In Search of Self:
Explorations of Identity in the Work of Paul Auster

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Andrew Edward van der Vlies
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ABSTRACT

Paul Auster is regarded by some as an important novelist. He has, in a relatively short space of time, produced an intriguing body of work, which has attracted comparatively little critical attention. This study is based on the premise that Auster's art is the record of an entertaining, intelligent and utterly serious engagement with the possibilities of conceiving of the identity of an individual subject in the contemporary, late-twentieth century moment. This study, focussing on Auster's novels, but also considering selected poetry and critical prose, explores the representation of identity in his work.

The short Foreword introduces Paul Auster and sketches in outline the concerns of the study. Chapter One explores the manner in which Auster's early (anti-)'detective' fiction develops a concern with identity. It is suggested that Squeeze Play, Auster's pseudonymous 'hard-boiled' detective thriller, provided the author with a testing ground for his subsequent appropriation and subversion of the detective genre in The New York Trilogy. Through a close consideration of City of Glass, and an examination of elements in Ghosts, it is shown how the loss of the traditional detective's immunity, and the problematising of strategies which had previously guaranteed him access to interpretive and narrative closure, precipitates a collapse which initiates an interrogation of the nature and construction of ideas about individual identity.

Chapter Two develops a suggestion that City of Glass was written in response to particular emotional concerns of the author by turning to an examination of the memoir-novel, The Invention of Solitude. This chapter examines the extent to which Auster's Jewishness is implicated in his understanding of identity, and in the techniques with which he expresses his concerns. It is argued that Auster's engagement with texts and memories important to him in order to find a voice adequate to the task which he assumes in The Invention of Solitude, reveals the ethical imperative of recognizing and accepting a relationship to alterity. The influence on Auster of certain Jewish writers, like Edmond Jabès, is considered in the course of the chapter.

The third chapter addresses the issue of the description of Auster's work as postmodernist, in the light of what the study has presented as Auster's ethical engagement with alterity. Critical responses to Auster's texts are canvassed, before it is suggested that aspects of

the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas may be useful in considering these important issues in Auster's oeuvre.

Chapter Four returns to a consideration of The New York Trilogy, examining its final part, The Locked Room, before discussing In the Country of Last Things and Moon Palace. All three novels are narrated by first-person narrators who, in very different situations, come (consciously and unconsciously) to negotiate their own identities in relation either to other people or to adverse circumstances. The chapter thus considers the manner in which these texts figure Auster's concern with relationships between individuals and otherness.

Chapter Five seeks, as a means of concluding the study, to consider aspects of Auster's presentation of the manner in which identity is connected to perception, and to an engagement with that which is other than the self. This chapter focuses on Auster's figuration of necessary responses to the otherness of the objective world and to chance as a radical alterity. Beginning with a consideration of an early essay, the chapter explores relevant aspects of Moon Palace, The Music of Chance, Leviathan and Mr Vertigo, considers elements in Auster's poetry, and demonstrates the usefulness of exploring the influence on his work of the 'objectivist' poets and aspects of Dada and Surrealist poetics. The seemingly punitive severity of the fates of some of Auster's protagonists is shown ultimately to be positive, and (potentially) redemptive, reflecting Auster's profoundly ethical conception of the responsibilities and possibilities of selfhood.

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS, EDITIONS USED

During the course of this study, several abbreviations will be introduced in the text. In addition to these, the following abbreviations are used to indicate the titles of texts by Paul Auster.

CG	City of Glass
CLT	In the Country of Last Things
G	Ghosts
GW	Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979
HM	Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure
IS	The Invention of Solitude
Lev	Leviathan
LR	The Locked Room
MC	The Music of Chance
MP	Moon Palace
MrV	Mr Vertigo

I have used the editions of Auster's texts published by Faber and Faber as these are the most readily available in South Africa. Ground Work and The Red Notebook reprint all of the interviews, and most of the prefaces and essays included in The Art of Hunger, published in the United States by Penguin; those not included in the former volumes are cited from this American edition. I have retained the spelling of the editions from which I quote, whether British or American. I cite the titles of Auster's essays, and specify the sources in the list of works cited; I have not included individual poems in this list, however, and I cite the relevant page numbers in Ground Work using the abbreviation specified above.

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FOREWORD
Auster's Identity

> All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is one of those fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based.
> (Milan Kundera, The Art of the Novel 23)

> What, then, is [Auster's] purpose?....The answer...is held in the poses that [he] has struck for us. The figures he has cut....The only disservice we do him is when we fail to take his figures seriously. He is speaking to us, in his awkward way. Let us at least listen.
> (Curtis White, "The Auster-Instance: A Ficto-Biography" 26)

Identity is a difficult concept to define in an age in which the dominant intellectual discourses no longer admit of vague references to will, reason, soul, or the idea of a general, essential human nature. Our sense of a 'self', of an inwardness which constitutes a sense of identity, is generally accepted to be a function of cultural, linguistic and historical processes. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has, in Sources of the Self, charted the development of the Western sense of the private self from Plato to the present. He makes it clear that the modern notion of selfhood is "a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West...but which had a beginning in time and space and may have an end" (111). Elsewhere Taylor writes that "an individual is constituted by the language and culture which can only be maintained and renewed in the communities he [or she] is part of" (Human Agency and Language 8).

In A.S.Byatt's prize-winning novel, Possession, Roland, a literary scholar, is described as having been "trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion", to regard his sense of self as formed by a network of "various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones" (424). In the same novel, another character wonders if her "unstable self" is simply a "matrix for a susurration of texts and codes" (Byatt 251). She finds this "both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist" (ibid.). Whilst not claiming that structuralist or poststructuralist theory denies the physicality of the human person, Byatt's

tongue-in-cheek descriptions of characters pondering the implications for their identity of these influential modes of criticism, evokes their poverty, even absurdity, in the face of actual experience.

Paul Auster's work demonstrates a constant awareness of the complexity of any exploration of subjectivity. While his oeuvre accepts that the status of identity is conditioned by manifold systems of signification and differentiation, Auster nonetheless seeks an accommodation with these conditions for a desire to affirm the dignity of the individual. The tenor of his comments on the Dadaist Hugo Ball is relevant to an understanding of his project. Claiming that Dada is the one movement of the early avant-garde whose project remains valid and instructive ("Dada Bones" 129) – "the energy of Dada can never be used up: it is an idea whose time is always the present" (134) – Auster significantly calls Ball's work a "simultaneous expression of despair and hope" (132), an attempt to reassert "individual dignity in a mechanical age of standardization" (ibid.). Auster's own work addresses similar concerns in the conditions which obtain at the end of the century. The nine novels which he has published to date can be read as examining the extent to which it is possible to conceive of the identity of an individual subject in the contemporary, late twentieth-century moment, and as interrogating the conditions, requirements, and ethical demands involved in such an endeavour.

Many of Auster's protagonists are engaged in activities of writing, attempts at inscribing their own lives. Asked in an interview about the presence of manuscripts in many of his novels, Auster responded that it is the nature of "[t]he private act of writing as something necessary" which interests him ("The Manuscript in the Book: A Conversation" [hereafter "Manuscript/Book"] 185). Auster agreed with the interviewer's suggestion that what is important for the activity of writing represented in the novels is that it offer "a testimony of the life" (ibid.).

In Moon Palace, which is itself presented as a written account by the older narrator of his early manhood, the young Marco Fogg is said to have tried to write a series of essays. Of all the writers he has read, Marco finds that

> Montaigne was the greatest inspiration....Like him, I tried to use my own experiences as the scaffolding for what I wrote, and even when the material pushed me into rather far-

> flung and abstract territory, I did not feel that I was saying anything definitive on these subjects so much as writing a subterranean version of my own life story. (MP 233)

Charles Taylor comments that when Montaigne set out to record his reflections, he shared the traditional view that these would reveal a universal human nature, stable and unchanging, existing as an essence or core within every person. But what he discovered, Taylor suggests, was a "terrifying inner instability", a radical mutability (Sources of the Self 178). Montaigne thus set out to describe what he could of his own experience, following "the contours of the changing reality of one being, himself" (ibid. 179). In so doing, he inaugurated "a new kind of reflection...the aim of which is to reach self-knowledge by coming to see through the screens of self-delusion which passion or spiritual pride have erected" (ibid. 181). And he discovered that "[t]he self is both made and explored with words" (ibid. 183).

Auster claims to have been heavily influenced as a young writer by Montaigne's essays ("Interview with Joseph Mallia" [hereafter "Interview JM"] 105). Auster's work explores repeatedly the difficulties of coming to terms with the changing realities of the self, and with the mutable and mysterious world in relation to which the self must constantly position itself. Much in Auster's fiction, like Marco's writing, can be seen as "a subterranean version of [his] own life story" (MP 233), but this does not amount to the writing of autobiography; rather, it demonstrates a commitment to the project of investigating subjectivity. Auster's novels together constitute, he claims, the "saga of the things that haunt [him]" ("Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory" [hereafter "Interview LM&SG"] 123); all "seem to revolve around the same set of questions, the same human dilemmas"; they are all to a certain extent, "the same book" (ibid.). This does not, however, render them homogeneous or predictable: "[p]rose", declares Auster, offering a Bakhtinian perspective on the expressive possibilities of novelistic form, "gives me a chance to articulate my conflicts and contradictions...[my] multiple being" (ibid. 133). Auster sees his writing as reflecting and in some way constituting his identity: "[i]f all these books were put together in one volume, they would form the book of my life so far, a multi-faceted picture of who I am" (ibid. 126). This notion recurs in the fiction.

Auster's art is the record of an engagement with the meaning of being human: his fiction may be entertaining, but the ideas behind it are serious. He writes out of that sense of

"necessity" which he believes creates all great works ("Interview JM" 112-13), and, in an essay on Louis Wolfson's Le Schizo et les Langues, affirms Georges Bataille's vision of literature as a "disruptive force...capable of revealing to us the truth of life and its excessive possibilities" ("New York Babel" 119). What Auster has to say in his fiction is as serious as these evocations of compulsion and necessity suggest. The reader is invited to apprehend the excessive possibilities of life and to engage in a consideration of what it is to be a human being.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1947, Auster attended Columbia University in New York. After graduating with an MA degree, he shipped off to the Gulf of Mexico as a seaman on a tanker, and later lived a hand-to-mouth existence in France for four years, where he acted as a caretaker in Provence, and a telephonist, ghost-writer and translator in Paris. Returning to New York in 1974, he married Lydia Davis, and a son, Daniel, was born. He published only poetry, reviews and essays during the 1970s, and earned a meagre living from translation work. Auster's first marriage crumbled soon after the death of his father in January 1979, and a small inheritance supported him while he wrote The Invention of Solitude. Auster met and married Siri Hustvedt in 1981, and they have a daughter, Sophie.[1]

In the relatively short period since the early 1980s, Auster has produced several notable novels: The Invention of Solitude (1982),[2] City of Glass (1985), Ghosts and The Locked Room (1986), In the Country of Last Things (1987), Moon Palace (1989), The Music of Chance (1990), Leviathan (1992), and Mr Vertigo (1994). City of Glass, Ghosts and The Locked Room are referred to collectively as The New York Trilogy, and were published together as such for the first time in 1987. Auster wrote the screenplay for the film Smoke, directed by Wayne Wang and wrote and co-directed with Wang a sequel, Blue in the Face. He has recently written and directed the film Lulu on the Bridge.

In an interview conducted in December 1994, Auster stated that he was writing another

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[1] Biographical information is gleaned from the interviews cited in this study; Auster's account of his early years as a writer, Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure; autobiographical elements in The Invention of Solitude and The Locked Room corroborated in the interviews and in Hand to Mouth; and Dennis Barone's "Introduction" to Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster.

