Anna's crossing of the ocean and her probable departure westward thus have nothing of manifest destiny about them and indeed, if "manifest destiny" is predominantly an *imaginative* term, then her bald statement regarding her western future – "I cannot imagine it" (187) – only reiterates that "if anything is in short supply in the city, it's imagination" (61). In other words, in a place where "[t]hings fall apart and vanish" with such rapidity (7), a national imaginary is no longer even possible. (And as we have seen, "destiny" itself may be no more than an ideological burden.) The omnipresent danger is that the future itself becomes obsolete and people are reduced, like Nashe and Pozzi in <u>The Music of Chance</u>, to the drudgery of scavenging in the present, to Buber's egregious "possession by process." Moreover, as previous chapters have argued, sympathetic imagination is required in order to accept one's intrinsic connections with others. If this form of imaginative work fails (as it does with the fake eaters), then people truly are reduced to the status of islands with no ethical or temporal contiguity.

In this relation, despite Anna's assertion that "you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing [. . .] habits are deadly [. . .] it must always be the first time" (6-7), the spirit of constant renewal and improvisation frequently connected with frontier existence is symptomatic here not of the desire to fashion a new world, but of the need to recycle the detritus of an already old world. Moreover, the constant manipulation of decaying matter holds out the danger of moral decay:

> On the one hand, you want to survive, to adapt, to make the best of things as they are.
> But, on the other hand, to accomplish this seems to entail killing off all those things
> that once made you think of yourself as human. (20)

This is what Elisabeth Wesseling evocatively dubs "the horror of continual novelty" (498) and it is epitomised by the man-made barricades thrown up around the city to extort payment from passers-by:

> Wherever buildings have fallen or garbage has gathered, large mounds stand in the middle of the street, blocking all passage. Men build these barricades whenever the materials are at hand, and then they mount them, with clubs, or rifles, or bricks, and wait on their perches for people to pass by [. . .] If you want to get through, you give the guards whatever they demand. Sometimes it is money; sometimes it is food; sometimes it is sex. Beatings are commonplace, and every now and then you hear of a murder. (6)

Clearly, this is a description of an industrial society in decline. Yet Sven Birkerts is astute in observing that to describe such dystopian visions as "attacks on urbanization and mass society is not enough" ("Reality" 67). The true horror is not simply the proliferation of garbage and rubble but the barbarity of using such waste matter to build barriers between people (types of hiding places, the antithesis of Anna's archipelagos). Fundamentally, that savagism is engendered by the refusal to view waste and rubble (and as we shall see human corpses) as correlatives of human activity – specifically consumption and the artificial demarcation of space.

In possibly the single most resonant passage of the novel, which acts almost as a direct response to the barricades described above, Anna ponders just this issue of correlation:

> It is not enough simply to look and say to yourself, "I am looking at that thing." For it is one thing to do this when the object before your eyes is a pencil, say, or a crust of bread. But what happens when you find yourself looking at a dead child, at a little girl lying in the street without any clothes on, her head crushed and covered with blood? What do you say to yourself then? [. . .] Your mind seems to balk at forming the words [. . .] For the thing before your eyes is not something you can very easily separate from yourself. That is what I mean by being wounded: you cannot merely

see, for each thing somehow belongs to you, is part of the story unfolding inside you.

(19)

Although it is not my intention to engage in a full Kristevan reading, one can hardly ignore the parallels here with Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. For the corpse as "the utmost of abjection" represents "the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders." It is that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Powers 4). Most importantly, despite Anna's claim that the corpse somehow "belongs" to the viewer, it is, according to Kristeva, something which cannot be incorporated because it precedes and constitutes the self by its relation to mourning for "an 'object' that has always already been lost" in the violent separation from the maternal body (Powers 15). Thus it recalls a "pre-objectal relationship" (10) when a Cartesian distinction between subject and object was untenable. So rather than belonging to Anna, the corpse both is and is not her – it is "above all ambiguity" (Powers 9), thus defeating any attempt to demarcate a substantive self. Anna moves from empirical seeing to "bodying forth," and her imaginative and ethical distinction derives from her recognition of this.

If Anna's association of the look with this feeling of abjection connects In the Country of Last Things to Auster's poetry, it is no coincidence. Auster states that he actually began thinking about the novel "back in the days when I was a college student" (AH 284), which may be a reason why its tightness and the sureality of its prose and setting resemble his other novels less than they do his early poetry. On a deeper level, Anna's observations remind us that a democratic gaze, characterised by the sincerity of attention the poems aspire to, deals not in narcissistic mirrorings of the self – what Kristeva calls "a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven" (Powers 14) and what Buber would call a "hideout" – but in the *narcissistic crisis*

of the abject (Powers 14). If narcissism, in Kristeva's terms, depends on repression, "the ability of the speaking being [. . .] to divide, reject, repeat" (Powers 12), then abjection persistently threatens that ability by loosening repression upon contemplation of the other, reminding the ego of its status *as* other. For Auster this is equivalent to the point at which the authorial self partially dissolves in the chorus of voices always-already present in the text. For Anna it becomes a question of survival in an abject environment absolutely inimical to narcissism.

At this point it is necessary to tie together a number of threads which have run through this chapter. To summarise, if this is indeed possible to any satisfying degree: it is clear, despite Kristeva's assertion that the abject is "more violent" (Powers 5), that the idea retains something of Freud's "uncanny" in that it is radically defamiliarising, casting the "*deject*" as both "exile" and "stray." And, just like Buber's Adam, the dejected wanderer is required to ask "'*Where* am I?' instead of '*Who* am I?'" as the shifting of space threatens his or her sense of solidity (Powers 8). Thus the abject must be seen as ethical, a question of responsibility. To view the corpse as somehow intrinsic to the self is to force oneself out of the hideout of the ego and to acknowledge the possibility of a "pre-biographical unity" (Buber, Between 28) of self and other where meaning arises not from an individual's actions and character (the "Who am I?") but from precisely the liminality expressed by the abject. One of the reasons Mr Vertigo and Timbuktu are less successful in articulating these ideas is their insistence on retracing biographies endlessly inscribed with paternal authority. Whilst one should be wary of reinforcing critical stereotypes of the feminine as that which is intrinsically fluid, indeterminate, elusive, it may well be that Auster's choice of a female narrator enables a perception of these ethical issues less inhibited by paternally-defined borders. Additionally, in as much as the search for William

provides the initial catalyst for the narrative action, the relatively rapid abandonment

of that search signals both the futility and the divisiveness of the desire for closure,

and a circumscription of masculine influence.

Which returns us to the plot. Moon Palace, argues Steven Weisenburger,

employs chance to disrupt genealogy and hence "the mimesis of a supposedly

homogenous time and [. . .] the principal alibi for that linear, developmental

temporality, 'the subject' or hero" (73). According to Anna, lives have "an essential

randomness in their design" (144). In itself, this is almost an Auster platitude.

However, the very space Anna occupies, with its waste-strewn unpredictable

topography, mirrors this randomness and propels Anna into the equally random-

seeming episodes with which I began this analysis. Considering the fact that the

entire city economy is based on the recycling of waste ("shit and garbage" are

important energy sources [30]), we have to view the world of the novel as a conflation

of the spatial and the narrative under the sign of the abject. Waste and defilement

dictate the course of plot, as well as being bound up within it, such that in corrupting

the demarcation of space, waste is a challenge not only to the prevailing social order,

as Tim Woods observes ("Looking" 112) but also to conventions of linearity. If one

accepts my argument that the country of last things is a contemporary frontier

environment, then the abjected elements constitute a threat to Turnerian bifurcations

and, as Michael Johnson also notes, to the very *style* of history his thesis promotes

(63). History is rhizomatic, describing not just diachronic movement, but the myriad

interconnected contexts which traverse that movement. ("Context" is of particular

importance in the following chapter.) It may be unquantifiable and subjective, but it

cannot be reduced to the individual.

Identity for Anna (and by implication for everyone) derives from exile, from

liminality. She is both a part and not a part of this crumbling world, and it of her.

Material or narrative solidity offers no solace; only the company of those she

recognises as similarly exiled can provide inspiration. That is why, as Tim Woods has

observed ("Looking" 110), Anna's encounter with the rabbi in the library is so pivotal,

providing her with a temporary sense of standing "on solid ground" (96). Jews, the

rabbi opines, are "always standing on the brink of the last moment" (112), on the

frontier between existence and obliteration. Only in shared acceptance of this

threshold status can the threshold itself be negated and relation established. The

library episode, along with the other fantastic events of the narrative, illustrates

Martin Buber's assertion that the breaching of the threshold is temporary at best. So,

remembering that "[i]n this most Christian of worlds / All poets are Jews" (Marina

Tsvetaeva, qtd. in IOS 95), one is impelled to view art (in this case the letter which

becomes the novel) as the ongoing attempt to achieve the breaking down of frontiers

through the employment of language only ever in transition. Art *is* exile, abject: it is

"the condition of being in two places at the same time, or, quite simply, the condition

of being nowhere" (CP 379). This nowhere resembles the space of equilibrium

between inner and outer: it is the space where art can happen.

The Jewish cultural identity which links Freud, Buber, Kristeva and Auster,

and which is characterised for Auster by "ambiguity" and double exile from a notional

homeland and from practised Judaism ("Secular Jewish Culture"), therefore has to be

considered an integral component of Auster's art. (This is a point suggested by Derek

Rubin's reading of The Invention of Solitude, for example.) A secularised but

specifically Jewish vision undoubtedly informs several of the concepts I have

employed in this chapter, notably Freud's "uncanny" and Kristeva's abject. It also

helps to explain Auster's desire to undermine the essentialising compulsions inherent

in certain American mythologies such as the frontier, inherited in part from a Puritan world view of election or damnation. If he succeeds in <u>In the Country of Last Things</u> more than in the other novels I have looked at, it is because he views the wilderness as something other than an isolating space or an iconic backdrop for paternal dramas. Here he has chosen a narrator who learns to appreciate that the wilderness of waste and fragmentation provides "extremely fertile ground" for creation (<u>CP</u> 379) precisely because it cannot help but inhabit us (rather than we inhabit it or impose upon it) as a metaphor for our own exile and yearning for reconstruction through relation. Anna also recognises, with far more perspicacity than Fogg, Walt or Mr. Bones, that this yearning cannot be stopped by simply re-enacting moments of loss or reaching for the heavens: it is truly never ending and must be in Buber's terms "continually renewed." "The end is only imaginary," she observes, "a destination you invent to keep yourself going, but a point comes when you realize you will never get there" (183). The journey is the important thing, and that journey is art itself.

6. Art and Life, Novels and Films

The Book of Illusions: Carrying the burden of representation

> The most important thing in art is **The Frame**. For painting: literally; for
> other arts: figuratively – because, without this humble appliance, you can't **know**
> where *The Art* stops and *The Real World* begins.
>
> You have to put a 'box' around it because otherwise, **what is that shit on
> the wall?**
>
> If John Cage, for instance, says, "*I'm putting a contact microphone on my
> throat, and I'm going to drink carrot juice, and that's my composition,*" then his
> gurgling qualifies as **his composition** because he put a frame around it and said so.
> *"Take it or leave it, I now* **will** *this to be* **music**." After that it's a matter of taste.
> Without the frame-as-announced, it's a guy swallowing carrot juice. (Zappa 140)

Frank Zappa's definition of art makes several assumptions. First, it

presupposes an audience. Whether or not an object or an event is materially or

metaphorically framed, can it really be said to attain an artistic status without the act

of viewing? As Alma Grund asks in The Book of Illusions (2002), "If someone

makes a movie and no one sees it, does the movie exist or not?" (207). And to cite a

more recent example: would David Blaine have inspired such interest (and indeed

such vilification) had he decided to starve himself alone in his apartment, rather than

suspended in a box in the centre of London?