[2] The Invention of Solitude is considered in this study to be a novel, or a memoir-novel, rather than an autobiography.

novel, with Dream Days at the Hotel Existence as its working title: "I'm sure it won't be finished for several years. I think it will be a fairly long book" ("Manuscript/Book" 186). During early 1997, Amazon.com, the popular and comprehensive internet 'virtual' bookstore, listed a novel entitled Dream Days in the Hotel Existence, by Paul Auster, as due for release in November 1997. The publication date was subsequently postponed to 1 February 1998 during the course of the year, but the listing was removed before that date. A recently posted internet 'biography' of Auster indicates that he moved from Viking Penguin to Henry Holt in late 1996, signing a three book deal with his new publishers. The first of these was the memoir, Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure; the "remaining two books to be published by Holt will be novels, already in progress, titled Dream Days at the Hotel Existence and Timbuktu".[3]

There has been relatively little critical consideration of Auster's work. Of the few critics who have written about it, some regard Auster as "one of the two or three major American authors of the post-1970s era" (Barone, "Introduction" 3). A leading private collection of manuscripts, the Berg Collection, housed in the New York Public Library, recently bought all of Auster's manuscripts; as this collection also contains manuscripts by Dickens, Melville, Twain, Nabokov, and Jack Kerouac, amongst others, Auster regards the purchase as amounting to a "gamble" that his work "will last" ("Manuscript/Book" 165).

The only conference to have been held on Auster's work to date was held in France, attracting predominantly Francophone critics. It is away from the United States that Auster appears to enjoy his greatest reputation. An American delegate at the conference, William Marling, commented that "[f]ew contemporary writers have been so successful abroad and so suspect at home" as Auster (301). Gerald Howard, who worked at Viking Penguin on the publication of In the Country of Last Things, and arranged for the republication of The New York Trilogy, notes that while Auster's American reputation is based on "a steadily increasing readership and volume of word of mouth", it is "[a]broad" that he "has in certain countries emerged as a figure of major importance, particularly in France...England, Germany, and now

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[3] This virtual biography could, at the time of revision (December 1998) be found at http://members.aol.com/knkreutzer/auster/autbiog.htm (part 1; parts 2 to 4 at the same url with suffixes -/austbio2.htm, -/austbio3, and -/austbio4.htm in place of austbiog.htm).

Japan" (95). His work has been widely translated,[4] and is increasingly being included in undergraduate literature curricula.

While there are several journal articles on Auster's novels, almost all deal only with one or more of the novels of The New York Trilogy. Only three collections of critical essays have appeared to date,[5] and few of the contributions to these anthologies concern more than one novel. One freestanding monograph on Auster's work has been published, but it adds little to the journal articles' analyses.[6] The secondary literature "comes to surprisingly little for an author with so impassioned a following in both North America and Europe" (Merivale 186).

Auster's "intense literariness" demonstrates a "sophisticated absorption of the continental literary tradition" (Howard 95); yet his work also betrays particularly American obsessions – considerations of personal freedom and new beginnings, enterprise and discovery – and engages with the literature of the American 'Renaissance'. He is, in the words of Dennis Barone, editor of two of the three recent collections of essays on Auster's work, "frequently...compared to authors ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Alain Robbe-Grillet" ("Introduction" 1).

One critic of contemporary American literature regards Auster's novels as sharing Saul Bellow's representations of characters who "go in search of a modicum of security" (Versluys 9);[7] this connection struck me forcibly when I first read The Invention of Solitude. The scenario of a man alone in an enclosed physical and mental space, attempting through a process of

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[4] Translations of his novels, poetry and essays, have been published in Bulgarian, Catalan, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Hebrew, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese (in Portugal and Brazil), Romanian, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish (Drenttel 195-98).

[5] Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster, essays in The Review of Contemporary Fiction 14.1 (1995) – both edited by Dennis Barone – and L'Oeuvre de Paul Auster: approches et lectures plurielles (edited by Annick Duperray), the published proceedings of a conference on Auster's work held at the University of Provence.

[6] Anne M. Holzapfel's The New York Trilogy: Whodunit? Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Novels became accessible to me very late in the course of researching this study. It adds very little, however, to the extant criticism, offering a severely programmatic analysis of the anti-detective elements in Auster's Trilogy, drawing on many of the sources which I consulted in researching chapter one. It became known in late 1998 that a doctoral dissertation by Carl-Carsten Springer on the 'crisis of identity' in Auster's work is nearing completion and may be published in 1999 (see http:www.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/springer/welcome.htm).

[7] Malcolm Bradbury also notices a re-evaluation of themes of Jewish-American fiction like Bellow's in work by Auster, amongst others, in his essay, "Writing Fiction in the 90s" (21).

intense self-examination, and a real or imagined process of self-inscription, to make sense of his own existence in the face of immense threats to his project, is shared with Bellow's Dangling Man (1944) and Herzog (1964). Bellow's conception of the novel as a mode of enquiry into the possibilities for human subjectivity, as "a sort of latter-day lean-to, a hovel in which the spirit takes shelter" ("Nobel Lecture" 97), offers a more affirmative - perhaps desperate - attempt to maintain a moral humanist programme in the face of modern chaos, than is possible for Auster.

In Bellow's first novel, Dangling Man, the first-person narrator, Joseph, recalls Spinoza's emphasis on the preservation of "the self that we must govern....It is our humanity that we are responsible for [the self], our dignity, our freedom" (139). Herzog's eponymous protagonist seeks to cast out death-bearing modern philosophies, rejecting the notion of identity as something simply constructed by signifying practices and networks of chemical reactions. For Moses Herzog, the "necessary premise is that a man is somehow more than his 'characteristics'", more than "a cloud of particles, mere facticity" (273); "human life is subtler than any of its models" (279).

The provisional endings of Bellow's novels reflect a (reluctant) critique of the possibility of success of such ambitious programmes. The endings of Auster's novels share this provisionality; his protagonists learn that they cannot resist the collapse of traditional humanist conceptions of the self, and that they must struggle to examine and accept the conditions under which it is possible to 'be'.

This study seeks to explore the nature of the notion of identity which emerges from a reading of Auster's work. The most complete presentation of Auster's conception of the difficulties of modern subjectivity, and of the responsibilities which a search for the 'self' demands, is to be found in his novels, and it is on these that this study focuses. Inevitably, given the constraints of space, the imperative of avoiding repetition, and a desire to deal with individual texts to an extent proportional to their contribution (in my view) to Auster's conception of subjectivity, more attention is devoted to some than to other novels. I deal extensively with The Invention of Solitude and The Locked Room, for example, but only briefly with Mr Vertigo.

In a review of recent Auster criticism, one critic suggests that the issue of the "trajectory" of Auster's novels "can't be overlooked much longer"; this would "involve mapping his chiasmically changing relationship to Europe on the one hand and to the 'American grain' on the other": from earlier "postmodern" works "turning to some form of contemporary 'realism', whether 'magical'...or not, in his later works" (Merivale 196). While I would have liked to tackle this issue, it does not fall within the scope of the present study. I believe – and I hope that this will emerge from the chapters which follow – that despite a clearly discernable shift in Auster's work from the more overtly 'postmodernist' Trilogy, to what might be described as elements of 'magical realism' in Leviathan and (especially) Mr Vertigo, Auster's search for, and presentation of the possibilities for the self, remains remarkably constant. Each successive novel augments Auster's representation of the processes involved in the formation of subjectivity and identity.

Auster was a published poet before he became known as a novelist. He claims that he does not regard himself as "having made a break from poetry. All my work is of a piece, and the move to prose was the last step in a slow and natural evolution" ("Interview JM" 105). Because Auster's poetry provides insights into the development of his conception of the self, references are made during the course of this study to selected poems, and to the work of poets who have exercised a marked influence on Auster's ideas.

As with so many writers who are or have been critics, editors, or translators (and Auster is all of these), Auster's work often shares the concerns of the works of those writers which he has chosen to translate or edit, and on which he has written so perceptively. He began translating as an undergraduate at Columbia (Auster, "Translation" 101), and has continued to translate the literature with which he feels a particular affinity: Joubert, Mallarmé, Petit, Dupin; these he claims belong to his "inner world" (103).[8] I will thus refer to Auster's views on those works which he has translated or edited, in the course of this study. I will also make use of Auster's critical prose, because, just as T.S.Eliot's essays shed valuable light on his poetry, so Auster's prefaces and essays on writers to whom he "felt a need to respond" ("Interview JM"

[8] Translations, including out of print translations by Auster of work by Joubert, Mallarmé, du Bouchet and Petit, was published by Marsilio in 1997.

105), give insight into the development of his techniques and concerns. This is made clear, for example, in the manner in which his judgment on a book by Philippe Petit, On the High Wire, in the introduction to its English translation, suggests an affinity between the serious nature of the solitary quests in his own writing and the high-wire artist's discipline and courage:

> [t]his is perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt from the treatise: the high-wire is an art of solitude, a way of coming to grips with one's life in the darkest, most secret corner of the self. When read carefully, the book is transformed into the story of a quest, an exemplary tale of one man's search for perfection. As such, it has more to do with the inner life than the high-wire. It seems to me that anyone who has ever made personal sacrifices for an art or an idea, will have no trouble understanding what it is about. ("On the High Wire" 95-96, emphases added)

It is the notion of identity which emerges from Auster's repeated representation of such quests that forms the subject of this study.

CHAPTER ONE

Auster's Detectives: in Search of their Selves

> Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place for ever.
> (Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Wakefield" 133).

I Getting to "another place...altogether"

The New York Trilogy - City of Glass (1985), Ghosts (1986), The Locked Room (1986) - was enthusiastically received by those who misunderstood Auster's use of the detective genre and acclaimed the Trilogy as a mystery novel,[1] but also by those who recognized it as "something auspicious enough to compare to Samuel Beckett's fictional trilogy" (Gach 15). Stephen Schiff wrote in the New York Times that by making the clues more metaphysical than physical, Auster's trilogy redirects the reader, from the "grubby search for a wrongdoer to the more rarefied search for self" (15).

Conventions of the crime detection novel are employed in The New York Trilogy with the intention of arriving "somewhere else entirely" ("Interview LM&SG" 139). "In the same way that Beckett used the standard vaudeville routine as the framework for Waiting for Godot", Auster wanted "to use certain genre conventions to get to another place...altogether" ("Interview JM" 109). This place is one in which questions are raised about the status of identity, of "who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are" (ibid.). Auster is uncompromising in his attitude to investigating the nature and construction of identity.

Popular mystery fiction is propelled by a search for that which is missing, either a person or some truth. The detective is, in Auster's words, "the seeker after truth, the problem-solver, the one who tries to figure things out" ("Interview JM" 109). He acts as guardian of society's

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[1] Auster has "found it rather galling at times" that the Trilogy was received as detective fiction ("Interview LM&SG" 139). Asked whether he felt that he was writing a mystery novel, Auster answered: "[n]ot at all. Of course I used certain elements of detective fiction", but "those elements" were being used "for such different ends, for things that had so little to do with detective stories", that Auster was consequently "somewhat disappointed by the emphasis that was put on them" ("Interview JM" 108).

laws and dearly held ontological certainties. Auster's gambit is to problematise these certainties, and subvert the teleological imperatives of the detective's quest. The detective's own identity becomes the object of investigation. "Mystery novels always give answers", Auster explains, while his work "is about asking questions" ("Interview LM&SG" 139). Because he is aware that the old certainties have vanished, that there are no longer unquestionably absolute and transcendentally authorized answers, it becomes imperative that "the right questions" be asked ("The Art of Hunger" 113).

Such questions must be accommodated in a form which maintains the integrity of the struggle for interpretation, "an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself" (ibid.). Writing about the poetry of André du Bouchet, and, implicitly, about his own project, Auster praises an art which, "[b]eginning with nothing, and ending with nothing but the truth of its own struggle," presents the "record of an obsessive, wholly ruthless attempt to gain access to the self" ("André du Bouchet" 183). Since nothing may any longer be reliably assumed, the nature of our standard assumptions about selfhood and identity must be thoroughly interrogated to prepare for a renegotiated account of our sense of the way in which we exist in the world.