Secondly, underpinning Zappa's statements is the modernist's belief that, with

the frame in position, life and art *can* be neatly separated. But in a supposedly

postmodern world where, as Jean Baudrillard has remarked, "everything that

redoubles in itself, even ordinary, everyday reality, falls in the same stroke under the

sign of art, and becomes aesthetic," the most mundane activity can be transmuted into

art. In fact, representation is unavoidable: we really cannot know where the art stops

and the real world begins precisely because for Baudrillard there is no real world

(Symbolic 150). We are always, in a sense, framing and being framed.

This theory, postulated in Symbolic Exchange and Death and Simulacra and Simulations, of the evacuation of the real (itself nothing but an effect of textual representation) through the endless proliferation of images, will be familiar to readers of contemporary American fiction in the work of authors such as Don DeLillo and Robert Coover. Indeed, an entire genre of fiction – that is *meta*fiction – has been devoted to it. Neither is The Book of Illusions unique among Auster's works in investigating to what extent "illusions" (signs, stories, artworks) obscure an underlying reality, or serve only to mask the fundamental lack of any reality: The New York Trilogy is but the most discussed example. However, it does interrogate more thoroughly and more self-consciously than any of his earlier works the status of art, and whether art enhances life, precludes life or is in fact the only life we have. The very title boldly refers to itself as an aesthetic artefact. Uniquely, this book of illusions chooses to foreground a particular medium of representation and framing – cinema.

Returning for a moment to the schematic dichotomy set up in the introduction to this study, I would stress that The Book of Illusions comes closer than any other Auster text (apart from particular poems) to the bleakness of the wholly negative reaction to the loss of authority. That is, the disconnected individual adrift in a sea of signification with no escape but the melancholic falling back upon his own narrative resources. In other words, an approximation of Baudrillardian postmodernism seemingly quite at odds with the Buberian dialogue elaborated in previous chapters. By actuating a peculiarly symbiotic relationship between art and death, as well as art and life, Auster, like Baudrillard, is here haunted by theological and eschatological questions, so that when dealing with life, art and death God is never far away, whether he exists or not. Although this situation is familiar from other novels evincing

anxiety about God's authority, especially <u>Oracle Night</u>, the story-within-a-story and intertextuality are here employed far more successfully in order not only to highlight the dangers of a consummately postmodern withdrawal into the signifier, but also to present the faintest possibility of escape through a formal storytelling structure I presently dub the *parable*. Paradoxically, then, rendering one's life as art is a kind of death and yet if approached dialogically, it redeems life. In the other text I examine in this chapter – <u>The Brooklyn Follies</u> (2005) – it becomes the prerequisite of community living in all its folly and eccentricity, a rich source of necessary fictions which sustain relation. This novel therefore comes much closer to the positive reaction to the loss of authority described in the introduction. Life must aspire to become an oxymoron, a *true fake* and it is in this transformation that the nihilism of a Baudrillard-style position (which this thesis has been consistently questioning) can be avoided. Like Rufus's funeral performance (the aesthetic and emotional heart of the novel), life must try and be "everything it was and everything it wasn't" (<u>BF</u> 225).

As an undoubted influence on <u>The Brooklyn Follies</u> and at least in a thematic sense on <u>The Book of Illusions</u>, Auster's directorial debut <u>Blue in the Face</u> (1995) also deserves some attention. Although I do not devote an entire section to it, this chapter is interspersed with relevant observations. For the moment I should state that my instinctive feeling is that the movie and Auster's subsequent notes on it in <u>3 Films</u> combine to produce one inter-text, and despite – in fact, because of – the "wild and woolly" improvisatory nature of the whole project (<u>3F</u> 170), they produce a quintessentially Austerian aesthetic artefact. Despite the film's ludic tendencies, it manages to carry Auster's traditional ontological speculations into new territory by subjecting them to the dual operations of the audio-visual text and the subsequent literary product entitled <u>3 Films</u>. The inter-text is more than the sum of the generic

texts which comprise it, just as the individual finds identity only through meaningful

negotiation. Moreover, it is the Auster text most preoccupied with the manner "in

which fiction spills out into the real world [. . .] the ways in which the self can be

rewritten" (Bilton 86) and, I would contend, the way the real world encroaches upon

fiction. This is a characteristic it shares with The Brooklyn Follies.

Paul Auster's writing frequently evidences a fascination with figures who

aspire to transport their very existences into the realm of art. Maria, the conceptual

artist who appears in Leviathan, is a close fictionalistion of Auster's friend, the artist

Sophie Calle. Themselves framed within the book Double Game, Calle's

performances, which include the hiring of a private detective to follow her and record

her movements in photographs and the written word, self-consciously play with

notions of the frame and the audience by exploring "the drama of watching and being

watched" (L 63). It is a typically Austerian feat of multi-layered representation to

fictionalise someone whose own work explicitly aestheticises her experiences, but

Calle attempts, in an act of playful one-upmanship, to take the notion further by

asking Auster to create a literary character whose every movement she can emulate.

Out of a rather precious sense of artistic responsibility Auster refuses, choosing

instead to offer "Personal Instructions for SC on How to Improve Life in New York

City (Because she asked)," which results in the situationist piece entitled "Gotham

Handbook." Calle's art does not simply assert, as Yves-Alain Bois says, that "[a]buse

of power and indiscretion [. . .] are the marks of all photographs" (128), it suggests

that any selves can only be said to exist in a state of perpetually reciprocated

voyeurism; that we are all fit subjects for art by virtue of being the sum of

multifarious representations by others. Any concept of a centred self is repudiated:

the self is a significant absence approximated through simulations, the constructions

of our spectators. So Sophie uses the address book she finds to build a portrait of

Pierre D., its owner, through the descriptions of the contacts he has recorded in it.

Similarly, in the piece "The Hotel," she takes a job as a chambermaid and violates the

privacy of the absent guests by secretly photographing their possessions,

demonstrating that the self is further refracted through its material accoutrements. For

Calle, that self has no choice: it is always on display, on trial, consumed in the process

of being represented.

In the introduction to his translation of Philippe Petit's On the High Wire,

Auster's declaration that "[t]he art is the thing itself, a life in its most naked

delineation" (CP 438-39) informs us that high-wire walking effectively blurs the

boundary between the lived experience and the representation of that experience.

Unmediated by the complicating factor of language, the high-wire is an art of

contemplative silence which demands a like silence from the spectator, and "an art of

solitude, a way of coming to grips with one's life in the darkest, most secret corners of

the self" (441). Paradoxically, the staging of this private soul-searching in the public

arena constitutes the framing of the event as art, but the clandestine, unpublicised

setting-up of walks such as that accomplished between the towers of Nôtre-Dame in

1971 allows the privileged viewer to witness the spectacle almost by accident, to

stumble fortuitously into a life-lived-as-art in its unfolding. As Auster puts it, "it was

somehow as though he had allowed the audience to share in the workings of his

thoughts, had made us privy to some deep, inarticulate obsession within him" (436).

Auster is disingenuous in giving prominence to the appreciation of beauty

rather than danger in the high-wire act:

> Unlike the stuntman [. . .] the good high-wire walker strives to make
>
> his audience forget the dangers, to lure it away from thoughts of death
>
> by the beauty of what he does on the wire itself. (CP 438)

Keen to portray Petit as an idealised pre-lapsarian innocent for whom falling is simply unfeasible, Auster chooses to ignore the fact that the "common humanity" (442) we experience as onlookers derives partly from our collective awareness of the proximity of death to the artistic act. Surely Petit's performances would fail to elicit such wonderment if the wire were a couple of feet above ground rather than several hundred, just as part of the appeal of David Blaine's performance is its thanatic trajectory and much of Calle's work relies on the anticipation of imminent physical danger.

In fact, and this is markedly true of The Book of Illusions, one of Auster's chief considerations is the link between art and death. David Zimmer's motivation for writing his critical appreciation of Hector Mann's movies in The Book of Illusions is partly the need to fill the void left after his wife and son's deaths in a plane crash. Therefore, although it constitutes a random act of destruction within the fictional universe, the crash is nothing less than the departure point (in both senses) for the act of artistic creation synonymous with mourning, and for Auster and Zimmer becomes anything but random. As The Invention of Solitude shows, the recuperation of death allows the ripening of the artistic imagination.

Thus one re-enters art's now familiar problematised relationship with both life and death: a life can be resurrected through the creation of art only in the process of affirming the loss which inspired the creation itself. Likewise, silence is itself double-edged. For Petit, for Benjamin Sachs in Leviathan, and for Hector Mann in The Book of Illusions, silence provides a space for contemplation, for "unstinting attention" (L 119) and allows a direct form of communication free from the debilitating influence of language. Hence the importance of silent film to The Book of Illusions. (In The Brooklyn Follies, silence enables love more effectively than chatter or eloquence, as

we shall see.) Nevertheless, it is clear that silence is also symbolic of death itself, and that the writer-narrators of Auster's novels, like Auster, feel compelled at some point to fill the pregnant spaces with words, despite their deceitful tendencies, in order to stave off the end. Silence holds both an attraction and an atavistic fear.

Once again, we can trace the origins of Auster's ambivalence toward silence in the work of Martin Buber. For him, "silent patience in the undivided word that precedes the formed and vocal response – leaves the *Thou* free, and permits man to take his stand with it in the reserve where the spirit is not manifest, but *is*. Every response binds up the *Thou* in the world of *It*. That is the melancholy of man, and his greatness. For that is how knowledge comes about, a work is achieved [. . .]" (I and Thou 37). In other words, silence is intimidating because it facilitates the potentially transcendent and shattering meeting with the "Thou" but to use language to articulate it, to render it a work, instantly crosses the frontier into the world of objects. Auster as an author *cannot* remain silent for he needs to write about the possibility of these meetings, but in so doing he instantly terminates them. Martin Buber himself has exactly the same problem, of course, a point recognised by Jean-François Lyotard (Differend 111-12).

This recurring need for language is one aspect of what Zimmer dubs "the burden of representation" (15). Alma Grund, who, as her name implies, can be regarded as the soul of The Book of Illusions, embodies the burden of representation in somatic and symbolic terms like a modern-day Philoctetes. With characteristic allusiveness, the first description of Alma evokes Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark":

> When she walked into the light, I saw that there was a birthmark on the left side of her face. It was a purple stain about the size of a man's fist, long enough and broad

enough to resemble the map of some imaginary country: a solid mass of discoloration

that covered more than half her cheek [. . .] (100)

Cindy Weinstein convincingly argues that in Hawthorne's tale, Georgiana's

birthmark is a sign of authorship – the visible mark of God's creation, or alternatively

of Hawthorne's literary endeavours. Aylmer regards it as unpalatable because he feels

his power as a creative scientist diminished by its presence, due to the fact that its

oscillations – that is, Georgiana's ability to efface it when she blushes – signify the

female's participation in the literary and scientific economy of meaning, and so pose a

threat to his masculine authority. Moreover, in a nineteenth-century America

increasingly subject to the mystifying demands of capital, "[e]rasing the visible signs

of labor became a cultural project" (Weinstein 57). Therefore, Georgiana's birthmark

distils discourses of gender, literary production and religion at a node of complex

hermeneutics. Aylmer's doomed attempt to destroy it stands for a reified

consciousness, or for the hangover of a Puritan obsession with visible signs of

election or rejection.

In Auster's milieu, no attempt is made to destroy the marks of production.

The "man's fist" on Alma's face speaks of the reflexive process of artistic re-

presentation in which Auster is engaged: the hand of the author is clearly visible here.

To put it another way, Alma is intrinsically *framed* by the birthmark, such that in a

sense she becomes a piece of art which attests to the inescapability of representation

in much the same way Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, and Sophie Calle's acts of

voyeurism do. Bearing in mind Zimmer's evocation of the "imaginary country," one

could also suggest that Alma's body is colonised by meaning in the same way as the

frontier spaces dealt with in the previous chapter.

Both a cynosure and an exemplar of the beauty of human imperfection, the

mark encourages a proliferation of meanings which can be seen in David's

contradictory responses to it. Firstly he remarks:

> When she turned around and faced me again, I could see only her right side. She
>
> looked different from that angle, and I saw that she had a delicate, roundish face,
>
> with very smooth skin [. . .] Her eyes were dark blue, and there was a quick, nervous
>
> intelligence in them that reminded me a little of Helen. (101)

Here, Alma is a palimpsest upon which David can lay images of his dead wife Helen.

Her face becomes a "strange double face" (108) and neatly rehearses the theme of

ontological doubling in Auster's work. Later, however, David tells Alma, "[y]ou're

the only person I've ever met who looks only like herself" (119). David fails to

appreciate that her uniqueness lies less in her simply having the birthmark or her

status as a repository of myriad significations, than in her heightened awareness of the

hermeneutic possibilities and her re-appropriation of the mark for her own interpretive

ends. Having thoroughly immersed herself in Hawthorne's story, and in an active

inversion of the representational impulse which passive Georgiana is unable to

achieve, Alma accepts "the central fact" of the birthmark as "simply what we think of

as human" (120-21) and uses it as a barometer to gauge other people's readings of

her:

> All I had to do was look at them, study their reactions when they saw the left side of
>
> my face, and I could tell whether they could be trusted or not. The birthmark was
>
> the test of their humanity. (121)

So a burden, even a curse, becomes an invaluable tool for testing sympathy and the

potential for dialogue. Alma's birthmark, like the wall in The Music of Chance,

allegorises in a subtle manner both the work of the author and the fabrications of the

reader.

In the sense that the birthmark dictates that its owner's experiences are

inextricably bound up with the *representation* of those experiences, Alma becomes an

ideal for Auster. For part of the attraction of the interpenetrative relationship between life and art exemplified by Sophie Calle, Philippe Petit and in an even more integrated way Alma, is simply that less time is wasted in the process of creation: life is not put on hold, or jettisoned completely, while art is being produced. Throughout Auster's novels, characters struggle to reconcile rival impulses: do we live; do we defer living while we sit in our locked room, (writing about the possibility of living or the memory of living); or do we contrive a way to make the living and the writing concurrent?

To recite two examples: In City of Glass Daniel Quinn, cast in the role of detective, is struggling to find a way meticulously to observe the movements of his quarry Peter Stillman and simultaneously make detailed notes. After much experimentation

> he decided to rest the notebook on his left hip, much as an artist holds his palette
> [. . .] Quinn was now able to divide his attention almost equally between Stillman and
> his writing [. . .] seeing the thing and writing about it in the same fluid gesture. (63)

Quinn, as chapter four indicated, starts out as a writer of detective fiction, becomes a detective by accident and then as part of his investigation a prolific writer once again, but one who desires the simultaneity of writing and experience, equivalent to the exercise of imagination in dealing with the other. This is a desire which penetrates to the heart of Auster's entire oeuvre. We should also remember that the life of Blue, the "hero" of Ghosts, describes a slightly different trajectory. As Stephen Fredman illustrates, Blue imprisons himself in the room that is the book, an exclusively masculine arena of creativity, and allows his life to fall away completely as he myopically concentrates on Black and his writing ("Consequences"). As I have noted, he fails to appreciate the succour and the release that true art, in this case Thoreau's Walden, can provide.

Auster returns to this theme in The Book of Illusions. Hector Mann's film The

<u>Inner Life of Martin Frost</u>, which I examine in more detail later, depicts the eponymous hero, a writer, being forced to destroy his manuscript in order to regain the life and love of his partner Claire (242-69). These examples would seem to contradict the author's declaration, borrowed from Pascal, that "all the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only: that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room" (<u>IOS</u> 83). As with so many recurrent tropes in Auster's work, the room is ambiguous: it enables a productive solitude and silence, yet precludes the rich experience of life. It can be viewed as, in short, a deferral of life, a form of temporary death.

Although <u>The Book of Illusions</u> clearly flirts with postmodernism, I would argue once again that it is nothing new. The ongoing art-life dialectic outlined previously suggests that Auster inhabits a territory formerly mapped out by Victorians such as Robert Browning in "The Statue and the Bust" and Henry James in <u>The Portrait of a Lady</u>. Moreover, just as Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" forms a bridge between the author's puritan concerns and later Victorian preoccupations with art (a link, if you will, between Jonathan Edwards and Henry James), so there remains in <u>The Book of Illusions</u> a strong puritan influence: an obsession with signification; an attention to issues of guilt, salvation and resurrection; and a concomitant formal experimentation with parabolic structures. As I have indicated, Alma Grund's birthmark distils many Austerian obsessions into a densely layered system of signification, and presently I return to <u>The Book of Illusions</u> in more detail to examine how these different discourses interact.

The key to Auster's ontological and epistemological preoccupations, as I have suggested throughout this study, can be found in his formal idiosyncrasies. Auster is fond of building layer upon layer of narration to the extent that a less than attentive reader might forget which character is actually speaking. This is a technique dubbed

by Brian McHale "infinite regress" (Postmodernist 114). For some critics, the

technique becomes wearisome. D. T. Max asks, in a New York Times review:

> At one point in "The Book of Illusions," Auster narrates Zimmer narrating Mann
>
> narrating Frost narrating his story. What are we to make of this? (6)

Like Aliki Varvogli in The World That is the Book, I would argue that, structured in

this manner, many of Auster's novels and their extended anecdotes can be read as

versions of the contemporary parable (69, 72). Furthermore, if we accept as

axiomatic that one of Auster's chief concerns is the essential unknowability of the self

(which by no means precludes the attempt to *meet* the self), I believe that it is

profitable to regard the characters themselves as living parables, textual entities which

exist only as manifold subjective versions of stories told about them. Like parables,

Auster's texts employ polyphony and deny a nucleus of meaning by consistently

framing and re-framing characters and events until a sense of objective reality and

originary authority is obscured. First it is necessary to examine the specific ways in

which I define a parable, drawing on the writing of two scholars – Gila Safran Naveh

and John Durham Peters.

Paul Auster himself, in an interview with Chris Pace, defines a parable as "an

exceedingly thinned out story, something boiled down to essentials so that when you

read it, no matter how concrete it might be, it reverberates with a mythic quality."

Fundamental to biblical parables, according to Gila Safran Naveh, is a structural and

epistemological duality, such that ostensibly realist narratives contain intricate,

mystifying subtexts designed to adumbrate the inner workings of God's grace and

teachings. Auster's contrast of concreteness and the mythic reflects the inherent

tension between the apparent story and the secondary meaning. Alma is the living

embodiment of this duality: the birthmark carries both material and symbolic

meaning, and attests not only to the burden of representation but also to a residual

puritanism which insists on viewing external imperfections as a sign of inner weakness. She attains parabolic status by her encapsulation of the human desire literally to read *into* things:

> Other people carried their humanity inside them, but I wore mine on my face [. . .]
> Every time people looked at me, they were looking right into my soul. (121)

But she is surely naïve in assuming that others necessarily read her soul *accurately* or disinterestedly: Zimmer's divergent constructions of her as doubled and yet unique demonstrate the futility of attempting to locate an essence.

After all, as Naveh demonstrates, the listener's (or reader's) desire is intrinsic to the narrative process of the parable (14). It must be remembered that the parable refuses a monolithic interpretation: as John Durham Peters argues, it is, by its very nature, an exercise in "uniformity in transmission and diversity in reception," a disseminatory act which encourages numerous responses. Using "the parable of the sower – the archparable of dissemination," Peters convincingly argues that "[t]hose who have ears to hear, let them hear!" from Matthew 13, self-consciously encourages multiple but not necessarily inclusive meanings, like the seeds scattered across the land (52, 51). Thus Zimmer's highly subjective readings of Alma's mark, inflected with his personal experience, can never be definitive.

A parable, which is usually embedded in a larger text, evinces an obliqueness and polysemy which stem, importantly, from "a practical crisis of some sort – the incomprehensibility of a word or a rule or the failure of the covenantal tradition to engage its audience" (Naveh 10). Traditionally, then, the Gospel parable was a means of engaging the listener in an act of practical exegesis to shed light on scriptural teachings: the hermeneutic process was "the royal road to their metatext" (Naveh 27), which tended to be a passage from the Bible. Thus, a parabolist was an inter-textualist, but one who was confident in the teleology of the form, knowing that the

chain of signification ended with the unique and trustworthy Word of God, the consummate explanatory text. Contrastingly, the modern-day parabolist (Naveh chooses Kafka as her exemplar, but Auster would do just as well) utilises parables to reveal not a scriptural meta-text, but only another potential crisis: the unavailability of any all-encompassing system of meaning. In her words:

> the modern recipient of parables remains unenlightened about their meaning [. . .]
> With no way of satisfying their real ambition, modern parabolists concentrate on
> refining their linguistic deftness to the point of being consumed with "the word" [. . .]
> The discovery is the appalling realization of our fundamental incapability to go back
> to our linguistic and conceptual origins. (35-36)

Or as Kafka asseverates in "On Parables," "parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already" (Parables and Paradoxes 11). Even more troublingly for him (and numerous Auster characters suffer the same fate) this parabolic narrative, in Hebrew *mishral*, distressingly lacks the final cohesive lesson, or *nimshal*. The parable points not to an over-arching meaning, but self-reflexively to its status as text and to the story-making process. With God all but departed, all we have left are the representations; we might say in Auster's terms the illusions. The contemporary parable borrows the formal peculiarities of the Biblical parable, but jettisons the familiar teleology, revealing a crisis of faith by enacting the departure of meta-narratives. (The paranoia this engenders was the subject of chapter two.) It is in itself a form of mourning, then, and perhaps an opportunity. Formally it cries out for, even as it seems to resist, a return to the paratactic and is thus an aesthetic and an ethical form.

Jean Baudrillard's thinking, as I have noted, leans heavily on such theological concerns. In "Simulacra and Simulations," he explicitly connects his theory of the proliferation of images to historical religious arguments:

> [w]hat becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination – the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? (Simulacra 172)

The postmodernist inherits the fears of the Protestant Reformation: through the multiplication of images, the real of God is ultimately effaced completely. One is reminded of Naveh's statement about "our fundamental incapability to go back to our linguistic and conceptual origins." In the particular formal and epistemological ways I have been discussing, life becomes parabolic, a series of texts upon texts with no stable founding authority.