What is required, Auster suggests by quoting Beckett in the context of a discussion of Knut Hamsun's Hunger, is "a new form" of literary expression, to accommodate the "mess", a form which "admits the chaos" of experience in a world without absolute certainties, "and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else" (quoted in "The Art of Hunger" 113). Auster has stated that he considers The New York Trilogy to be concerned with a search for "spiritual grace" in the face of this chaos ("Interview JM" 110). An approach to the apprehension of such grace, however, requires that the protagonists in each of the novels - Quinn in City of Glass, Blue in Ghosts, and the narrator in The Locked Room - suffer a series of assaults on their assumptions about their independence as subjects. They undergo forms of suffering representative of the movement in all of Auster's work to a "scenario of possibility" (Rudman 44) in which they face what Auster calls a "stripping away to some barer condition in which we [all] have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't" ("Interview JM" 109).

In City of Glass, Quinn, faced by his inability to make Daniel Auster's yoyo "go up",

muses that a "great philosopher once said that the way up and the way down are one and the same" (CG 101) – a reference to Heraclitus.[2] The movement in Auster's fiction seems to be to a point at which existential questions are posed. Auster claims for the Trilogy's protagonists the desire "to discover a more solid foundation for [the]...self" ("Interview JM" 110-11). All of Auster's characters undergo apprenticeships, the natures of which will be explored more thoroughly in the course of this study.

The remainder of this chapter investigates the manner in which Auster's early fiction develops a concern with identity, and examines the implications of the representation of this search, so to speak, for the self, for an understanding of subjectivity as figured in the novels which follow.

II Squeeze Play: an apprenticeship detective thriller

Auster's arrival at the other place of which he speaks ("Interview JM" 109) – the investigation of identity using detective genre conventions – was prepared for by the writing of an apparently conventional mystery novel of his own, Squeeze Play (1982), under the pseudonym Paul Benjamin.[3] Written primarily for the money during a particularly dire period of hand-to-mouth existence before the writing or publication of any of his book-length prose works ("Interview LM&SG" 127-28), the novel provided a testing ground for the possibilities of the genre. Read as a comment on The New York Trilogy and Squeeze Play, Quinn's fascination with the detective genre – "[w]hat interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories" (CG 7) – suggests that an examination of the relationship between these works, to my knowledge not yet attempted, might be revealing.

The existence of Squeeze Play and the identity of its author have only recently become widely known. Michael Dibdin identifies Paul Benjamin as Paul Auster in notes to The Picador Book of Crime Writing (326), and Squeeze Play has recently been republished under Auster's

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[2] Pre-Socratic fragment 60, as quoted as an epigraph to Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (189).

[3] Auster and his first wife, Lydia Davis, also translated Georges Simenon's 45° à l'ombre, published as Aboard the Aquitaine, in a volume of three Simenon detective stories, African Trio: Talatala, Tropic Moon, Aboard the Aquitaine, along with two translations by Stuart Gilbert.

name, with a memoir and short plays, in Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure. Auster used the pseudonym as the name for the writer-protagonist in his screenplay for the film Smoke, and permutations of the name appear in his fiction.[4] A clue to the book's identity is included in City of Glass. While waiting for the elder Stillman's train at Grand Central Station, Quinn finds himself seated next to a young woman reading one of the novels which he writes under the pseudonym William Wilson:

> [s]he was reading a book, a paperback with a lurid cover, and Quinn leaned ever so slightly to his right to catch a glimpse of the title. Against all his expectations, it was a book he himself had written – Suicide Squeeze by William Wilson, the first of the Max Work novels.[5] (CG 52)

In City of Glass, the writer Quinn feels that his pseudonym has taken on a life of its own, usurping his function as agent: "although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself" (CG 4). Quinn feels that he has become a "triad of selves" in which, contrary to the expectation that he would feel as if he were writing through his pseudonym, Wilson is the ventriloquist, Quinn the dummy, and the fictional detective, Max Work, is "the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise" (6). A schematized representation of this dynamic – William Wilson → Daniel Quinn → Max Work – invites an attempt to plot the relationships among real, assumed and fictional identities operating in Squeeze Play, which can be done as follows: Paul Benjamin (pseudonym) → Paul Auster (author) → Max Klein (protagonist of pseudonymous fiction).

In reply to an interviewer's question about his experience of writing this detective novel under a pseudonym, Auster confirmed that he shared Quinn's dummy-like experience: "[a]ll through the months I worked on that book, I felt as though I were writing with a mask on my face" ("Interview LM&SG" 138-39). This experience was both "disturbing" and instructive: "If I hadn't gone through that experience of pseudonymity myself," Auster states, "I never would

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[4] Benjamin is used as a first name in Leviathan for the enigmatic, elusive and ill-fated writer, Benjamin Sachs, who is friend and sometime 'double' for the narrator, Peter Aaron (Paul Auster's initials). In The Locked Room, Sophie and Fanshawe's son is called Ben (Benjamin), while Sophie and the narrator's son is named Paul (LR 300).

[5] 'Squeeze play', or a 'suicide squeeze', refers to a risky strategy very occasionally employed by the batting side in baseball: "It was the suicide squeeze, and when it's executed properly there's no way to stop it" (SP 180, emphasis added).

have been able to develop Quinn in the way I did" (ibid. 139). If "Max Work" is cryptically "Magnum Opus" (as suggested by Chénetier, "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World" 39), the naming of Max Klein (literally 'Big Small') in Squeeze Play is apt for a character in Auster's apprenticeship detective novel; the paradoxically named small Max prepares for Auster's 'first' major work/"Max Work".

Squeeze Play is a fast-moving detective novel in twenty-one chapters. The wise-cracking first-person narrative voice of the detective, Klein, presents the intrigues of a network of people surrounding George Chapman, a paralysed former baseball hero with political aspirations. During the course of the novel, Chapman, who had asked Klein to investigate a threatening letter, is found poisoned. Klein is attracted to Chapman's widow, who is suspected of the crime, and sets out to prove her innocence.

The novel draws on the conventions of the American 'hard-boiled school' of detective literature which developed in 'pulp' magazines like Black Mask in the nineteen-twenties and thirties (Tani 22), exemplified in the novels of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and others. Only since the 1950s has serious critical attention been given to detective fiction. Before the rise of so-called metaphysical detective stories, detective fiction was viewed either as "elegant puzzle matter" or as "macho-escapism", depending on the type being read (Tani xi). Numerous critics have subsequently attempted to provide exhaustive typologies of the genre's conventions.

Stefano Tani offers an exemplary discussion of the genre's origins in The Doomed Detective, tracing its development in two parallel streams from the nineteenth century to World War II: the "rational, static, and intellectual" stream begun by Poe (hence the label 'Poesque'), and taken up by the British; and the non-Poesque, or 'hard-boiled' American, described as "non-intellectual, adventurous, and popular" (Tani 35).

The teleological drive towards a solution in traditional detective fiction reflects the conventional presumption of a congruence among language, thought and the real, only temporarily disrupted by the criminal (Huhn 461). Traditional detective novels present experience as open to interpretative ratiocination by a detective who restores order to society.

They are thus allegories of the positivistic mind, and also resemble dream interpretation, as both deal with the transformation of fragments into ordered understanding (Hutter 230-51). The "search-and-seizure mentality of the revelational plot" reflects the violence inherent in coercive forms of thought in Western metaphysics which seek to order disparate fragments within rational explanation (Saltzman, Designs of Darkness in Contemporary American Fiction [hereafter Designs of Darkness] 52, 58). Carlson notes that Barthes specifically classes the traditional detective story as a "texte de désir", privileging linear narrative, and read primarily for the pleasure of the ending. In the "texte de jouissance" – which Barthes associates with the French experimental novel – the plenitude and economy of the traditional detective novel is displaced by that "shock and disequilibrium of a text where anecdote disappears in self-reflexive discourse, and the only hero is the disoriented reader" (Carlson 439).

Detective fiction's positivism seems to offer the postmodern sensibility promising material for use and subversion, critique and re-application. The post-war literary detective novel – the metaphysical or anti-detective novel – has grown out of the work of authors of various nationalities who have responded to this potential.

Squeeze Play reflects the relationship between 'hard-boiled' detective fiction and American Naturalism (Tani 22). The violent world of the novel is faithfully represented through gritty realism; the decaying social fabric is fully described (see for example 3, 93). Whereas 'classic' English 'whodunits' emphasize a lived routine only temporarily upset by a crime, the perception of American society as forever self-forming, expanding and unstable, is reflected in the violence and fragmentation of 'hard-boiled' fiction. The landscape of the American version differs too, as city wastelands replace idyllic British rural, village, or academic settings (Tani 22). Klein's descriptions of decaying urban landscapes draw ironically on a very different image of Britain, startlingly conflated with the landscape of the 'hard-boiled' thriller:

> there is enough industrial stench along the way to make you think you've travelled through a time warp back into nineteenth-century England...smoke charges out of giant factory chimneys, polluting the grotesque landscape of swamps and abandoned brick warehouses...hills of garbage and the rusted hulks of a thousand burned-out cars. (SP 49)

Klein's case begins in the conventional manner, and follows a clichéd pattern. Contacted

by a client, he recalls what he knows of the individual, whom he later meets. It becomes clear during this interview that the client is withholding information (7). There is the usual band of suspects, "many people who dislike" the client (later victim) without necessarily wanting to kill him (45). The detective works alone, withholding information from the police (85).

A "tough guy" (21), Klein presents himself as such with a healthy dose of irony, which is often taken to extreme lengths, peppered with irrelevant detail and absurd comparison, and undermined with bathos (see for example SP 92). He is a prototypical "lonely hero who clings to a personal moral code" (Tani 22); he wants to be "able to look [my son] Richie in the eyes when I told him about the kind of work I did" (SP 85). Klein believes in being ruthlessly honest:

> I didn't say anything to reassure her. Telling her that it was all going to work out in the end would have been a lie, and I didn't want to make false promises. It was real, and because it was real anything could happen. (45)

In the traditional 'Poesque' whodunit, there are conventionally two separate 'stories' in the plot: that of the crime, perpetrated in the past, which has given rise to the mystery, and that of the investigation in the present, which must reconstruct the first 'story' (Huhn 451-52, Todorov 159-60). In Butor's L'Emploi du Temps, a murder mystery novelist tells the narrator that

> all detective fiction is based on two murders of which the first, committed by the murderer, is merely the occasion for the second, in which he is the victim of the pure and unpunishable murderer, the detective. (quoted in Todorov 159)

In the 'hard-boiled' detective story, the narrative coincides with the action; the first and second 'stories' both happen in the present. The "vulnerable detective" experiences a loss of immunity and becomes "integrated into the universe of the other characters" (Todorov 164). As Klein discovers, it becomes easy to get "lost in the labyrinth of other people's lives" (SP 26). He endures the absurdities and cruelties of an unpredictable reality and, subject to the vagaries of a violent world, is intimidated, kidnapped, assaulted and shot at. Klein's situation embodies the deterioration of the privileged access to interpretation guaranteed to the ratiocinative detective in more traditional, 'Poesque', varieties.

Klein has great difficulty 'reading' the signs which must be deciphered in order to solve the case. In City of Glass, the detective is described as the one who must observe and move

through a "morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them" (CG 8). Klein describes his method in a similar manner: "[i]t's all a matter of details, coincidence, the chance gesture, the unconsciously spoken word. You have to be alert at every moment" (SP 26). Yet just as Quinn experiences a sense of bewilderment in the face of his 'case', so Klein finds that he can not easily gain access to the meaning of things, he remains trapped on the endlessly deferring signifying surface: "[y]ou go off in one direction hoping to find one small thing and instead find another thing that sends you off in yet another direction" (26).

Using ratiocinative methods leaves Klein feeling as if he is facing a wall, with no door in sight (120); "[n]o word was exactly what it seemed" (47). Signs refuse access to meaning:

> studying the dregs at the bottom of my coffee-cup...didn't tell me anything I wanted to know. I lit a cigarette and spent the next few minutes blowing smoke rings into the room. But they didn't give me any answers either. (116-17)
>
> [i]t had taken me a while to decipher these messages, to read them correctly as metaphors of the case. I had wanted facts, nothing but cold, hard reality, and now I understood the most important fact of all - that reality doesn't exist without the imagination to see it. (181)

Klein discovers that the only way to gain access to meaning is to participate in a process of 'unlearning', similar to the processes of reduction suffered by Quinn, Blue and the narrator of The Locked Room. Klein perceives it as follows: "I decided to forget what I had learned, to unteach myself the lessons of the past few days, to go back to zero" (139). Unexpected utterances such as this preempt strategies in later Auster novels. Squeeze Play's stereotyping and clichéd descriptions often become suddenly serious, suggesting a searching which prepares directly for the Trilogy.[6]

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[6] Apart from several images which are further developed in the novellas of the trilogy - Klein has nine copies of Brueghel's painting of the Tower of Babel on the walls of his office (15), and sights of urban decay make him think about the bliss of a Thoreau-like existence "as a hermit in the Maine woods, feeding off wild berries and the roots of trees" (50) - Auster develops each of the three novellas in The New York Trilogy from conventional scenarios, which are all present in Squeeze Play. Squeeze Play begins, as does City of Glass, with a telephone call: "[i]t was the second Tuesday in May when George Chapman called me...and wanted to know if I was available to take on a case" (SP 3). Chapman, like Stillman, is reluctant to give details over the phone. Klein suspects that Chapman is withholding information during their interview, a scenario which Auster develops into Blue's encounter with White at the beginning of Ghosts. Chapman holds a fascination for Klein, as Fanshawe does for the narrator of The Locked Room. Klein recalls playing baseball against Chapman in college, and follows his career with interest: "[f]ollowing Chapman during his great season, I somehow thought of him as my alter ego, as an imaginary part of myself that had been inoculated against failure. We were the same age, the same size....And

The climax of a detective novel is the resolution of the mystery, involving an unveiling of the state of affairs before and at the point of the crime's commission: "the resolution of multiplicity back into some primal unity" (Jameson 145-46, emphasis added). Raymond Chandler regarded his brand of detective fiction as evoking a sense of redemption through its use of tragedy, pity and terror. Chandler's detectives are knights, "neither tarnished nor afraid", who venture down "mean streets" into dark places where the truth remains hidden (quoted in Hartman 213).

Klein ventures into Chandler's dark streets to return a world disordered by a crime, to unity, but finds the unity of his own identity questioned. The resolution of the mystery in Squeeze Play is anti-climactic, and the real mystery is the self, not the case. At a particularly frustrating point in his quest, Klein exclaims: "[d]oors had been opening for me all day, and behind them I had been finding nothing but myself" (SP 92). He feels, during a particularly violent encounter, "like an artichoke whose leaves had been plucked" (105), a comically 'hard-boiled' image, which also suggests an approach to the very heart of self (or absence thereof). A few hours (and pages) later, this becomes clearer: "I had come to the limit of myself, and there was nothing left" (110). Klein has a disconcerting dream which demonstrates a concern with disappearing identities and the search for the self. He dreams of a deserted city in which "[e]veryone had vanished because of a strange and devastating power that had taken hold of my voice. Whenever I spoke to anyone, he would disappear. Eventually there was no one left. I had become the last man in the world" (111).

Chapman is likewise eager to achieve a sense of unity of self, seeking this in apparent self-destruction. His betting on his own performance before a baseball game is interpreted as

> a pure and deliberate attempt to destroy himself. It didn't matter that he would ruin himself in the process. Nothing mattered but coming into possession of himself, if only for an instant. It had been like walking through fire. The pain had made him real. (SP 158)

The characters in Auster's Trilogy suffer like Klein, and adopt strategies like Chapman. But

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Chapman went on doing so well...that in some sense I suppose he really did keep me from going off the deep end. I probably also hated the guy's guts" (SP 5). Klein's relation with Mrs Chapman approximates the narrator's with the two Mrs Fanshawes ('widow' and mother) in The Locked Room.

Auster, having gauged the potential of the genre, submits the conventions of the 'hard-boiled' novel to even more radical revision in City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room. A recent review of Squeeze Play (as reprinted in Hand to Mouth) calls it "for its first 30 pages, a not half-bad pastiche of a hard-boiled thriller". But then, the reviewer continues, "disaster strikes. As though intoxicated by his own mimetic skills, Auster swamps the text with racy one-liners" (Adair 20). These comments pay no heed to the novel as an interesting record, despite its faults, of the genesis of Auster's project in The New York Trilogy.

III The self becomes a puzzling case

A reading of The New York Trilogy suggests immediately that self-identity is a primary concern of all three novellas. The nature of the concept of identity held by each of the protagonists is examined within the first few pages of each novella. Based on positivistic assumptions which regard thought and language as neutral and empowering instruments in the service of humankind's mastery of the world, the ratiocinative 'method' of 'Poesque' detection characterizes a detective – like Sherlock Holmes – as a practical semiotician in search of truth. Stowe suggests in an analysis of Chandler's narratives that 'hard-boiled' fiction can, in contrast, be understood as employing strategies akin to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which posit an active interrelationship among subject, object, and mental process (366-73).[7] As was shown with Klein in Squeeze Play, the detective in this variety of detective fiction loses the immunity of his traditional ratiocinative colleague. Auster's detectives lack not only immunity, but also the guarantee of an ending, of a solution to the case, which is the teleological imperative driving all conventional novels of crime detection, whether 'Poesque' or 'hard-boiled'.

The plots of City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room feature protagonists for whom the exercise of systematic analysis and logic offers no guarantee of success: these organising metanarratives, supposed to secure the organisation of disorder and the attainment of 'truth' or 'knowledge', are revealed as violent, totalizing structures which can ultimately offer no

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[7] Blue, in Ghosts, is likewise a hands-on 'hard-boiled' type: "I'm not the Sherlock Holmes type, he would say to Brown, whenever the boss gave him a particularly sedentary task. Give me something I can sink my teeth into" (139).

cohesion to, or understanding of, the nature of existence. The novellas privilege nothing, non-solution, dissemination and silence. While the task of the traditional detective is to deconstruct the versions of the truth of those characters who are suspects, the deconstruction in The New York Trilogy extends beyond the false reality of the criminal to every 'reality', offering a deconstructive investigation of the possibility of ontological certainty in a world of texts, and a world as text.

In City of Glass, Daniel Quinn, for reasons which will be examined shortly, assumes the role of detective, fatally complicating his already problematic sense of self. Assuming not only a false name, but also an unquestioning belief in the efficacy of traditional techniques of detection, Quinn is inexorably drawn into a confrontation with, as another Auster character will state in a later novel, "how things really work" (MC 139).

In Ghosts, the concept of identity is abstracted and problematized from the first line in the designation of characters by colours (135). Blue's apparently simple instructions become complicated when his accustomed modes of detection fail. He realizes the impossibility of apprehending the facts – the truth – of a case through 'objective' observation and recording. Never having given much thought to "the world inside him", having "moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember...asking no more of things than that they be there", he realizes that he is himself a puzzling 'case': "an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself" (143).

Blue's assignment to watch the enigmatic Black forces him to speculate – "from the Latin speculatus, meaning mirror or looking glass" – about such issues: "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" (G 144).

The narrator of The Locked Room introduces himself and Fanshawe in a manner which suggests a similar mirroring relationship. The narrator recalls Fanshawe as "the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself" (199, emphasis added). In Ghosts Blue performs a similar function in Black's self-constitution: "[e]very time I looked up," Black says, "you were there, watching me, following me, always in

sight, boring into me with your eyes" (G 194). The mirror also features in City of Glass. After an extended period in the alley, Quinn sees his reflection in a mirror on the facade of a shop, but does not recognize himself (119).

All three protagonists – Quinn, Blue, the narrator – come to see themselves as being, or being reflected in and defined by, another. In various ways, they are made to struggle with the need to negotiate a relationship with otherness. Auster redeploys the narrative logic of detective fiction to force a crisis of identity in the protagonists of the novellas, and thus precipitate an apparently educative process – which will have to be examined – in which a belief in the possibility of uncovering an absolute, uncontroverted, grounded truth is shown by a confrontation with radical alterity to be misguided.

In Squeeze Play, Lieutenant Grimes and Klein present two different approaches to solving a crime. For Grimes "[i]t doesn't take a genius to solve a murder, it takes hard work" (SP 114), while for Klein, the process is different. Unable to put together the pieces of an increasingly "complex puzzle", Klein "[a]lmost unconsciously" finds himself "trying to crawl inside [Chapman's] skin, trying to see the world through his eyes" (117). This route to discovery was proposed in Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin tales, widely regarded as the first detective stories (Holquist 140-41).[8] Quinn, writing in his red notebook, asks: "[a]nd yet, what is it that Dupin says in Poe? 'An identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent'" (CG 40). Quinn misremembers in a confusion of identities, for it is the narrator of Poe's "The Purloined Letter" who verbalizes the observation (Poe 213). The manner in which Quinn recalls wearing friends' cast-off clothing – "the strange sense I would have of climbing into [another's] skin" (CG 40) – echoes the formulations of Klein and Poe's narrator.

In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", Poe's narrator describes Dupin's ability to identify with criminals and discern their thoughts. The narrator, observing the physical change in Dupin

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[8] "[A]bout the first detective story there can be no...uncertainty. We know the precise time and place of its origin. It was in Graham's Magazine of April, 1841, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A that The Murders in the Rue Morgue appeared, and the character which there made his entrance, sprung full blown from the bulging brow of Poe, has, under different aliases, been with us ever since" (Holquist 140); "[a]gainst the metaphors for chaos, found in his other tales, he sets, in the Dupin stories, the essential metaphor for order: the detective" (ibid. 141).

during this identification, dwells "meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul", amusing himself "with the fancy of a double Dupin - the creative and the resolvent" (Poe 144). Tani's exegesis of this passage concludes that the "creative" involves a temporary setting aside of Dupin's own psyche "to allow in something outside himself," the nature and personality of the other; while the "resolvent" Dupin makes the necessary connections and presents his conclusions (5). The identification of the detective with the subject of his investigation or observation is a necessity which forces the protagonists in The New York Trilogy into confrontation with innumerable reflections, traces and projections, providing unavoidable occasions for self-interrogation, through being obliged to face others, often in the form of a 'double'. Auster turns the detective's search into an examination of the self and its relation to others, and to the world. A close examination of City of Glass will support and elaborate these observations.

IV Daniel Quinn as deconstructed detective

In City of Glass, Daniel Quinn's assumption of the persona of a 'detective' embodies an initial belief in the possibility of narrative and interpretive closure, which is shared by the naïve Blue in Ghosts and initially by the narrator of The Locked Room. The descriptive catalogue expected in the opening paragraphs of a detective novel is absent; "there is little that need detain us" about Quinn (3), the narrator avers, although the information is offered that his wife and son have been dead for five years (3, 5). It becomes clear that Quinn has adopted a life of isolation, perhaps in reaction to his loss. Moments of painful and poignant remembrance "came less often now", and "[h]e no longer wished to be dead" (5). Nonetheless, a part of him has died, he indicates (4), and he is attracted to producing writing in a genre which involves the restoration to the world of that "sense of plenitude and economy" which characterizes the mystery novel's structure (8), in which there is no superfluity, no errant alterity which cannot be subsumed into the detective's solution. Quinn is shown to have effected a radical renunciation of the world, desire and memory, in an attempt to recover an imaginary wholeness (Little 153).

An indiscriminate "hunger" or "craving" for detective novels (CG 8) reveals Quinn's

need for the reassurance they offer of the triumph of order in a chaotic world. What Quinn appreciates about detective novels is that they create a self-contained world, and that every detail, "everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story" (CG 8). This praise is shown to be misplaced.

Quinn's taste in other literature is said to be prescriptive and specific in contrast, but the extract which he reads from Marco Polo's Travels describes accurately the detective's enterprise (in Quinn's projected mental formulation) to observe and record in search of the idea which will make sense of the morass of disordered fragments and clues through which he must move (8). Quinn's own clothes are described in a manner which reflects his view of most exterior material objects as "debris" (12). The Marco Polo text begins with an assertion of the possibility of recording "truth", of providing an "accurate record" (6); Quinn begins to consider the "crisp assurances" thus asserted when the first telephone call – a forced transaction with another – intrudes into a world which he seeks to control completely, and challenges his attempt at self-definition in isolation: the voice demands "someone he was not" (3, emphasis added).