Hector Mann's life and his films embody the deliquescence of the real through the proliferation of representations. As usual, it is difficult not to see our hero's surname as deeply allegorical. Hector "Mann" represents the multiplicity and the consequent unknowability, of man himself. If Alma Grund stands for the inescapability of representation and the inevitability of a life-as-art, Mann stands for the bedevilment of our efforts to locate the self's essence. Mann the arthouse director, creating films that virtually nobody sees, is only the last in a series of miscellaneous manifestations or reinventions of the man. His whole life is a series of disguises, of shifting identities, and the parabolic construction of the novel prevents the reader from receiving his voice directly, without the filters of multiple narrator figures. In short, he is always framed by others. For instance, David's research into Mann throws up four articles written between 1927 and 1928, all of which offer almost comically contradictory profiles of the artist, partly because of his own tendency to exaggerate or fabricate elements of his biography to render them more dramatic, and partly because the relative lack of hard facts about him forces the journalists to invent

examined earlier.[11] David's meticulous accounts of Hector's early silent films, whilst evidencing Auster's obvious "fascination" with this "dead" genre, itself speaking from beyond the grave ("Fresh Air"), serve a more important function. By the sheer length of the descriptions, and their attention to detail, Auster draws the reader into the imagined arena (into the frame, to employ Zappa's terminology once again), and lends the films a narrative weight equal to Mann's supposedly "real" life. We are to infer that Mann, in a Baudrillardian sense, is at least as real (or as simulated) in his movies as he is in life, that the latter is just another text to be interpreted in the same way the critic interprets films. Hector Mann is the living embodiment of one of the central tenets of the book, that "the world was an illusion that had to be reinvented every day" (57). To further complicate matters, it is at the climax of the film Mr. Nobody, a parable of "the anguish of selfhood" (53), that the numerous changes of identity which Mann undertakes during his withdrawal from society are prefigured. As Nicci Gerrard has observed, "[t]he lost films show stories that the characters then enact, as if they have made their fates into art before experiencing them in life," a comment which demonstrates an acute understanding of the novel's chiastic interplay between art and life ("Dead Men"). In tandem with Zimmer's commentaries, the films reflect, indeed enact, the permeable and amorphous frames through which every person and every action is viewed.

Mr. Nobody can be read as an allegory of the commodification and subsequent effacement of the self under a capitalist system. For the only time in his career, Hector plays a rich man, a hardworking immigrant who has pursued the American

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[11] Unfortunately, I have to leave it to someone else to explore the complexities of the translation from visual to literary language entailed in Zimmer's descriptions, but it is a fascinating area. For my argument, it suffices to say that both forms of language constitute frames through which the protagonists are viewed by other characters, the author and the reader. Brian McHale's Postmodernist Fiction explores the use of cinematic discourse within novels as "metaphors for textual strategies" (129) and an interposed layer between text and reality.

dream and become president of a company. He is therefore at the mercy of the demands of capital. To symbolise this, the film shows Hector being tricked into invisibility (a loss of self, in effect, as others cannot see him) by the villainous vice-president Chase, who has substantial debts to pay off (42). Ruthless American society temporarily erases him, and though he wreaks his revenge by comic yet criminal means, his subsequent resurrection in front of the mirror at the climax of the film is a recognition not just that "to be born again" (53) is predicated on annihilation, but also that the emergent self (as in Ghosts) comes from a distinctly Freudian or Lacanian act of misrecognition or misrepresentation. Mann stares at the mirror, sees framed there "the face of a man he has never seen before" (52) and the screen fades to black. So his apparent revitalisation signals the inevitable *fragmentation* of the self and a kind of dissolution of the "real" him. Mr. Nobody becomes, as Hector's life shows, Mr. Anybody. The film prefigures, among others, the Mann who later engages in sexual acts for money with the prostitute Sylvia Meers. Wearing a black mask and copulating in front of a retired judge, Hector erases his personality even as he is represented and commodified as a performative body, framed and fetishised by the spectator. In this way, representation again becomes a form of death, a way to "go on killing himself" (177), like the "stamp of mortality" on Alma's face (120).

The Inner Life of Martin Frost, an example of Hector's later directorial efforts, also equates, but in a slightly different way, representation with erasure. Broadly speaking, the eponymous hero Frost epitomises artistic endeavour, whereas Claire, the mysterious student whom he encounters at the ranch, embodies life with the other (at its apotheosis, love) which the melancholic pursuit of aesthetic creation in splendid isolation threatens to postpone indefinitely, resulting in actual or metaphorical death. Ultimately, Martin is forced into the paradoxical destruction of the manuscript which

Claire herself has inspired in order to save her life and solve "the riddle of his

enchantment" (268). However, our experience of reading The Book of Illusions

prepares us for the deconstruction of the naïve polarities of "art" versus "life." From

the beginning of Zimmer's description, in which the familiar surroundings of Hector's

ranch "are turned into the elements of a fictional world" which exist on the "inside of

a man's head" (as psychological framings rendered cinematic), it is clear that any

simple dichotomies will prove factitious and untenable (243). Indeed, Claire's

ambiguous response to what Martin regards as the noble and romantic sacrifice of his

art reinforces this feeling:

> She is ecstatic; she is horrified [. . .] now that Martin has solved the riddle of his
>
> enchantment, she seems lost. What are we going to do? she says. Tell me, Martin,
>
> what on earth are we going to do? (268)

Like a true Austerian, Claire realises that the very life Martin believes he is rescuing

is valid only when imbued with representations, indeed, that Claire herself, as an

imaginative creation, exists not as objective reality but as subjective artwork. To

destroy the art is effectively to destroy the life and leaves them staring into a vacuum,

"sitting in the middle of nowhere" (268). Truly now Martin has become a Mr.

Nobody, even as his muse has apparently been resurrected.

So implicit in The Book of Illusions, and wittily illustrated by both Mr.

Nobody and The Inner Life of Martin Frost, is the assumption that rebirth cannot be

total or unequivocal – it is dialectical, an unstable truce between the new self and the

residual selves of the past, and consistently founders on the inescapable truth that

none of those selves, as the films highlight, can ever escape the frame and enter

unmediated "reality." Furthermore, as Martin Frost in particular evinces, the mere

destruction of the artwork cannot guarantee liberation from the perceived tyranny of

representational codes it participates in and should not aim for it. The artwork is

implicated in and in turn helps create a complex and fluid context of relations: to try

and deny that context through destruction (or as we shall see by means of forgery) is

an intrinsically melancholic act.

One question posed by the novel is – can one's own departure perform this

supposedly liberating function? Haunted by the most shameful episode from his past,

the death of Brigid O'Fallon brought about partly by unrequited love, Mann aims at

total annihilation upon death, couched in distinctly religious terms:

> The films, then, were a form of penance, an acknowledgement that his role in the
>
> accidental murder of Brigid O'Fallon was a sin that could never be pardoned. *I am a*
>
> *ridiculous man. God has played many jokes on me* [. . .] Make films, yes [. . .] Make
>
> them as though your life depended on it, and then, once your life is over, see to it that
>
> they are destroyed. You are forbidden to leave any traces behind you. (278)

In "his psycho-religious battle between desire and self-abnegation" (279), guilt is at

once the creative spur and the exculpation, the denial of the audience which would

realise the movies as fully consummated pieces of art. And the denial of an audience

is a form of melancholic solitude, a denial of relation, even as it confirms the meaning

of the original guilty act. (For Slavoj Žižek guilt is, paradoxically, the chief means to

enjoyment of the act, not an obstacle to it [Puppet 57].) Furthermore, the destruction

of their filmic illusions seems to suggest that Hector and Frieda, despite claiming not

to believe in God, are like many other Auster characters nostalgic for a trace of a deity

who will, through death, restore "an epistemological certainty that only the

'postmodern' lacks" (Millard 185) and relieve them of the burden of representation

borne throughout their lives. It is as if, as Baudrillard suggests in Symbolic Exchange

and Death, death is the only means of escape from the code, from the incessantly

repeatable play of signification and equivalence. So is death truly the only

unrepeatable, unrepresentable act?

Not exactly. Paul Auster's rhizomatic structure disallows, even as it seems to invite, a spiritual trajectory which culminates in death, salvation and resurrection. As we have seen, Mr. Nobody problematises resurrection such that it results in fragmentation and proliferated, increasingly restless identities. Indeed, it is a key text in facilitating, through the metaphor of enforced disappearance, a *rehearsal* for death. Hector may be invisible, but he most definitely still inhabits the frame and his mischievous, morally ambiguous pranks demonstrate that "[a] man can be invisible to everyone around him, but his body can still interact with the world" (45). By analogy, then, we can conclude that one's death does not preclude one's enduring memorial or textual existence through representation (for example, memory).

The rather Victorian assertion that we live on in art after our deaths appears something to be feared rather than rejoiced in in The Book of Illusions.. (This is one of the key differences with The Brooklyn Follies). Posthumous publication of Zimmer's text demonstrates, in refutation of Hector's desire to leave no trace, that we are bound to carry the burden of representation in death as in life. That is why Alma, upon the destruction of her manuscript, and thus of what she perceives to be her sole opportunity to represent herself without the interference of the birthmark, commits suicide (321). The Auster who inhabits the pages of The Invention of Solitude, diligently filling those pages with signs to postpone the silence which will engulf him upon acceptance of his father's death, is the same Auster who continues to repeat the framing process when the protagonists have departed. Thus the author proves Baudrillard wrong: death is not an escape from the code, for as we have seen, death is in fact frequently the *beginning* of the artistic process, both the stimulus and the result, just as Hector's erasure in Mr. Nobody actually increases his impish creative influence.

Auster disabuses his characters of curative epistemological certainties

(whether or not they actually believe in them), presenting in this novel a bleak portrait

of human subjectivity as fractured, contingent, powerless, forever within the frame

and informed by "the fact of our transience and mortality," the inevitability of death

(AH 335). This sense of mortality inflects the artistic process and at its most negative

incessantly mourns to the brink of melancholia the loss of the grounding authorities

humans erroneously cling to – the father, the author, or God. Without this

representational authority, and as a monument to the inevitable mourning process, one

is left with the aesthetic artefact declared to be The Book of Illusions – a collection of

textual frames-within-frames which, despite its inception in virtual nihilism, is a

compelling work.

At its most positive, the sense of mortality can inspire the playful

manipulation of representation – a paradoxical artistic freedom – in the work of artists

such as Sophie Calle, Philippe Petit and, to a point, Hector Mann. One might also add

to this list Lou Reed, who stars in Blue in the Face apparently as himself and yet

suffers a humorous infraction of his singularity by becoming "Man with Unusual

Glasses" (3F 174) in the screenplay's cast list. The two men appear consubstantial

and the feeling persists that they are one and the same. Importantly, the performing

identity emerges from the interview, such that Reed becomes either a metaphor for

himself or like Hector Mann the consummate raconteur, both himself and the roles he

inhabits, a connecting principle between fiction and reality.

It is as if their intrinsic awareness of the parabolism of life and art allows such

connecting figures, unlike Martin Frost or, for that matter, David Zimmer, to reconcile

the two terms and fashion an aesthetic which is at once deeply personal yet also truly

democratic (to employ the term with all the connotations it has acquired throughout

this thesis) in reflecting a self only ever in dialogue with other constructed, textual

selves. Therein lay the beauty and indeed the despair of existence.

The Brooklyn Follies: Faking It or Making It? Life, Art, Crime
and the American Dream

Born *Originals*, how comes it to pass that we die *Copies*?

(Edward Young, Conjectures 42)

Edward Young's rhetorical question, couched in a belief in the inimitable

original, founders on biology. Heredity, or genetic transcription, bears out Hillel

Schwartz's assertion that "copying makes us what we are" (211) and reveals that in a

profound sense we are never truly original. Whether one perceives the history of

biological copying to be one of degeneration or regeneration depends on one's

theological leanings. Evolution permits us faith in progress, a never-ending re-

shaping of prototypes into more streamlined and sophisticated models, copies which

eventually come to supersede the originals (that is, the earliest types). Choosing to

start with Adam and the Fall, however, adumbrates an acceptance of degradation, of a

spiritual template reduced to imperfect copies in dire need of refashioning.

The parabolic transmission of narrative I have described throughout this study,

and particularly in relation to The Book of Illusions, can be seen as allegorising this

imitative process. Even if one retains faith in the existence of an original, its

recession in the continual re-telling of stories becomes inevitable and, paradoxically,

stipulates that a true original is that which is unmolested by virtue of being unseen,

not decontextualised or not-talked-about. In other words, *unknown* and to all intents

and purposes non-existent. To even make aware of is to degrade, just as,

remembering the argument of chapter three, to unearth for preservation is to corrupt.