That Quinn is to face a challenge to his assumptions is indicated by the information that, "[m]uch later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance" – that events would not vouchsafe a pattern despite his attempts at control and closure – "[b]ut that was much later" (3, emphasis added). Much later he is to realize that he, unlike the good detective who achieves interpretive closure, "could never be sure of any of it" (13). What is to be made of the projected educative experience is left, like so much else, open to interpretation: "whether or not [the story] means something is not for the story to tell" (3).

Quinn seeks to avoid interaction with others (5), and to forget his own materiality; during his walks he seeks reduction to "a seeing eye" (4). In this he approaches his designation of his fictional detective as a "[p]rivate eye":

> [t]he term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter 'i', standing for 'investigator', it was 'I' in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. (8-9)

This description emphasizes Quinn's desire to seek order and assert a private selfhood in the midst of a fragmented world. The "salutary emptiness" which he experiences "within" on his walks through the city (4) engenders a feeling of loss, an escape from "the obligation to think" and remember: it is "impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long" (4). Quinn utilizes this effect of constant motion when following Stillman, when his motivation is tellingly described: "[b]y flooding himself with externals, by drowning himself out of himself, he had managed to exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair" (61). Even though he feels that he has "not really lost himself", but is "merely pretending" and can "return to being Quinn whenever he wished" (50) – a mistake made by Wakefield in Hawthorne's eponymous story, and by Blue in Ghosts – he tries to be Auster, to see the world through Auster's eyes (51), telling himself that he is no longer Quinn (61). Being 'Paul Auster', no more than a name for Quinn and therefore a "man with no thoughts" (61), allows him to repress painful memories of his wife and child (51). Being 'Auster' in an attempt to heal his fragmentary experience further fragments his already complicated system of identity.

Quinn's feeling of physical dis-ease compels him to attempt to negate his sense of participation in the world of others. He allows himself to "withdraw into the confines of a strange and hermetic world" (9), substituting for his presence a persona, the detective Max Work, and a pseudonym, William Wilson. Work's success – the success of Quinn's work – presents the inverse of Quinn's withdrawal. The "triad of selves" (6) developed with these fictional personas constructs a complex relationship with a world which Quinn finds threatening. His substitutes, like the walks in the city which allow him "all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere", allow Quinn to exist "no longer...for anyone but himself" (4).

The second telephone call comes as Quinn is "in the act of expelling a turd" (9); both telephone and excrement a reminder of the others Quinn seeks to deny, and of his own physicality (Little 155). Quinn responds to the third call, answering a request for "Paul Auster. Of the Auster Detective Agency" (CG 7) by assuming this identity.

The case in which Quinn becomes engaged as the detective Paul Auster requires him to watch the elder Stillman, newly released from incarceration, and keep him away from Peter, the

younger Stillman, the son who was psychologically devastated by his father's cruel search for the original language, a transcendent, divinely inspired and guaranteed univocal language of essences. Quinn must find and follow a man whose very name suggests the stillness and plenitude of the pattern which Quinn so desperately seeks to find and follow in his own life. Stillman is in search of a "still point of the turning world" (Eliot, "Burnt Norton" 191), to understand, complete and resolve the perceived fragmentariness of the world.

Stillman's Harvard thesis on "sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological interpretations of the New World" (26), The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World (41), proposes that Adam's task in Eden, "to invent language", was facilitated by a prelapsarian innocence in which "his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world", revealing the "essences" of all things (43). Language, however, "devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs" after the Fall. Stillman echoes Emerson's belief that the "Fall of Man" occasioned "the first word of history and the last fact of experience" (quoted in Martin 171).

Stillman explains that "the world is in fragments" (76). Alluding to Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, he describes his task as being "to put it back together again" (CG 76), to invent a "new language" (76), to

> say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same...every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent....The word...can no longer express the thing. (77)

The fictitious Henry Dark's apocryphal 1690 pamphlet "The New Babel" (CG 46), which Stillman cites (and invents), argues that it would be possible to reverse the effects of the fall by attempting to recreate the prelapsarian language, and by speaking "the original language of innocence" to recover the "truth within [one]self" (47). Stillman finds in New York's streets "an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things", debris which provides support for Dark's thesis, and material for his project of re-establishing the transparency of language: "I invent new

words that will correspond to the things" (78).[9]

The westward expansion of civilization to the New World was, according to Dark, the fulfilment of a Biblical prophecy, and a "New Babel" would start to go up in America in 1960, the year in which Stillman locked his infant son in a darkened room to forget what few words he knew, in an experiment which lasted for nine years (26, 48-49).[10] Dark's auspicious career, including being secretary to John Milton, is, Stillman later admits, "an invention" (80). Stillman's creation of a mini-myth of origin, with impeccable Puritan credentials, recalls in a parodic manner Hawthorne's elaborate contextualization of The Scarlet Letter in "The Custom House". The nameless third-person narrator of City of Glass performs a similar manoeuvre by claiming to have based his narrative on Quinn's red notebook, discovered in Peter and Virginia's abandoned apartment. He claims to have refrained from interpretation while at the same time maintaining that "the red notebook, of course, is only half the story" (132). The veracity of the narrator's account is undermined, further deconstructing the notion of origin, even of the narrative itself. The uncertain signification of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter "A", apparently discovered in an attic by the narrator of "The Custom House" (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 61), is shared by Quinn's red notebook.

Stillman's twisted utopian vision reflects a centuries' old depiction of America as a "New World", a potential paradise, the land of the new Adam.[11] Associated notions of progress and

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[9] In his study of language and translation, After Babel, George Steiner notes that "[t]he occult tradition holds that a single primal language, an Ur-Sprache lies behind our present discord....This Adamic vernacular not only enabled all men to understand one another....It bodied forth...the original Logos, the act of immediate calling into being whereby God had literally 'spoken the world'" (58). Steiner discusses various attempts over the centuries to reconstruct "the lost language of Paradise" in order "to lead men back to the universal Grammar of Adam" (59). Stillman's is an age-old quest, as Quinn's research into the issue, recounted in chapter four of City of Glass, illustrates (33-35).

[10] Peter recollects that "[t]he father...wanted to know if God had a language...[and] thought a baby might speak it if the baby saw no people" (20). The violence suffered by the protagonists of Auster's novellas in logocentric power relationships and through processes of stripping, bears comparison with the violence and terror of the best of Franz Kafka's work: old Herr Bendemann's sentence of death on his son, Georg, in "The Judgment" (Kafka 87); the officer's sadistic writing/execution apparatus in "In the Penal Colony" (140 ff); Samsa's metamorphosis (Kafka, "The Metamorphosis" 89-139); the indifference to the hunger artist's consuming discipline (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 268 ff).

[11] The first report from the 1607 colony intimated that the continent was a land of promise, "waiting for man to realize prelapsarian opportunities for ever lost to him in Europe" (Marshall Walker 4). It is significant that Peter's wife is Virginia, alluding to the 'virgin' nature of the New World, and the name of the first English colony in North America.

the possibilities for achieving a supreme individuality based on these pervade American literature and form the substance of the 'American Dream':

> [f]rom the very beginning, according to Stillman, the discovery of the New World was the quickening impulse of utopian thought, the spark that gave hope to the perfectibility of human life - from Thomas More's book of 1516 to Geronimo de Mendieta's prophecy, some years later, that America would become an ideal theocratic state, a veritable city of God. (42).

Quinn's quest as detective corresponds to Stillman's search for a language which reunites things with the words which purport to signify them in order to 'read' the "correct, clear, accessible, and unified text of reality" (Rowen 228). Just as Stillman's quest is fruitless and disrupted - he disappears completely at the beginning of chapter 10, and has, Quinn later learns from Auster, the writer in the narrative, committed suicide (122) - so Quinn is faced increasingly with the failure of his own attempts to solve the case. Both Quinn and Stillman "err by roaming the streets of New York on religious quests to establish the univocal presence of the paternal Word"; the experiences and fates of both demonstrate that "subjects and signs are never single, straightforward, or self-evident but rather are always duplicitous, always (at least) double and deceptive" (Little 137).

Intimations of elements resisting interpretive or ordering capture are present from the beginning of the narrative. In the Stillmans' apartment the task of registering "the details of what he was seeing...was somehow beyond him"; Quinn can manage to form "[n]o more than a general impression - even though he was there, looking at those things with his own eyes" (14). Peter's appearance challenges Quinn's concept of a person, and his own attempts to experience salutary emptiness. A different kind of nothingness confronts him in Peter, about whom everything is white, a colour which is used in the novel to suggest a bleaching of all points of reference. Peter seems "almost transparent", and Quinn has difficulty speaking to him, "as though [Peter] Stillman's presence was a command to be silent" (15). Peter recounts that his doctors told him that he is a "human being"; "[i]t is good to believe what doctors say" (18). He is the last of the Stillmans of Boston, but also the last (the deconstruction of the notion of a) still man, someone with access to the essences of things (19). Peter's language repeatedly negates itself, undermining belief in the ability of language to 'mean' in any conventional sense. He refers

to himself in the third person (16), and utters, besides nonsense words, the refrain: "I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name" (17).

Certainties begin to dissolve more quickly for Quinn after this encounter with Peter. He even begins to question language, speculating about its role in creating perceptions of reality: he wonders whether Peter sees the world differently because of his difficulty with language (36). Time becomes distorted (36), and Quinn's desire to withdraw from the world is frustrated as he becomes more than objectively involved in the case. His first recorded observations in the notebook reflect feelings towards the senior Stillman, which are neither entirely negative nor objective. Stillman's photograph suggests someone who appears "benign, if not downright pleasant" (39), even familiar (40).

Multiple identification threatens Quinn's assumptions about the possibility of a unitary transcendent signified or a unified sense of self; alterity starts to intrude, in the form of the trilogy's use of doubling. Quinn's pseudonym in City of Glass, William Wilson, is the name of the protagonist of an eponymous Edgar Allan Poe tale about doubling, in which Poe's first-person narrator's name is itself a pseudonym (Poe 626). Poe's Wilson is shadowed by another bearing his name, likeness and birthday (629-31). The closeness of the two in childhood is echoed in the narrator's childhood closeness to Fanshawe in The Locked Room, whose narrator might well utter Poe's narrator's words: "assuredly if we had been brothers we must have been twins" (Poe 630). The 'double' pursues Wilson throughout his life and Poe's tale ends in Rome, where the narrator slays his double in a room at the end of which a mirror reflects his own visage as the defeated and bloody 'double'. This episode informs the grimly humorous 'Black and Blue' assault at the end of Ghosts, and the narrator's determination to "track [Fanshawe] down and kill him" (267) in The Locked Room.

The motif of doubling in City of Glass is present in Quinn's first meeting with the young Peter Stillman, who prompts Quinn to think "[u]ncannily, in that first moment...of his own dead son" (14), also named Peter (35). That two men at Grand Central Station could be Stillman (55-56) represents the further intrusion of chance and alterity: whomever Quinn follows, the choice will be "arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end" (56). While

the detective's necessary identification with the subject of his investigation links Quinn to Stillman (40), it becomes clear that Quinn also identifies with Peter. He thinks of himself in Peter's position: "To think of myself in that room, screaming" (39).

These identifications further threaten Quinn's assumptions about his own self, rendered doubly duplicitous by the addition to his triad of a fourth person, 'Paul Auster':

> [a]nd then, most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. I do not think this is a game. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name. (40)

Quinn buys a notebook to write down observations to aid his attempt to understand Stillman. In the shop where he purchases the book, he sees a man with a concentration camp number tattooed on his forearm, a disquieting reminder of an attempt on an horrific scale to pursue an exclusionary, 'utopian' plan. Quinn seeks to impose order on his desk and confused identity before starting to write. He clears the surface of "debris",[12] and, for the "first time in more than five years" – since the death of his wife and child – inscribes his initials in the notebook whose very blankness, once again another kind of nothing, threatens him. He draws the shades in his room and sits naked at his desk in an apparent attempt to approximate a womb-like state, to recapture a prelapsarian innocence, which approximates the object of Stillman/Dark's prognostications and experiment with Peter, making apparent the link between this and Quinn's detective activity.