Thus, the categories of "original" and "copy" collapse and maintenance of the former

category becomes, to employ a term which Gary Lindberg demonstrates has particular

resonance in American literature, a matter of *confidence*. Alternatively, we can re-visit the word "incredulity," which I have previously argued travels in tandem with the frontier and places genealogy in jeopardy. Either way, what is under pressure is a belief in authenticity, attended by the omnipresent possibility that the narrative we encounter is not simply a tarnished reproduction, but a complete lie or a forgery (which, as Michael Wreen points out, is not necessarily a copy of anything [149], a point I return to). Indeed, to adhere to a belief in notions such as "authenticity," "authority" and "individuality" valorises the discourse of both the genuine and the spurious. Of course, returning to the genetic issues with which this discussion began, everything and every body might be a forgery anyway. And where genetics or genesis fail to elucidate matters, law inevitably intervenes. "A forgery is still a making," avers Ian Haywood, "its condemnation is a matter of interpretation and law" (6).

The Brooklyn Follies (2005) is as ramshackle and eccentric as its eponymous borough. Considerably less bleak than The Book of Illusions, less self-absorbed than Oracle Night, Auster's latest novel imagines life inside the frame once again, but this time the frame is more concrete: it is Brooklyn itself, a place where life is inevitably and at times joyously transfigured into the performative in the eyes of one's neighbours. As its stories and figures accumulate, one cannot help but agree with the Publishers Weekly reviewer's observation that "the book's presiding spirit is Brooklyn's first bard, Walt Whitman, as Auster embraces the borough's multitudes – neighborhood characters, stunning drag queens, intellectuals manqué, greasy-spoon waitresses, urbane bourgeoisie – while singing odes to moonrise over the Brooklyn Bridge." Blue in the Face, which features "Brooklyn Residents" simultaneously being and *playing* themselves (3F 174) is surely the other major influence.

Within the at times bewildering sprawl of stories and relationships (formally reminiscent once again of the improvised <u>Blue in the Face</u>), one theme serves as a kind of narrative adhesive, and that is the status of the forgery. It is important to stress immediately that the forgery is a peculiarly American literary theme in a "new" nation concerned with its own authenticity. For example, Carwin's ventriloquised voices, inflected with Old World cadences, are essentially malevolent copies which have tragic consequences for a supposedly enlightened New World society. Bartleby's polite refusal to check over his copies can be seen as a desire not to invest any personality in the text such that it is changed from a perfect copy to something resembling a fake. And of course, more recently, William Gaddis' <u>The Recognitions</u> employs art forgery as a metaphor for contemporary pastiche and fakery in all its forms.

In <u>The Brooklyn Follies</u>, as well as supplying diegetic ingredients – Harry Brightman's shady past as a co-conspirator in the forgery of a deceased artist's "*next*" canvases (45) and his latest scheme to fake a manuscript of <u>The Scarlet Letter</u> (127) – the forgery becomes the subject of a number of questions implicitly posed by the novel. These questions, it should be noted, are partially reflected in the text's formal characteristics, primarily the beguiling episodic structure illustrated by the idiosyncratic chapter titles; for example "The Queen of Brooklyn" (80) and "Dream Days at the Hotel Existence" (166). Like the tales within <u>The Book of Human Folly</u>, which starts out as "a hodgepodge of unrelated anecdotes" (6), each chapter stands as an individual tale yet intertwines with others to participate in a civic vision concerned with an individual's position within the mutability of social relations.

So the questions I attempt to answer are: first, if we agree with Charles Taylor that the modern notion of "authenticity" stems from an individual's

untrammelled faith in "originality," that is, living one's life in a unique way (Taylor

29), can a life ever, as it were, be faked, even if like Harry Brightman one perpetually

reinvents oneself (32-33)? Clearly, the facets of Brightman's personality which earn

him the affectionate epithet "rascal" from Nathan (52) – the changes of identity, the

scams, the verbal gymnastics – make him a confidence man in the American mould, a

successor to The Cosmopolitan, Huck Finn, Yossarian and Dean Moriarty. Indeed,

even his real name – "Dunkel," meaning "dark" in German or Yiddish – implies

indecipherability and the potential for deception, as well as the potential for retreat

into murky imaginative spaces, a point I return to presently. But if his conning

accurately reflects a mercurial reality, is it a fake? Secondly, if one attempts, like

Nathan Glass in his Book of Human Folly, to redact a life or a group of lives, does the

mere act of representation render biography a forgery? And if origin is ever more

irretrievable and irrelevant, can an intentional forgery or a simple case of

misattribution be just as valuable as an original by virtue of their *aesthetic* qualities,

regardless of any ethical complications they may throw up? Is all art essentially

forgery?

Our point of departure is once again etymological. Here is a text acutely

aware of the double meaning of "to forge," just as City of Glass relishes the

fissiparousness of "to cleave" (43). Meaning both "to create" and, in its now more

familiar pejorative sense, "to create fraudulently or duplicitously," the verb's own

duplicity prompts K. K. Ruthven to speculate:

> Instead of assuming a difference *between* 'literature' and 'literary forgery', therefore,
>
> we might consider each term as marking a difference *within* the category of the
>
> literary. (38)

Ruthven attributes literature's inherent fakery to a suspicion of rhetoric's persuasive

power harking back to Plato (50). (As a brief digression, it is interesting to note Harry

Brightman's playful suggestion that what we know as classical literature itself,

"Aeschylus, Homer, Sophocles, Plato, the whole lot of them [. . .] was all a hoax"

dreamed up "by some clever Italian poets during the Renaissance" [125-26]).

Certainly, rhetoric as a tool of power comes under critical scrutiny throughout

Brooklyn Follies. David Minor, Aurora's domineering, evangelist husband (note how

nomenclature puts him in his place), "expresses himself so well" (261) that he almost

succeeds in robbing his wife of her autonomy altogether (259). It is a form of

linguistic colonisation on a par with the frontier metaphorisation discussed in chapter

five. Furthermore, David is himself linguistically and ideologically colonised by the

Reverend Bob, who represents for Minor the "flesh-and-blood human father"

functioning as mouthpiece for divine instruction "from the big boss himself" (263).

Auster's more overt attacks on self-appointed authority figures in this novel are

exemplified in the figure of Minor, who, after the death of his father, stumbles from

one surrogate father figure to another, from the marines, serving "Big Daddy

America" in the Gulf War to the consolations of "the biggest father of them all" (262).

Aurora's mixed metaphors are indexical of the problem: authority is, as the Bush

administration has shown us, a fallacy (or a forgery) when it is reduced to a series of

metaphorical constructs or binary oppositions designed for control, not dialogue.

Explaining her subsequent relationship with Nancy to Uncle Nathan, Aurora

divorces eloquence from the genuine in the arena of truly dialogic love: "The men

I've been with, it was always about words [. . .] With us, I just have to look at her, and

she's inside my skin" (290). This is the "silence before the *Thou* – silence of *all*

tongues" advocated by Martin Buber (I and Thou 37) and as Nathan wryly observes,

"not talking is about the hardest thing a person can do" (173). Ironically, Aurora is

confiding in someone whose disgust at a lack of linguistic originality contributes to

his own arrogant advocacy of authority and eloquence. Of his daughter Rachel he
sneers:

> much like her mother before her, it's a rare day when she speaks in anything but
>
> platitudes – all those exhausted phrases and hand-me-down ideas that cram the dump
>
> sites of contemporary wisdom [. . .] not once has she come up with an original
>
> remark [. . .] (2)

As we saw in chapter three, a cliché's egregiousness derives not strictly from its
"hand-me-down" nature (language is, after all, something we learn from others), but
from the melancholic disconnection brought about by its reiteration without
consideration of the flexuous nature of context. In becoming a semantic passe-
partout, a cliché loses all significance, but *received* wisdom is not inherently to be
mistrusted. Indeed, one notable aspect of Nathan's education – his transition from
salesman of "life-insurance" (2) to writer and securer of "biography insurance" (301)
– is the realisation that the kinds of everyday parapraxes which undermine individual
linguistic authority and inspire The Book of Human Folly are not simply folly, but
apertures through which social interaction can be facilitated. For instance, when
Nathan mistakenly asks for a *"cinnamon-reagan"* bagel and the man behind the
counter instantly replies, "we don't have any of those. How about a pumpernixon
instead?" (5), we are witnessing not only the betrayals and forgeries language
constantly tricks us into, but also a moment of connection and a glimpse of the
political subtext which threads through the novel. There *is* a kind of wisdom in
associating Republican leaders with both consumption and cock-ups.

However, I want to stress that although Auster would of course acknowledge
that language forges meaning in both the positive and negative senses, the emphasis in
his latest novel is more existential and aesthetic than purely linguistic, and ultimately
casts light on the American dream itself. Just as The Book of Human Folly, "an

account of every blunder, every pratfall, every embarrassment, every idiocy, every

foible, and every inane act" committed by Nathan, his friends and various historical

figures (5), is antithetical to an American ethos of self-fulfilment and success, so I

suggest that the greatest folly and the most egregious forgery is commitment to that

ethos without due consideration of one's social context and constitution. Like Charles

Taylor and Martin Buber before him, I hold that the affirmation of individual choice

as an autotelic category, leading to what Taylor calls "soft relativism" (18), becomes

factitious without "horizons of significance" (Taylor 39) to articulate and measure

choice against. In The Brooklyn Follies we shall see that these horizons are found

neither in moral absolutes nor indeed solely in a key imaginative space within the text

– The Hotel Existence, "[t]he inner refuge [. . .] a man goes to when life in the real

world is no longer possible" (100) – but in the mess of social relations. A space like

The Hotel Existence, as Auster texts from The Invention of Solitude have shown, only

has validity in harmony with the outside world; otherwise it becomes a myth of

American pastoral, a "hideout" in Martin Buber's terms. It is a retreat only in the

narcissistic or melancholic sense. After all, as Brightman so succinctly expresses it,

existence must be "bigger than just life. It [is] everyone's life all together" (101).

And life all together, the real location of existence, is Brooklyn. Brooklyn

exemplifies the oxymoron toward which the novel aspires: the *true fake* (though not

an empty, melancholic postmodern one as encountered by Umberto Eco on his

"Travels in Hyperreality" [8] and touched on in chapter three). It is, we are told,

"New York and yet not New York" (48), elastic of context and both genuinely itself

and other.

In chapter four I argued that a glass holds out the promise of perspicacity

while tricking the observer into fantasies of self-reflection and misrecognition. That

our narrator here is named Nathan Glass should set alarm bells ringing. Not only are we reminded of Stephen Glass, the <u>New Republican</u> journalist who invented news stories for many years, but also surely of another literary fabulist, the Nathan Zuckerman who narrates a number of Philip Roth's novels. Realistic, of course, is not real; it is the disingenuous presentation of a facsimile of the real, akin perhaps to Baudrillard's "*Counterfeit*" mode of appearance (<u>Simulations</u> 83). So naturally, being an Auster narrator, Glass pays lip service to candour:

> Truth be told (how can I write this book if I don't tell the truth?), I put myself to sleep by masturbating. (66)

Given its context, however, just after Nathan has referred to himself as "an aimless, disconnected lump of human flesh" (62), this utterance provides little assurance of a veracity we can actually engage with. Truth here is onanistic, self-serving. Rather than revealing the interlocutory value of the work of art, its "character as *addressed*" and addressing (Taylor 35), the scene casts the reader as mere voyeur to a private act of physical and narrative self-gratification. Nathan is, after all, not a writer like Auster narrators such as Peter Aaron or Sidney Orr but more of a "windbag" (Campbell, "Mighty Quinn" 11) who happens to write as a hobby. If his prose lacks tautness and a sense of dialogic responsibility at this stage, he can be forgiven.