Soon grasping the scope of Stillman's project, Quinn reads Stillman's thesis, and meets him three times, but can make no sense of his movements or intentions. Fascinated by Stillman's outings through the streets of New York City to collect "discarded things, stray bits of junk"

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[12] Quinn's actions can be seen as a purification rite, "an attempt to recollect the centred presence of Being by fashioning a language and a body that have eliminated errancy...to sweep away the waste that lies forever at the limit of any system, challenging its productivity and integrity" (Little 146). Little draws on Maud Ellmann's discussion of asceticism and writing to categorise the catalogue of debris: "the useless residues (dead matches, spent cartridges) that resist proper employment; the loose change (a few coins) that remains uninvested in a proper economy; the signs of leakage (dirty handkerchief) that compromise the proper subject; the idle marginalia (doodles) that deform the frame of the proper book" (Little 156).

(59),[13] Quinn can initially discern no pattern, and cannot decipher the clues with which he is faced: "he could do no more than observe, write down what he saw in the red notebook, hover stupidly on the surface of things" (59).

Quinn's attempts to record every detail of Stillman's activities are constantly undermined. He experiences difficulty in making the writing in his notebook correspond to the reality he is observing. After experimenting with various positions, he writes significantly with "the deaf mute's pen" which he acquires at Grand Central Station (52) in his right hand and the red notebook on his left hip (63). A deaf-mute is completely cut off from the world of heard or spoken words, and thus from vain attempts to represent the world in speech or writing. Still achieving no success (65), Quinn becomes "deeply disillusioned":

> [h]e 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. The implication was that human behaviour could be understood, that...there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. (67)

Quinn does think he discerns the shapes of the letters "OWER OF BAB" by mapping Stillman's movements (67-70), and believes Stillman to be tracing "THE TOWER OF BABEL" (70) during his walks. Stillman's thesis regarded the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis as a recapitulation of the fall of language occasioned by the first sin in the Garden (43). That Babel was destroyed and mankind's ability to speak a single language frustrated bodes ill for any project which attempts to search for or employ similar literal or figurative univocality. Quinn thinks immediately of Pym – the protagonist of Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym – even though he dismisses the aptness of any analogy (70-71). Pym's self-involvement and quest "for ultimate knowledge of his own psyche", is, like Ahab's quest in Melville's Moby Dick, doomed to end with an encounter with "the meaningless whiteness of annihilation" (Ian Walker 121). Quinn had earlier found himself thinking of "the opening pages of Moby Dick" and about

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[13] This "flotsam" (CG 59) of the streets features prominently in In the Country of Last Things. The objects which Stillman collects include "a collapsible umbrella shorn of its material" (CG 59), the umbrella being a standard vaudeville prop, also used in Beckett's literature of the absurd (see for example Auster's comments on Mercier and Camier in "From Cakes to Stones"). In Moon Palace, Marco and Effing encounter Orlando in the streets of New York, "walking along with an open umbrella over his head...the protective cloth had been stripped off the armature, and with the naked spokes spread out uselessly in the air, it looked as though he was carrying some huge and improbable steel flower" (209).

Melville's final, sad years, before, "with great clarity and precision", he sees "Bartleby's window and the blank brick wall before him" (CG 51-52). Melville's examinations of the terrifying consequences of the separation of the individual from his fellow beings (Matthiessen 228) is evoked, but Quinn does not share Ishmael's discovery that sympathy with another can redeem the "wolfish world" (Melville, Moby Dick 146).

Terence Martin refers to a phenomenological reading of Moby Dick which highlights the manner in which the chapter entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale" moves beyond traditional associations of white to ontological realms of signification (Martin 76-77). White functions in a similar manner in City of Glass, pointing to an unassimilable nothingness that leads to the bleaching of all points of reference, the questioning of the narrative's origin and ending, and its collapse into silence. The narrator and Auster (the character) leave the building in which they find the red notebook and walk out into the snow: "[t]he city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end" (132). Melville's oeuvre, particularly Moby Dick and Bartleby, provides informing intertexts for all of Auster's novels.

Quinn's assumptions are further questioned when he eventually meets Stillman. He introduces himself first as "Quinn", eliciting a response which demonstrates how the name "flies off in so many little directions at once" (74). Quinn's name exists only by virtue of its difference from similar sounding words, yet paradoxically Stillman also calls it the "quintessence...of quiddity". Quinn presents himself next as "Henry Dark", the name of the supposed author of The New Babel in Stillman's thesis (46), to which Stillman replies: "[a]h...a man who begins with the essential" (79). The reply appears paradoxical when Stillman acknowledges soon after that Dark is fictitious (80). When Quinn introduces himself as Peter Stillman jnr, the elder Stillman notes the lack of resemblance to his son, but remarks: "people change...One minute we're one thing, and then another another" (84).

Stillman explains that he chose the name Henry Dark because HD stands for Humpty Dumpty (81), an egg representing the perfection which "[i]t is our duty as human beings" to restore to linguistic and existential affairs (82). Dumpty is a "philosopher of language" who sketches in his speech to Alice the "clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we

speak, to make language answer our needs" (81). Stillman quotes from Through the Looking Glass: "[w]hen I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less" (CG 81; Carroll 100). The imagery in which this belief is expressed is undermined when Quinn visits the author Paul Auster and is offered an omelette: "from the darkness, [Quinn] began to hear a voice, a chanting, idiotic voice that sang the same sentence over and over again: 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'" (CG 97).

The meeting with Auster, the writer-character, accelerates the collapse of assumed absolutes for Quinn and the reader. This Auster's "tongue-in-cheek" essay on Don Quixote, "an imaginative reading" (97), questions the nature of authorship, with implications not only for The New York Trilogy as a whole, but for Quinn's understanding of his own agency and identity.[14] The real Auster – the author of the Trilogy – speaks of wanting to implicate his "author self" in the machinery of his text, by including a "Paul Auster" character: "I wanted to open up the process, to break down walls, to expose the plumbing" ("Interview LM&SG" 137). Auster – the one in the novel – asks Quinn whether he is "in the book", literally the telephone directory, but with implications which question much more. "'Yes,'" replies Quinn, "'The only one'" (102-3). Quinn encounters another double in Daniel Auster – "'[e]verybody's Daniel !' 'That's right,' said Quinn. 'I'm you, and you're me'" (102) – and the happiness of the Auster family makes "Quinn [feel] a little more of himself collapse" (102).

Evocations of negativity increase in frequency in the first paragraphs of Chapters ten, eleven and thirteen. After leaving the Austers' apartment, Quinn feels that he is

> nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so

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[14] Saltzman draws attention to a literary antecedent for these speculations in Jorge Luis Borges' tale, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (Designs of Darkness 61). There is also, amongst Franz Kafka's enigmatic story fragments, a curious paragraph entitled "The Truth about Sancho Panza", in which Sancho Panza succeeds "in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure...in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits" (Kafka 430). In The Locked Room the narrator speaks of himself as Sancho Panza to Fanshawe's Don Quixote (215); Daniel Quinn's initials match Quixote's, the Peter Stillmans' are Sancho Panza's, inverted, and the elder Stillman's bizarre quest Quixote's. Virginia tells Quinn that she was referred to 'Paul Auster', detective, by "Mrs Saavedra's husband, Michael" (CG 30); Miguel Cervantes' family name was Saavedra (Chénetier, "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World" 40).

far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine. (104)

The 'case' is now about Quinn, and what he writes in his notebook that day, for the first time, has "nothing to do with the Stillman case" (108). Quinn still seeks a consolatory nothingness. He wants to disappear, and muses on being drawn into "the circles of [music's] repetitions" (109). He quotes "Baudelaire....It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not" (110), and ponders his own use of the word 'fate' as he comes increasingly to confront chance (117). Quinn nonetheless still seems to valorize analytic techniques. The clouds which he sees from the alley in which he settles to watch Peter's apartment "had to be investigated, measured, and deciphered" (117); but the object of this urge is now clearly something more and more impossible to control and he experiences a fleeting awareness that "perhaps he was not really searching for anything definite" (111).

A growing awareness of the impossibility of his task of detection - he is unable to negate an intruding, radical alterity, or to impose order on a welter of opaque clues - is coupled with a growing confrontation with the assumption that he can define himself in isolation:

> Quinn had always thought of himself as a man who liked to be alone. For the past five years, in fact, he had actively sought it. But it was only now...that he began to understand the true nature of solitude. He had nothing to fall back on anymore but himself. And of all the things he discovered during the days he was there, this was the one he did not doubt: that he was falling. What he did not understand, however, was this: in that he was falling, how could he be expected to catch himself as well? Was it possible to be at the top and the bottom at the same time? It did not seem to make sense. (117)

Individual subjectivity depends on an acceptance of the 'other'. The first person pronoun 'I' can designate only in relation to 'you' in the same way as 'here' relates linguistically to 'there' rather than a fixed location (Kerby quoted in Alford 25). This differential basis of identification is repeatedly emphasized in The New York Trilogy. The fierce hermeticism of Quinn's withdrawal into a rigidly isolated space, the most private and passive element in his triad of selves, is reflected in The Locked Room in Fanshawe's apparent completeness. Black's isolation becomes Blue's in Ghosts, and forces the latter to face the other, something which Blue finds threatening.

Black's alterity becomes, for Blue, a "blankness, a hole in the texture of things" (G 145).

Blue cannot accept the implications of an identification with Black, and so

> can no longer accept Black's existence, and therefore denies it. Having penetrated Black's room and stood there alone, having been, so to speak, in the sanctum of Black's solitude, he cannot respond to the darkness of that moment except by replacing it with a solitude of his own. To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else. But this is precisely where Black is, even though Blue does not know it. (190)

The difficulty of accepting the other is well defined in Sartre's existential phenomenology, as developed in Being and Nothingness.[15] According to Jonathan Rée, the "otherness of otherness" constitutes a frightening paradox for Sartre. Any acknowledgement of alterity reveals something beyond the limits of our experience, forcing a confrontation with "a nauseating black hole within our everyday self-satisfactions" (Rée 16). This image is strikingly similar to imagery in Ghosts, and to Quinn's falling sensation in City of Glass. The next chapter will make some of the implications of this imagery clearer through further consideration of the importance of phenomenology, more particularly the implications for an understanding of Auster's work of some key ideas of Emmanuel Levinas.

On returning to his apartment Quinn discovers, like Gregor Samsa waking to his terrible metamorphosis, that everything has changed (123). Like Blue in Ghosts, Quinn, by removing himself from societal networks, loses all practical selfhood for others. Both occupy Wakefield's position in Hawthorne's story of the same name, in which the narrator warns that "by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place for ever" (133).

Drawn into the empty Stillman apartment in the last pages of the novella, Quinn discards his clothing and falls asleep in a darkened room (126) like that in which young Peter was

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[15] Auster and his first wife Lydia Davis translated a collection of essays by and interviews with Sartre, Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken, published (in translation) in 1977. The manner in which Sartre conceives of the self may appear to sit somewhat uncomfortably with some of the anti-totalizing impulses apparent in the perceived, somewhat radical, position in City of Glass, but does privilege perception, about which more will be said later. In conversation in Life/Situations, Sartre states: "the self...is an object before us. That is to say, the self appears to our reflection when it unifies the reflected consciousnesses. Thus there is a pole of reflection that I call the self, the transcendent self, which is a quasi object" (117-18). The aged Sartre's semi-blind state of debilitation may have influenced the depiction of Thomas Effing in Moon Palace.

isolated.[16] Realizing that Max Work and William Wilson are both fictional (127), all the absolutes of his former life disappear: "[n]ight and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition" (127); "[s]o many things were disappearing now, it was difficult to keep track of them" (128). Quinn's last line conveys his terrified apprehension of the implications for his own identity of the impossibility of achieving closure: "[w]hat will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (131); "[m]uch later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance" (3).