Nonetheless, we should still consider Anthony Grafton's assertion that "[c]laims of faithfulness in copying suggest [. . .] the presence of the forger" (8), especially when the prior reality being reactively copied is, as we know from previous readings of Auster's poetry and prose, always-already textualised, artistic. In other words, masturbatory truth-telling is at best highly subjectivised, at worst an admission of fakery and a guarantee that we see through the glass darkly. Unlike Emerson's transparent eye-ball, this glass cannot see, or chooses not to see, everything: "So

much for Glass's unerring eye" (91). As we shall see, it takes several tragic incidents,

including a heart scare (295) to jolt Nathan from his solipsism.

Some definition is now required. Before we can proceed to an analysis of the

two concrete examples of forgery, one pictorial, one literary, narrated in The Brooklyn

Follies, we need to establish some parameters by asking: exactly what is a forgery?[12]

Bracketing off for the moment the treachery of the word "forgery" itself, already

alluded to, it is productive to start with a succinct definition arrived at by means of

rigorous philosophical reasoning by Michael Wreen:

> A forgery has to be understood as a forged XY, and so the important thing is to
>
> define a forged XY. As I understand it, a forged XY isn't a genuine XY, but is
>
> represented as a genuine XY, and is so represented with the intention to deceive.
>
> (152)

Whether or not as children of postmodernity we maintain that *all* representation tends

toward deceit, it is the intentionality specified in the final clause that distinguishes the

forgery. "Y" stands for the artefact forged, which could as easily be a cheque or a

letter of invitation as a Dutch masterwork. Wreen stipulates that the "Y" must be "an

artifact-kind," meaning that it must possess "a source of issue," as oppose to natural

objects such as plants or rocks which are "created out of pre-existing materials of

some kind, as a result of the interplay of forces" (153). Therefore, he argues, a natural

object can never be forged, only faked (he offers the example of plastic fruit), unless,

presumably, human manipulation renders it artefactual. I find this assertion

problematic, though it is unnecessary to explain my misgivings here.

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[12] If from now on I employ the term "forgery" at the expense of alternatives such as "fake,"
"counterfeit," "pseudoepigrapha" or even "supercherie," it is largely for the sake of procedural and
discursive clarity, whilst acknowledging that within the realm of deception denoted by these terms,
there are subtle conceptual and contextual differences. "Hoax," a word which comes to acquire great
significance in the novel, stands as a superordinate term along the lines of "act of deception," and can
thus include the others. Chapter two of Ruthven's Faking Literature goes into more detail on
terminological questions.

Suffice to say that the status of "X" as the "source of issue" is somewhat more multifaceted and involved. Clearly it could be the place holder for an individual artist or author, such as "Vermeer." However, the point at which any attributive certainty we might hope for begins to unravel is when Wreen states:

> 'X' could range over anyone or thing – for example, any group, period, workshop, or company – that could be the creator, the originator, or, more generally, the issuer of something. Forged seventeenth-century Flemish paintings are possible, just as surely as forged Picasso paintings are. (153)

What we are referring to here, in citing "period" in particular, is *context*, and it is the implied distinction between the unique artist and the wider context which begins to feel troubling, even if Wreen's expansion of the source of issue category tidily explains why a forgery need not be a copy of any pre-existing artefact. For while it is technically possible and frequently desirable in terms of fixing exchange-value to ascertain that a Van Meegeren is not a Vermeer, where does that leave us? Falsehood is, as Nicholas Barker reminds us, an entirely abstract concept (23), such that nothing material in the artefact itself renders deception tangible. Instead, we draw speculative inferences from phantasmal hints toward a false provenance. That is why Wreen can say quite accurately that "[n]othing about a painting per se makes it a forgery; only as a represented object, in a network of human intentional activity, can it be a forgery" (161). (The *aesthetic* ramifications of this I come to later.)

But it is precisely human intention which complicates the issue. Dominick LaCapra reminds us that to talk of authorial intention at all is proleptic, an interpretation based on "excessively narrow moral, legal, and scientific presuppositions" (37) and generated within a contested present which strives to explain a complex and equally contested past context. In other words, a simple mapping of genuine or false authorship through documentary evidence is impossible, as is any appeal to a

hypostasised "context" without critical awareness that no monolithic context ever in fact exists. In LaCapra's words: "For complex texts, one has a set of interacting contexts whose relations to one another are variable and problematic and whose relation to the text being investigated raises difficult issues in interpretation" (35). Our essentially dialectical relationship with even the recent past makes the extraction of provenance and intention exceptionally difficult. Moreover, when confronted with "'creative forgeries' of things that have no 'original' but answer some abstract desire or value" (Barker 23), a supreme example of which would be Macpherson's Ossian texts, one has to accept not only the aesthetic and socialistic value of the forgery but the simple truth that provenance may eventually become irrelevant under the ascendancy of the aesthetic. While accepting that Macpherson's pluralistic context will never be recovered without present inflection, one nonetheless has to agree that forged texts "cannot be dismissed as mere pale reflections of their originals. They are, at least, part, and not a negligible part, of the stemma of the text. They can also be deeply revealing witnesses of the 'sociology of the text', a mirror of the society which elicited the forgery" (Barker 27).

So if a work's source of issue transcends simple author attribution and is bound up in a multiform context which can never be fully repossessed, is one to dismiss context and intentionality from the equation altogether? Absolutely not, if we augment Wreen's definition with this assertion: forgery is deceit precisely when it seeks to *stand in for* a context, thus denying the coalition of creative, social, political and cultural factors which make up the genuine context. To return to one of this study's key terms: such forgery is essentially *melancholic*. (Macpherson's fragments are not of this kind because of their use of "reworked authentic material" [Thomson 10], their actual connection with their purported past). David Lowenthal's claim that

"[e]very relic displayed in a museum is a fake in that it has been wrenched out of its original context" (17) is true in a rather pristine sense, but one needs to consider once again the question of intentionality. I would stress that the intention that really matters is the forger's melancholic intention to disavow a work's participation in the web of relationships which constitutes it (what Nelson Goodman dubs the "history of production" [122]); to deny its own position as a stemma of the so-called original and negate the essentially dialogic relation of text and context. In so doing – and my initial example from The Brooklyn Follies, Gordon Dryer's forgeries of Alec Smith's paintings, attempts to demonstrate this – the forger deceives not only the public and the critics but himself.

The names in this novel reach further toward the allegorical than in any previous. Alec Smith, the reclusive genius whose intense, expressionistic canvases tremble "with an incandescent roar of emotion" (40) and keep Harry Brightman's Chicago studio solvent, is patently a maker, a creator, someone whose hands and soul find nourishment in the work. Gordon Dryer, whose surname forces us into direct comparisons, embodies the aridity, lack of original productivity and emotional detachment of one whose talents stretch only to usurpation. (In passing, I suggest with some trepidation that Auster's work, at least as reflected in the critical responses to it, sits somewhere between the "Romanticism, with its florid gestures and pseudo-heroic impulses" of Smith's work and the "abstractions" and "cold intellectualism" of Gordon Dryer [43, 42, 43]).

When Smith dies by apparent suicide, Dryer suggests to his now lover Brightman that they "continue to create Smith's work after the artist [is] dead," in other words, produce forgeries of the "final paintings and drawings of the young master" (43). Dryer's efforts are astonishing, and Nathan's description (via Harry via

Tom) of his artistic transformation is rendered in terms highly significant for our argument:

> Dryer had reinvented himself as Smith's double, purging every shred of his own personality in order to slip into the mind and heart of a dead man. It was a remarkable turn of theater, a piece of psychological witchcraft that struck both terror and awe in poor Harry's brain. (44)

It might initially appear that in keeping Smith alive through his work, whilst simultaneously reminding us of his death, Dryer is engaged in the same process of prosopopeia as Auster himself in The Invention of Solitude. But this superficial reading would ignore the privileged knowledge afforded us alone as readers: that is, within Harry and Dryer's milieu, nobody is supposed to know that Smith is dead. Thus, this forgery is a systematic refusal of loss which unlike Auster's project aims not at the (non-pejorative) forging of an artistic voice within a community of voices, but at the stealing of a voice from its context. Auster in no way aspires to a purging of personality, only the consolidation of a voice plurally and communally constructed. In fact, Dryer's apparent jettisoning of his own individuality can be read as incorporation of those required elements of Smith revealed in the characteristics of the work. In short, there is nothing of dialogue, nothing of sympathy in this highly skilled forgery. There is not even the wholly reactive "guiding light of sympathy" which enables The Marble Faun's Hilda to produce her exquisite copies of Renaissance paintings full of "evanescent and ethereal life" through "generous self-surrender" (48, 49, 51). Dryer's work, like Flower and Stone's wall in The Music of Chance, is closer to a Jamesonian notion of postmodern "pastiche," cannibalised and depthless (Cultural Logic 25).

Returning to Martin Buber: it is evident that the central "I" and "Thou" entity in his metaphysics, the configuration of the purely relational "primary word"

(11), also patterns the individual's appreciation (in all senses) of the work of art:

> This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises. (I and Thou 16)

Apprehension of the form stems not from perception, or at least, as Louis Hammer contends, "[s]ense perception is to be understood as rooted in a desire for the reality of the other" (610), nor as a desire to *know* the other. Neither should experience be the motivation, nor indeed any cognitive or objectifying impulse, for this would be to internalise the form and to engage in an act of "reflexion." A work of art may stand over against the 'I', but "though it substantially touches and moves his soul is in no way immanent in it" (Between 27). To attempt to face the form in the totality of its and one's own being carries omnipresent risks, however. At the precise moment of meeting, consciousness and articulation may engage and as a result "lead the form across – into the world of *It*. The work produced is a thing among things, able to be experienced and described as a sum of qualities" (I and Thou 16). As we have seen, the "I" finds itself lured by the ubiquity of language and the desire for interpretation into continual crossings of the threshold between the two primary relations, the dialogic and the objective. So the desired release of affective power is fleeting at best.

Affective and transcendental, the aesthetic moment for Buber (and undoubtedly for Auster, too, though with modifications I shall come to) is commensurate with the meeting of human subjects, and the meeting of the human subject with God. Influenced primarily by Kant's aesthetics in the Critique of Judgement (63-80), it implies the suspension of a Cartesian cognate subject in order to

disarm the calculating scientific faculties which would reduce beauty in art to sets of objective or ideational properties. Dryer's forgery can be nothing other than calculating: despite the evident technical abilities, his success lies not in sympathy with the fullness of the work, but in dissecting its characteristics, "the harsh palette-knife strokes, the dense coloration, and the random, accidental drips" (44). This last element is the most telling, as how can a deliberate reproduction hope to contrive the spontaneity of the accidental? It is a dilemma, of course, repeatedly faced by Auster himself in attempting to represent the effects of the contingent. And paradoxically, in both Dryer and Hilda's cases, it is the initialising obliteration of self which blocks one's capabilities of connection and leads to mere replacement with excised objectified elements of the other. As Buber expresses it in one of his more sententious passages: "Certainly in order to be able to go out to the other you must have the starting place, you must have been, you must be, with yourself" (Between 24). One's individuality is not to be totally denied, even as it should not be regarded as the pre-eminent ontological category.

The two elements of Dryer and Harry's forgeries I have outlined – the wilful melancholic abandonment of the intricately interlinked personal and historical circumstances which constitute a work's context; and the sublation of the aesthetic moment – inevitably overlap. Whether or not we roughly assign them to Heidegger's categories of "thingly" and "workly" ("Origin" 27), we can assume that any aesthetic differences between the original and the forgery are to be found not in the kind of detective-like, microscopic empiricism detailed by Nelson Goodman (99-112) but in that unfathomable, ineffable moment of being with the work which is central to the original's context and is unrepresentable by the forgery. At stake, then, is not authorship as a substantive or hypostasised category, but an author subjectivity

created by the work as the work is created, a reciprocity impossible to reproduce through the forger's close and cynical observation.