Quinn's nakedness, and the mysterious appearance of food in this womb-like state of ground-zero – he also "remember[s] the moment of his birth and how he had been pulled gently from his mother's womb" (130) – suggests an approach to Lacan's Real order. Such a reading would, however, problematize the apparent rejection by the text of the possibility of attaining such a state. The mysterious appearance of the trays of food, and Quinn's acceptance thereof, might thus be read as constituting his acceptance of a necessary reliance on the other, figured as food; that Quinn eats reflects his rejection of a discredited ascesis. Does Quinn's eventual rejection of the search for a transcendent signified prepare for his receipt, "in the form of trays of food appearing from nowhere or out of nothing, the unfathomable grace of an unfigurable Other" (Little 160)? Or does the food's absent provider signal the existence of a beneficent, removed but authoritative source or power? Quinn's demise and disappearance is figured, perhaps fittingly, in inherently contradictory ways, resisting adequate interpretive closure, if not for the reader, then certainly for the narrator.

The manner in which the novella repeatedly subverts the grounds of its own telling, and presents what appears to be the education of an initially misguided, and finally dispersed protagonist, adheres both aesthetically and ethically to its presentation of the intransigence and triumph of nothing (the impossibility of figuring such alterity is reflected in the difficulty of

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[16] The language of Quinn's notebook entries comes to approximate Peter's broken syntax. Peter's refrain – "I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name" (17) – and Quinn's writing – "My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name" (40) – both echo Beckett's similar negatives in the closing sentences of Molloy (Saltzman, Designs of Darkness 60): "[i]t is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining." (Beckett 162). City of Glass begins with Quinn in bed, at night, with "the rain beat[ing] against the window" (6).

enunciation in a manner not predicated on reductive binarism).

V Traces of nothing

There is a palpable tension throughout City of Glass between different kinds and perceptions of 'nothing': from the nothing which Quinn initially seeks to feel, to the terrifying nothingness that keeps intruding on his attempts to find and order truth. Quinn's withdrawal, his desire to be "nowhere" (4), is in effect an expression of a desire for a new, unencumbered, sense of being. It is significant that he enjoys being able to "pinpoint the first moment of his existence", his conception (10).

Beginnings abound in American literature, as do invocations of the inscription of nothingness. The desire in the young United States to establish a beginning for the nation which would signal a break from the colonial past involved a desire to define an ex-historical beginning, a beginning out of nothing, expressed in political formulations and in literature through a rhetoric of negation (Martin 6,54). Veteran American critic Terence Martin concludes that:

> American negatives constitute a secular version of the body of apophatic theology by means of which certain medieval thinkers formulated their insistent ideas of a Prime Cause....With roots that go back to an austere, iconoclastic Neoplatonism, it is, I believe, a structure, part of the way Americans look at (and present) themselves and their actions in (and to) the world. (63)

In mystical thought, purity and spiritual liberty are approached through disciplined subjection to negation, denial and ascesis; Christian mystics and apophatic theologians sought a sense of 'the nothingness of origin', a complete union with God's being (Martin 64, 69). No such ontological certainty is guaranteed as the result of Auster's protagonists' stripping experiences, which are often figured - though significantly in formulations which are focalized as the character's own (mis)understanding of his own situation - in a rhetoric of negation drawing overtly on the imagery of apophatic theology's via negativa.

The second novella of The New York Trilogy, Ghosts, features a protagonist whose experiences repeat the substance of Quinn's. Ghosts makes particular use of negative imagery in a manner which engages directly with nineteenth-century American literature and Neoplatonism.

Daylight, suitable to the bright and youthful vigour of America's novelty as a democratic nation, was seen metaphorically as the nineteenth-century American medium. A commentator wrote in the Edinburgh Review in 1829: "[n]o ghost was ever seen in North America. They do not walk in broad day; and the night of ignorance and superstition which favours their appearance, [is] long past" (quoted in Martin 52). But the certainties which daylight implies are absent in the shadowy world of Ghosts, in which a case which initially seems simple enough - "White wants Blue to follow a man named Black and to keep an eye on him for as long as necessary" (G 135) - becomes increasingly frustrating for an intrepid detective.

Identities are unstable in Ghosts. White is apparently in disguise when he first briefs Blue (135), and wears a mask when collecting Blue's report from the post office (166-67). Black wears the same mask in the final encounter, suggesting that Black and White, opposites and doubles, are the same person. Blue himself assumes various disguises, presenting himself as a beggar, "a local character by the name of Jimmy Rose" (171), who resembles Walt Whitman. Blue then pretends to be "Snow, a life insurance salesman from Kenosha, Wisconsin" (179), and finally, "the Fuller brush man" (183).

Black, like a doppelgänger, "appears to be no more than a shadow" (141); he seems vaguely familiar, and Blue has the "feeling that he has seen Black before...There's something about the eyes, he says to himself" (152). As the days spent watching Black increase, the pattern of Blue's daily existence comes to be determined by Black. The termination of Black's relationship with an unnamed woman (153-55) even prefigures the collapse of Blue's engagement (to "the future Mrs Blue") (160-61). Blue is paradoxically comforted by the extent to which their lives come to mirror each other's, "[f]or the closer he feels to Black, the less he finds it necessary to think about him. In other words, the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is" (158). Knowledge of Black's routine means that Blue does not have constantly to pursue him, but the implication of this correlation between entanglement and freedom is that by being forced unconsciously to define the pattern of his life in terms of that of another, Blue begins to approach the possibility of leading "the semblance of an independent life" (158). The two are inextricably bound; Black tells Snow (the disguised Blue) that Blue needs him: "[Blue]

needs my eye looking at him. He needs me to prove he's alive" (181).

Auster enters in the aptly named Ghosts into a complex dialogue with the writers whose extraordinarily imaginative vitality produced the seminal texts of the 'American Renaissance': Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. "[T]here are ghosts all around us" says Black (174).[17] In his rambling and eccentric observations on the "many great men" who have walked the same streets in Brooklyn on which Black and Blue converse (174), Black discusses Walt Whitman (172) and Hawthorne (175-76), while Henry Ward Beecher, Thoreau, and others are mentioned (174). Blue's disguise, Jimmy Rose, is the subject of an eponymous Melville tale about an old man and his decaying New York home (Melville 241).[18] Black has a "bookcase on the north wall, but no more than several books in it: Walden, Leaves of Grass, Twice-Told Tales" (G 185), representing Thoreau, Whitman and Hawthorne. Blue remembers working with his mentor, Brown, on "the Gray Case" (139), the facts of which resemble Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (176).

The Transcendentalists' assertion of the infinitude of the private man was influenced by the introspective tendency in European Romantic literature, a "new awareness of the self as an object of scrutiny" (Hochfield 139). Emerson once described Thoreau's life as "a series of ongoing renunciations that made him...'a willing hermit'"; "how near to the old monks in their ascetic religion" (quoted in Martin 166). Thoreau's Walden (1854) was a "call for the purification of human life" and "a re-originating of the self" (Martin 175). In Ghosts, Blue is made aware of his own assumptions about himself as the true object of scrutiny in the 'case' he is investigating. Auster has stated that "the spirit of Thoreau", the notion of "a solitary life, of living with a kind of monastic intensity - and all the dangers that entails", is dominant in Ghosts ("Interview JM" 110).

Blue buys and reads a copy of Walden (G 139) after seeing Black reading it (139, 152, 163), and it becomes a representative text for the solitude within which Blue is forced to

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[17] Alison Russell regards Ghosts as "a collection of the signs that make up American culture" (78).

[18] Auster used the name again in his screenplay for the film Smoke, and for its sequel, Blue in the Face: "Jimmy Rose" is described as Auggie Wren's "protégé...a mentally retarded man in his late twenties" (Smoke 21).

consider himself. The empty rented apartment which 'White' provides for Blue becomes the locus of self-analysis and ascetic reduction in Ghosts. It is, by Auster's own admission, a kind of "Walden Pond in the heart of the city" ("Interview JM" 110), and also mirrors the single room in the Hawthorne home in Salem where the young writer lived a solitary existence for twelve years (G 175). "Writing is a solitary business. It takes over your life", Black tells Blue (175).

Just as Hawthorne wrote stories in virtual isolation for twelve years, so Blue spends months telling himself different stories to explain, to inscribe, Black – "[f]or Black is no more than a kind of blankness...and one story can fill this hole as well as any other" (145) – and himself. Blue sees in various magazine stories, anecdotes, and films, texts which are relevant to his situation:

> he wishes to God that his father could be there, walking over the river and telling him stories. Then, suddenly aware of what his mind is doing, he wonders why he has turned so sentimental....It's all part of it, he thinks....That's what happens when you have no one to talk to. (151)

Solitude makes his consciousness a site for the inscription of his own life in relation to surrounding 'texts'.

The extent to which one is free to negotiate a place within that 'text' is one of the issues which the three novellas of The New York Trilogy seek to explore. It is made explicit in Ghosts, for example, that a text both holds the key to a fuller understanding of the nature of freedom and identity, and also intimates that textual entrapment (which perhaps arises from an unwillingness or incapacity to 'read' the 'text') determines the (im)possibility of its attainment. This text is Walden, which Blue finds difficult and opaque (G 162). The narrator makes clear that were Blue to heed Thoreau's advice that

> [b]ooks must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written...his entire life would begin to change, and little by little he would come to a full understanding of his situation - that is to say, of Black, of White, of the case, of everything that concerns him. (163)

He would understand the textual – that is to say, "Black" and "White" – nature of existence, of everything that concerns him.

As his collapse gains momentum, Blue day-dreams that "everything in the world has its

own colour", and "begins to make a list" (182) of various blue objects, moving on to white, and then black objects (183); "finally growing tired of the game, he begins to drift, saying to himself that there is no end to it" (183, emphasis added). Each blue object named differs in shade from every other, and 'blue' cannot be said to be any one colour. Belief in the existence of transcendentally authored (and the Transcendentalists' quasi-Neoplatonic), non-relative, linguistic essences, dissolves in the unavoidable play of differences, in a text of which the title refers to the traces of those whose lives have not reached adequate closure.

The beginning of Blue's collapse is figured in terms taken directly from Walden. After encountering the masked 'White' at the post office, Blue realizes that "[t]he picture is far more complicated than [he] ever imagined" (G 168). He doubts the freedom he has felt during the more than a year spent on the case:

> [i]t seems perfectly plausible to him that he is also being watched, observed by another in the same way that he has been observing Black. If that is the case, then he has never been free. From the very start he has been the man in the middle, thwarted in front and hemmed in on the rear. Oddly enough, this thought reminds him of some sentences from Walden....We are not where we are, he finds, but in a false position. Through an infirmity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out. (168)

Blue's conceptualization of the nature of his own identity, and relation to others, is shown to be false. Interesting possibilities with regard to doubling being a manifestation of being "in two cases at the same time" – both 'being' without understanding how or why, and "being in a false position", and thus being double – are raised. Blue's problem is to identify "who poses the greater threat to him, White or Black?" (169), the unknown and indeterminable, or the known and observed? White and Black turn out to be the same person (190), "in league" (169), having "trapped Blue into doing nothing" they "reduce his life to almost no life at all...like a man... condemned to sit in a room and go on reading a book for the rest of his life" (169). Negation is expressly linked with an acknowledgment of the textuality of existence, and the impossibility of achieving closure, either interpretive or narrative.

Arguing that Auster seeks to challenge metanarratives[19] which present the attainment of perfect knowledge as possible by positing a nothing which is a radical alterity, a "fugitive otherness", Little reaffirms the suitability of appropriating for subversion a genre premised on the organisation of all fragments into a solution, an explanation offering access to perfect knowledge (133, 136).

In City of Glass, Quinn's initial violent hermeticism evidences in its asceticism "a will and a desire to purge difference from...the self" (Little 134-35). Blue similarly attempts to assert the validity of received notions of selfhood, but is, like Quinn, frustrated. Blue's response to Walden perfectly demonstrates this. His expectations of a linear narrative which reaches closure are undermined. In place of "a story, or at least...something like a story", Blue finds "an endless harangue", significantly, "about nothing at all" (G 163 emphasis added). Alterity, nothingness, all that resists interpretive capture, forces Blue to engage in a scrutiny of the self, as Thoreau did in Walden.