Careful readers will have noticed the underlying danger in this argument – that of deeming crucial only some kind of mystical originary moment between artist and work, never to be repeated. To which I would respond first that though it is theoretically possible for subsequent viewers of the artwork to enter into relation *with the forgery*, its melancholic intentionality does in some way subtract from the experience. It does this by cutting the viewer off from a rich and genuine historical context, however hard this is to measure. Secondly, we should consider that the transcendental leanings of Buber's metaphysic necessarily choose not to account for the possibility that a truly dialogic aesthetic may itself be historically contextualised and composed in a web of wider relationships. For Auster, moments of affective splendour such as Tina Hott's performance of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" at Harry's graveside (222) achieve their power precisely by being placed against the backdrop of the "2000 election disaster" (244). When democracy fails, when political dialogue is so manifestly circumscribed, then the need to treasure these fleeting glimpses of real / fake beauty becomes even greater.

When we consider Harry and Dryer's plan to forge the manuscript of The Scarlet Letter, rather different issues arise. An apt place to start is Nelson Goodman's hugely influential and much refuted argument in Languages of Art (1976). According to Goodman, an artwork can be called "autographic" "if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant [. . .] if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine" (113). Painting is Goodman's primary example. Here, and Dryer's work confirms this, the forgery's strictly aesthetic merits are irrelevant. "Allographic" arts are those such as music where any accurately rendered

performance of a faithfully notated score, regardless of stylistic interpretation, counts as genuine. It is Goodman's faith in notation which spectacularly undermines his thesis. Asserting that "[i]nitially, perhaps, all arts are autographic" and "an art seems to be allographic just insofar as it is amenable to notation," Goodman believes that the "transitory" nature of certain art forms, notably drama and music, requires notation "in order to transcend the limitations of time and the individual." This is why "in the case of literature, texts have even supplanted oral performances as the primary aesthetic objects" (121).

Thus Goodman believes that *"sameness of spelling"* (employed here in a broader, metaphorical sense denoting "accuracy of transcription") is all that is required to render faithful a copy of a literary text or indeed a manuscript. Indeed, "nothing is more the original work than is such a correct copy" (115, 16). Not only does this imply the close correlation between "copy" and "forgery" I have already discredited but it also underestimates language's inherent instability. Moreover, to cite but one famous example, the application of this criterion would consign Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd's editions of Emily Dickinson's poetry, with their notorious punctuation changes, to the realm of forgery rather than editorial insensitivity. Moreover, a unique manuscript is surely an example of the "autographic features" all "so-called allographic arts" possess (Margolis 170), which is precisely why it is a highly valued aesthetic object. Harry Brightman is very explicit about these features:

> It's not as if you just sit down with a printed version of *The Scarlet Letter* and copy
> it out by hand. You have to know every one of Hawthorne's private tics, the errors
> he made, his idiosyncratic use of hyphens, his inability to spell certain words
> correctly. *Ceiling* was always *cieling*; *steadfast* was always *stedfast*; *subtle* was

always *subtile.* Whenever Hawthorne wrote *Oh,* the typesetters would change it to

O. (128)

Invoking the typesetters' activity reminds us that although to some extent authorship

and origin are being fetishised in the desire for the manuscript of the canonised and

thus fetishised text, the author is only one part of a complex historical, cultural and

industrial network of creativity and exchange. The vagaries of the printing industry

help evoke Hawthorne's context and add to both the documentary interest and the

aesthetic value of the text. Thus Goodman's distinction between autographic

(painting) and allographic (literature) falls down when we observe that autographic

elements in both instances are themselves relational and not simply evidence of

"patriarchal anxiety about legitimacy of descent and the inheritance of property"

(Ruthven 40). It is this fact which overcomes "the limitations of time and the

individual."

As Nathan predicts, Harry is "walking into a trap" (129). There is no

Hawthorne forgery, only Dryer and his latest partner Myron Trumbell's scheme to

wreak revenge on Harry for implicating Dryer in the Smith forgeries years before

(46). What has been perpetrated, then, is "an elaborate hoax within a hoax" (210).

In terms of plot, Dryer's romantic and economic betrayal of Harry leads directly to

Harry's death by what can only be assumed to be a broken heart (208). Meta-

narratively, if we agree with K. K. Ruthven that metafiction "revels in its own

fictiveness" (51) and draws attention to its fakery, the hoax-within-a-hoax playfully

mimics the author's own fictive practices in earlier, heavily sedimented works such as

Oracle Night. A nice joke, we might think, but the ramifications are far-reaching and

serious. Through the portrayal of death by multi-layered narrative within a largely

anecdotal structure, is Auster advocating a return to a broadly mimetic "realist"

approach which may in fact prove to be a greater imposture? Is the credulous reader walking into the same trap?

One response might be – only if one loses sight of how Auster's reality is textured. I have established in previous chapters that Auster considers himself a realist, and that to reflect reality is to allow for the aleatorical and the fantastic. What is more, to the extent that the fabric of collective reality is narrative exchanges and an objective superordinate narrative is unavailable, the veracious or the genuine arise only through the sincerest possible attention to the interposed narratives of others, with due respect for the potentially infinite overlapping contexts each interlocutor brings. With their multiple narratives, the Chinese doll construction of Oracle Night and the anecdotal form of The Brooklyn Follies might be seen as two sides of the same coin, then, with one crucial difference. The former aspires to the lost hypotactic, miming the futile search for authority and pure reality through the regressive mining of layers. In contrast, the latter proceeds from the start along the horizontal, the paratactic, working more affirmatively on the assumption that authority, always suspect, has departed and new paradigms are required.

Nathan muses that "there is no escape from the wretchedness that stalks the earth" (189) but The Brooklyn Follies at least demonstrates that our primary coping strategy is the continuation of storytelling. It is no coincidence that the novel ends on the morning of 11 September 2001, when "the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies" drifts across Brooklyn (304) and human strength in adversity is under its greatest pressure. As Auster has made clear in interview, a "family tragedy" of that magnitude and essential unreality cannot be conceived of at all without amassing stories:

> the accumulation of all those stories becomes, in some way, the reality of the experience for us, because it wasn't private, it was a communal event and we have to

talk to each other and hear what each of us has gone through in order to get some

sense of the totality of the experience ("Fresh Air")

This in no way resembles, say, Baudrillard's terminal stage in which simulacra

become completely untethered from reality. Although to use language always runs

the risk of betrayal, it also necessitates Emersonian vehicularity, travelling between

persons. There is nothing of "postmodernist exhaustion" (Neagu 157) in Auster's

writing; rather it hankers after urgent communal participation in a shared sense of the

experience of the material world. And whether or not his work is in "the realistic

mode," I agree with Adriana Neagu in positioning Auster (and certainly this novel)

within what she dubs "the post-postmodern dominant [. . .] the revigorating [sic] of

humanist concerns through a re-evaluation of the ethics of writing and reading" (150).

Alan Bilton's claim that "[i]t's hard to think of any other contemporary writer who

sees so much at stake in the very act of writing" (83) is certainly an overstatement.

Yet what is at stake here is no less than the *saving* of a sense of reality fragmented by

inconceivable violence.

The lesson Nathan Glass, Harry Brightman and Tom Wood all have to learn is

that stories, pieces of art and indeed lives are forgeries when they attempt a

melancholic escape from the vicissitudes of reality into decontextualised imaginative

realms constructed around a pre-eminent self. Like David Minor's solipsistic

religious fanaticism, the Hotel Existence is "built on a foundation of 'just talk' [. . .]

It's still just hot air and hopeless fantasy, an idea as fake as Harry's Hawthorne

manuscript" (180-81). Imagination employed inwardly, rather than outwards toward

the meeting of others, results in the enactment at a personal level of precisely the

same Edenic eternal present we have seen exercised on American mythology in

previous chapters. Idyllic though the Chowder Inn episode appears to be (166-200),

and despite the brutality of the interruption of Harry's death, the "Dream Days"

chapter's narration fully in the present tense betrays the characters' desire to arrest history. A similar effect is achieved by the sudden use of play script for the chapter when the idea of the Hotel is first discussed (98-108). Formally and emotionally these scenes are as isolated as the Blithedale-like retreat Nathan and Tom briefly enjoy in Vermont. As a further example, Nancy Mazzucchelli, the subject of Tom's ridiculous crush, is initially described by Nathan as "a sublime incarnation of the angelic and the beautiful" with "an unselfconscious abandon that allowed her to live fully in the moment, in an ever-present, ever-expanding now" (83). Clearly her present-ness is fetishised in tandem with her attractiveness. This is before the men get to know her, at which point she loses this symbolic significance and becomes a socially and historically constituted being, complete with a past and marital difficulties (240).

The most resonant example occurs on the way to Vermont when Tom tells Nathan a story about Franz Kafka. In the final year of his life, resettled in Berlin, he comes across a young girl during his daily afternoon stroll in the park. The young girl, "sobbing her heart out [. . .] tells him that she's lost her doll." Kafka immediately improvises a story about the doll: she has gone on a trip and has written him a letter to explain. Promising to bring the letter the following day, Kafka returns home and with "the same seriousness and tension he displays when composing his own work" begins to compose the letter (153-54). Constructing an elaborate fairy story involving the doll's education and ending in her marriage, Kafka continues the letter-writing for three weeks until "the letters have cured [the little girl] of her unhappiness" (155). Tom's interpretation is revealing:

> "She has the story, and when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear. For as long as the story goes on, reality no longer exists." (155)

Perhaps influenced too heavily by his undergraduate thesis on Poe and Thoreau, "Imaginary Edens: The Life of the Mind in Pre-Civil War America" (14), Tom fails to perceive that the altruistic deployment of Kafka's imagination does not provide escape for the little girl, but a means of continuing to live within the real world. Kafka's is a necessary fiction, or in Auster's words the deployment of a "lie in order to tell the truth" (Tim Lewis 128). It is a forgery which attains truth through its understanding of the recipient's context and its efforts to relate, and it provides further evidence of Auster's continued interest in the ethics of writing.

Nathan arrives at an acceptance of a similar truth as he lies in hospital. Whereas his previous job in life insurance reduced biography to detective work and financial recuperation (exemplified by his ironically named former colleague Henry Peoples, who demonstrates "all the warmth and personality of an extinguished lamppost" [246]), his latest project reconfigures biography as "a question of love" (302). We know from The Invention of Solitude that the project is empirically dubious, in that the belief in one's capacity "to rescue the stories and facts [. . .] and shape them into a continuous narrative" implies a faith in objectivity masking an act of subjective representation (301). In fact, this is precisely what Nathan has done in this novel – taken the "random jottings" of his collection of follies (6) and produced a concatenated version. But there is little doubt that the ethical motivations behind the publication of "books about the forgotten ones" (301) are to be endorsed. In the sense of sticking to the facts and "resurrect[ing] that person in words" (302), these biographies will prove to be only creative forgeries. However, in realising that beauty, art and significance reside in "the ordinary, the unsung, the workaday," Nathan's biographies participate in meaningful relations. They reconcile individuals to loss (mourning, not melancholia) whilst retaining a sense of interlocking contexts

in even "the smattering of impressions made on other people" (300-1) that they capture. Nathan stands to make little money from the books; likewise they are less a celebration of individual success or authenticity than a contribution to a sense of community. Unlike Harry and Dryer's forgeries, then, these biographies can be called true forgeries.

In terms of Auster's prose works, then, we have almost come full circle – back to the question of mourning. Reference has been made throughout this section to Rufus, alias Tina Hott, and his lip-synching performance by Harry's graveside. It is the key scene in Brooklyn Follies, not least because it provides Nathan's most intelligent and sensitive pronouncements. It is also an appropriate place to finish, as it shows a satisfaction with the figurative and artistic substitutions of mourning quite different from, yet an extension of, the intense soul-searching of The Invention of Solitude. Rufus / Tina embodies the otherness in all of us and whilst there is an absurdity to his "incarnation of absolute femininity," his "perfect representation of grieving widowhood" in "full widow's regalia," the emotion and the genuine making good of a loss are encapsulated in the sham act (221-22). It is, in fact, the very essence of mourning: the re-assertion of life-as-story, individuality asserted only in harmony with alterity both dead and alive. Like Sophie Calle and Philippe Petit, and like the imaginary sweet shop which supplies real sweets to the neighbourhood kids in Blue in the Face (3F 172, 216), Tina's cabaret is not as Nathan says a "transcendent" moment in the sense of rising above reality (223), but a celebration of the fact that reality can be fabulous. Such "vital energy" has been invested in the performance (3F 216) that what transpires is not the obliteration of an underlying reality by layers of representation but rather, and this is a fine but crucial distinction, the co-opting of representation by a vibrant and ever-expanding life which refuses to be cowed.

Similarly, Auggie Wren's declaration at the start of <u>Blue in the Face</u>, "I doubt that any of it makes sense any more but this is how I remember it" suggests that what is to follow will be an entirely fictional narrative, yet the segments of High-8 footage featuring the citizens of Brooklyn constitute an invasion of the fictional universe by a performative real. So rather than Lyotard's postmodern form as immanent critique of a dominant realist culture ("An Answer" 1-16), in both texts we have a presentation of the real as Auster sees it – mediated, for sure, but enriched by the plethora of voices contributing to it. Above all, and this is worth stating explicitly, it is a real which *does exist* whether or not it can be captured accurately in a book and whether or not one might have difficulty distinguishing it from a forgery.

In conclusion, perhaps we should ask whether the novel itself is a fake. That <u>The Brooklyn Follies</u> is in many ways one of Auster's least satisfying texts is undeniable. The stretching of credulity expertly practised in <u>In the Country of Last Things</u> and <u>Moon Palace</u> can at times here, where it seems less consistent with the down-home setting, cut off our emotional involvement and seem simply gratuitous. In addition, mythical American ideas such as rebirth, which I have been examining throughout this thesis, gain an easy acceptance in stark contrast to their complex dialectical treatment in works such as <u>The Book of Illusions</u> and the early poems. Here, one's ability to transform oneself is simply axiomatic. Gordon Dryer, as we have seen, is able to reinvent himself "as Smith's double" (44). Aurora effects a change from pornographic actress to prim housewife and Tom immediately accepts that "it was a different Aurora who sat in front of him now" (74). "No one," we are informed, "would ever be certain of Harry's origins" (39). Even the facility implied in Nathan's statement that "[a]ll men contain several men inside them, and most of us bounce from one self to another without ever knowing who we are" (122-23) seems at

odds with the deeper interrogations of identity and authority this thesis has been concerned with.

Clearly, one could argue that the author is further emphasising that thinking in terms of originals is a disreputable impulse, and that selves are always in performance. But the unquestioning acceptance of the possibility of rebirth may signal a deeper need. That is, an American writer's need, post 9/11, optimistically to reaffirm certain mythic, foundational ideas for therapeutic reasons. If it feels like a fake, it may be that the critical approaches one has come to accept in relation to Auster's work are inappropriate here. Instead, the author demands that we employ the same *faith* in American ideals as him. Indeed, after such a traumatic and irrational event, faith in humanity and community is all that anyone can have. The difficulty is that, unlike Martin Buber's expressions of faith in dialogue which, "through grace," aspire to "the dreadful point – to love *all men*" (I and Thou 17, 21), Auster reverts to faith in nationalistic ideals which as we have seen are anything but inclusive.

Conclusion: Paul Auster and Democracy

O Mr. Bush you scare me so
From the top of your head to your little toe
You prowl the halls of Texas death row
Only the rich are in the know

The fat men are in charge
The thin men take the barge
To hell, to hell, to hell

Paul Auster's "King George Blues" was written as a Kurt Weill-style "agitprop song from the Thirties" ("Bush Blues" 2) a revolutionary number designed, as the name of the website where it appeared (<www.topplebush.com>) makes patently obvious, to excite anti-administration feelings prior to the presidential election. Whatever its artistic merits, and despite our knowledge that it was ultimately unsuccessful, it represents some of the first overtly political statements Auster has made in public. Indeed, throughout the war in Iraq and during the run-up to the elections, barely an interview passed without reference to the author's hatred for and disappointment in George W. Bush. "Bush is not the president of the United States," he declared in a 2004 Observer interview: "He's an illegitimate leader. . . I think the 2000 election is going to go down in memory as one of the greatest judicial mistakes ever made by the [Supreme] Court" (McCrum 25-26). His appearance at an anti-Bush fundraiser with several acclaimed writers, including Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen and Salman Rushdie, was taken as proof by one journalist that we were witnessing "a new incarnation: intellectual 'engagé'" ("Bush Blues" 4).

This increased avidity for the political fight does not at first glance, however, appear to have crossed over into his novels or poetry. Indeed, Auster has stated:

> politics and art don't mix [. . .] the kind of writing I wanted to do was not involved
> in this kind of discourse, and it was a very troubling issue for me and I think I spent
> most of my college days trying to reconcile what we might call a social conscience
> with the impulse to make art (South Bank)

Any sloganeering has thus been reserved for interviews, lectures, websites and the

occasional essay such as "Appeal to the Governor of Pennsylvania" (CP 495-96). Even if Brooklyn Follies is to some extent an anti-American Dream text set against the background of the presidential election, it shares with its predecessors a polite refusal to allow humanistic speculations to become too saturated with what most people would understand as politics.

Nevertheless, as any early twenty-first century reader must know, *everything* is politicised. The postmodernism towards which I have shown suspicion throughout this thesis has at least, particularly in nuanced accounts such as Simon Malpas' and Fredric Jameson's, made this irrefutable. Primarily, I have repeatedly emphasised that Auster's ethics of writing, which I have explored chiefly by means of Freudian psychoanalytical concepts and dialogic philosophy, is in fact profoundly political. Freud's world of unconscious drives and symbolism, derived in part from ancient cultural rituals, does not immediately appear conducive to political readings (although Ronald S. Thomas' Dreams of Authority makes an excellent attempt at one) and of course has its many detractors. William Watkin, for example, dubs Freud's work "patriarchal, Eurocentric, ill-informed, colonial and simplistic" (98) – a severe but not entirely unreasonable assessment. Yet at the heart of the Freudian therapeutic experience there lie ideas – storytelling, transference of narrative and interpretation, the reconciliation of the individual to loss and otherness – which Auster takes up in The Invention of Solitude and subsequent prose works, and shapes into the foundations of a vision of democracy. Likewise, Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy, though inflected with Hasidic mysticism and less preoccupied with the role of art in human relations than Auster's work, ultimately aspires to a vision of an individual in profound and equal relation with others. In short, democracy.

All of which compels the reader towards one obvious conclusion: that Auster's

pluralistic and ambiguous vision of democracy, informed as I have demonstrated by

his secularised Jewish cultural heritage, is radically at odds with the current

Republican administration's bullish, solipsistic and profoundly exclusive version.

Jonathan Raban's article, "Pastor Bush," whilst heavily caricatured, offers a

compelling series of arguments for reading the violent dispensation of Bush-style

democracy as a contemporary Puritan project. Simon Malpas, more succinctly, notes

the return to "grand narrative politics" (41) in contemporary international relations.

Both are views Auster would surely endorse, (even if some of his novels, notably Mr

Vertigo, revel in the seductiveness of iconic American narratives); his preoccupation

with the democratic sharing of everyday stories is one aspect of the drive to

counteract such narratives from within.

But Auster is still an American writer, and proud of it. One need only look at

Peter Aaron's comments on the Statue of Liberty in Leviathan to see this:

> It represents hope rather than reality, faith rather than facts, and one would be hard-
> pressed to find a single person willing to denounce the things it stands for: demo-
> cracy, freedom, equality under the law. It is the best of what America has to offer the
> world, and however pained one might be by America's failure to live up to those
> ideals, the ideals themselves are not in question. (216)

As the normalising tone of this quotation suggests, and my reading of The Brooklyn

Follies confirms, one can detect an ongoing tension in Auster's work between the

questioning mind which seeks to derail all epistemological certainties and the patriot

who, in the face of a tragedy like 9/11, strives to reaffirm the very same mythological,

faith-based constructs adopted by the Bush administration in the worldwide

promulgation of ideals of Americanness. The looseness of the prose and the

spectacular shifts in plotting in Brooklyn Follies reflect an easy acceptance of a rather

clichéd brand of democratic freedom – the freedom simply to be whoever one wants

to be and to change one's identity at will. Thus the crisis of confidence engendered by New York's catastrophe results, ironically, in a bid for certainties couched in the notoriously uncertain language of the confidence man.

There is much more to be said about this, I suspect, and it will be fascinating to see whether Auster's next prose work, entitled Travels in the Scriptorium, picks up on the paratactic style and optimistic tone of Brooklyn Follies, returns to the deliberate narrative frustrations of Oracle Night or attempts something entirely new. With regard to future Auster scholarship, I would like to conclude with a few questions and remarks which might inspire critics to take things in new directions.

First, what are the reasons for Auster's current voguishness? (That word is justified, I think: after all, this is a writer who appeared in the December 2005 issue of Esquire magazine.) Is he marketable precisely *because* he conforms to an acceptable, representative bourgeois portrait of a metropolitan, Democrat writer who likes to embrace iconic images of the U.S.A. and has cool friends such as Lou Reed and Jim Jarmusch? Unquestionably, the success of Smoke and Blue in the Face, both of which offer reassuring images of what audiences would love New York to be like, are a contributing factor. As Jeremy, Jay McInerney's gloriously solipsistic writer in Model Behaviour, opines: "'fucking Auster had to write a movie before anyone got down on their knees'" (80). Much work on Auster's cinematic efforts (Carsten Springer's, for instance) has tended to deploy the language of literary criticism without exploring the ways in which visual language enables Auster to present his ethical themes differently, and perhaps more accessibly. My avoidance of detailed filmic analysis comes from my own lack of proficiency in the language of film studies. Though there are of course rewards in exploring the necessity of linguistic or literary responses to the visual (The Book of Illusions is partly about this), there is surely room for a dedicated

study of the films themselves. To complicate matters further, Auster has recently started work on directing The Inner Life of Martin Frost, a film which is imagined in detail in The Book of Illusions.

Finally, to return to the question of authority I began with. The Brooklyn Follies is virtually unique amongst Auster's prose works in eschewing authorial instability. The reader is free to immerse himself in the consciousness of Nathan Glass and does not need to worry about the sudden appearance of an "Auster" or an "Omster" or a "Trause." It is too early to locate a trend away from such instability but arguably, and I hope the thesis has made the case for this, Auster is at his most compelling when he chooses to practice authorial destabilisation. One wonders whether the parallel career in film making, and the inevitable magnification of celebrity which attends it, make the practice more difficult. Auster's pronouncements on the differences between the two media are highly ambiguous:

> As a writer you have complete control of everything that happens. As a filmmaker you're at the mercy of the talents of other people. It can be very absorbing to collaborate but also very frustrating. (Interview with Bill Goldstein)

I have argued that as a writer in a tradition, acutely aware of history, influence and the communal nature of stories, Auster has always in a sense been committed to collaboration. To cease to view himself in this way would be to forego that which, party political beliefs and abstractions aside, makes him a most democratic artist.

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