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The mysteriousness of experience, frustrating detective-like approaches which seek to decipher every unexpected occurrence, is repeatedly dramatized in Auster's work. "We're surrounded by things we don't understand", he states, and in the novellas of The New York Trilogy, his characters "suddenly come face to face with them":

> [i]t becomes more apparent that they're surrounded by things they don't know or understand....Even if the situations aren't strictly realistic, they might follow some realistic psychology. These are things that we all feel – that confusion, that lack of knowing what it is that surrounds us. (Auster, "Interview JM" 109-10)

The experiences of Quinn in City of Glass, and of the protagonists of Ghosts and The Locked Room, have repeatedly been described by Auster as involving a process of "stripping" to a condition in which they, and we, must "face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally

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[19] Little includes in this category "the fundamentalist narrative of Divine Will, the humanist narrative of the divine self, the literary critical narrative of divine Author-ity" (134). More obviously, the text figures in this category the elder Stillman's linguistic-theological quest, and Quinn's initial belief in traditional strategies of detection.

comes to the same thing" ("Interview JM" 109). In search of "spiritual grace", characters suffer "a form of humiliation...perhaps...a necessary stage in discovering who we are" (ibid. 110). Auster describes Ghosts as reading "something like a fable" ("Interview LM&SG" 145).

Ascribing to his protagonists' 'quests' the nature of spiritual journeys and educative processes, Auster implies that his fable-like stories represent some 'lesson', even while they eschew such, or any, meaning: "whether or not [the story] means something is not for the story to tell" (CG 3). He identifies the breakup of his first marriage and separation from his son as the "emotional source" of City of Glass ("Interview LM&SG" 141). Auster had met and married Siri Hustvedt by the time he wrote the novel, and thinks of it as a "homage" to her, a way of imagining his fate had he not met her. "Perhaps my life would have been something like [Quinn's]", he states (142).[20]

The information that City of Glass is informed by Auster's own feelings of loss and 'redemption', and the implication that Quinn's and Blue's experiences are 'educative', suggests that Auster's fiction is always concerned with what, for want of a better word, might be termed the ethical dimensions of subjectivity. Because his fiction is, he admits, influenced by his own life and experiences – "the material that I feel compelled to write about...is dredged up from the depths of my own memories" ("Interview LM&SG" 126) – I wish to pursue these observations by glancing backwards, to The Invention of Solitude (1982), before returning to consider the final part of The New York Trilogy, and the novels which follow.

[20] In Auster's screenplay for the film Smoke, the writer Paul Benjamin, has, like Quinn, suffered the loss of his wife, and (unborn) child (Smoke 27). Benjamin leads a lonely existence, like Quinn, but unlike Quinn he is 'saved' through encounters with others during the course of the film.

CHAPTER TWO

The Invention of Solitude: Writing the Self, Remembering the World

> How through memory a person is one, and how without it there is no more I, or at least a continuous I, no more past, no more future.
> (Joseph Joubert, The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection Trans. Paul Auster 55)

> Writing is a wager of solitude, flux and reflux of anxiety. It is also the reflection of a reality reflected in its new origin, whose image we shape deep in our jumble of desires and doubts.
> (Edmond Jabès, "Of Solitude as the Space of Writing" The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion 35)

> The book [The Invention of Solitude] wasn't written as a form of therapy; it was an attempt to turn myself inside-out and examine what I was made of. Myself, yes - but myself as anyone, myself as everyone.
> (Paul Auster, "Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory" 136)

I Filling the blank photo album: finding an invisible father

The Invention of Solitude can rightly be regarded as Auster's ars poetica (Bruckner 27). This text is central to any consideration of Auster's oeuvre. It is "the matrix of everything he has written since" (Chénetier, "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World" 36), and can be treated as something of a blend of critical or expository essay and pseudo-autobiographical investigation using the techniques of narrative fiction. Despite the fact that both parts of the text deal with elements of their author's life, Auster has maintained that he was not intent on the writing of autobiography.[1] He emphasizes, in three separate interviews, that his aim was to explore "certain questions" in a narrative with himself as "central character" ("Interview JM" 106), using the circumstances of his own life to investigate "certain questions that are common to us all", particularly our relationship to memory ("Interview LM&SG" 136). The resulting book reflects, in his words, "an attempt to turn myself inside-out and examine what I was made of. Myself, yes - but myself as anyone, myself as everyone" (ibid.).

Pascal Bruckner argues that Auster's text avoids the "orgy of egotism" and "invasive

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[1] I will nonetheless refer to the narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" as Auster, in addition to the more clumsy, if more correct, "the narrator". Dennis Barone agrees that "Auster is creating art in The Invention of Solitude, not writing autobiography" ("Introduction" 14). Despite the fact that elements of Auster's own experiences inform the actions and thoughts of many of his protagonists, "self-referentiality should not be taken as autobiography" (ibid.).

proliferation of autobiography, of the diary, of self-preoccupation as a genre in and of itself" which, in his view, is what has retarded recent French literature (Bruckner 30). Motoyuki Shibata, one of Auster's Japanese translators, makes the point that The Invention of Solitude is more of a novel than a memoir. It is, Shibata writes, "a refreshing change from the Japanese tradition of the shi-shosetsu (I-novel), a strongly autobiographical, and highly confessional type of novel: something that resembles but is entirely different from Mr. Auster's book" (187); "[p]erhaps influenced by this tradition of shi-shosetsu, most reviewers in Japan identified, I think rightly, The Invention of Solitude as a novel: almost no one called it a memoir or an autobiography" (ibid. 188). In an early draft of "Portrait of an Invisible Man", Auster writes "[t]his is not an autobiography" after several long passages of childhood recollections, which he deletes, along with everything which is too autobiographical (Auster, "Manuscript/Book" 183).

Auster's text is a moving meditation on memory and loss, providing insight into some of the concerns central to his writing: the desire to recuperate memory and experience; to record, despite the imprecisions and uncertainty of language and the power of silence; and to recognise and confront the implications of death. Time and again, the protagonists in Auster's novels make the mistakes which Auster intimates his father made; repeatedly they struggle with similar longings and frustrations in attempts to define themselves, and write their, and others', lives. The Invention of Solitude is Auster's aesthetic, and, I will argue, ethical manifesto.

When his father died on 15 January 1979, Auster recalls that he experienced an immediate desire to achieve some physical record of his father's life ("Manuscript/Book" 177). Disturbed less by the fact of his father's death than because he appeared to have left "no traces", Auster fears that, unless he acts quickly, his father's life will "vanish along with him" (IS 6). What is born of this desire to record is an intensely moving document, forever aware of the near impossibility of its task, offering nevertheless a precious handful of carefully observed details and vivid recollections. His father's physical presence is remembered, the experience of having to sort through his father's possessions is painfully evoked, glimpses of his parents' unhappy marriage offered, and the secret haunting his father's family is revealed. The 80 fragments of this incomplete mosaic evoke the inevitably fragmentary nature of a painful experience.

Sam Auster is described as an invisible man (7). The narrator's abiding childhood recollections of his father emphasize this absence (20), giving way to a "craving" for notice (21). Auster's father seems always to have been "implacably neutral on the surface" (20), apparently distant from himself, taking refuge in "predictable" (20) behaviour; removal from all interactions with others was the "fundamental quality of his being" (6). The attempt to record in order to preserve something of this life is no more than a continuation of the narrator's own lifelong search for a more physically present and emotionally responsive father. Absent at Auster's birth (18-19) and in large measure absent from much of his son's life, Sam Auster's death makes final an absence marked "[e]ven before his death" (6); his life was "death by anticipation" (7). The fact of his father's death has made Auster's recuperative quest more urgent: "[t]he only difference is that I have run out of time" (7).

The son finds hundreds of family photographs scattered in his father's bedroom drawers in a manner suggestive of indifference or neglect (13). More unsettling is the discovery of a large, expensively leather-bound album embossed with the legend "This is our life: The Austers", but completely blank inside (14). Both suggest a reluctance on his father's part to consider himself in relation to his family. A trick photograph from Atlantic City from the 1940s shows five views of the narrator's father around a table: none of these selves makes eye contact, "[i]t is a picture of death, a portrait of an invisible man" (31). The torn portrait of the narrator's paternal grandparent(s) and their children presents, in the excision of his grandfather (34), the text's most literally absent father.

These photographs embody absence and reflect the difficulties faced by any practice – with obvious implications for language – attempting to achieve permanent record. Roland Barthes, in a text strikingly similar to The Invention of Solitude in structure, tone, and originating impulse,[2] laments the inability of our discourses to guarantee any permanent

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[2] Barthes's Camera Lucida is a contemplative examination of memory and photography. Like Auster's text, Barthes was prompted to record his thoughts in response to the death of a parent – his mother. Barthes's text also has two sections, and consists of numerous fragments which, unlike Auster's, are numbered. The title – literally the clear room – invites comparison with the site of Auster's contemplations, particularly in the second part of the text, "The Book of Memory". Auster may have been familiar with Barthes's text. He claims in an interview that Peter Handke's A Sorrow beyond Dreams and Geoffrey's Wolff's The Duke of Deception are the closest to 'models' for "Portrait of an Invisible Man" ("Manuscript/Book" 179-80).

memory: "[h]istory is a memory fabricated according to positive formulas, a pure intellectual discourse which abolishes mythic Time...the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony" (93). Everything, he continues, prepares us for the impotence of being no longer able "to conceive duration, affectively or symbolically" (Barthes 93). This notion is similar to one which assumes importance in the second part of The Invention of Solitude.

It is ironic that the only firm records of Auster's family's history are clearly unreliable and subject to decay. Amongst the photographs is the trick studio picture – the result of artifice – and a torn and edited 'family' portrait. The "barely legible" reports of the Auster murder case are "almost totally obscured by age and the hazards of photocopying" (35). It is ironic too that the only firm though decaying record of a profoundly important family event – the murder of the narrator's grandfather by his grandmother (35), an event which, it is intimated, affected his father's behaviour – exists in the public rather than the private sphere. It is not a record for the narrator's private memory, but commodified for public consumption and record: the facts of the case, Auster writes, do not disturb him more than seeing them in print, "unburied, so to speak, from the realm of secrets and turned into a public event" (35).

The narrator's growing sense of his own isolation in the face of the difficulty of his assumed task forces him to confront the implications of his position. He reads from a letter by Van Gogh on the importance of interaction with others, a subject which is to develop into a key theme in The Invention of Solitude. The haunting poem "In Memory of Myself", from Auster's 1980 anthology, Facing the Music, emphasises an awareness of being present in the world despite the difficulty of enunciating this experience: "in spite of myself // I am here. // As if this were the world"; "myself / the sound of a word // I cannot speak" (GW 97). In the same collection, "S.A. 1911-1979" – a poem in memory of his father – draws attention to the imperfect nature of the only available medium in which to remember:

> To say no more
> than the truth of it: men die, the world fails, the
> words
> have no meaning. And therefore to ask
> only for words.
> (GW 92)

The narrator of The Invention of Solitude accepts that he can speak only of "things that cannot be verified" (20). The impossibility of achieving a true or lasting record in "Portrait" is an omnipresent challenge to Auster's project, and the attempt in the second part to write a "Book of Memory" can yield only fragments. Auster's self-confessed examination in "Portrait" of the possibility of writing or speaking about anyone else ("Manuscript/Book" 180) enunciates a concern that weaves itself through the fabric of his entire oeuvre. Quinn's difficulties in transcribing his observation of Stillman; Blue's frustration at realising he cannot decisively 'know' or record anything about Black, or himself; the narrator of The Locked Room's similarly worded observation about his relationship with Fanshawe; Anna's struggle to record her experiences in In the Country of Last Things; Aaron's necessarily incomplete grasp of Sachs's life, experience and motivations in Leviathan: these and other instances reflect this problem.

The narrator enters into little speculation about the reasons for his father's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge or relate to a world outside himself. Is it perhaps a result of the childhood trauma of his mother killing his father? Is he frightened to reveal an emptiness in himself? The narrator speculates that there was something inside his father, a fury, which he was constantly fighting (31). Whatever the explanation, the world for his father was "a place he was never truly able to enter" (24), and which he stubbornly refused to accept (25);[3] "the domain of the other was unreal to him" (15), "[o]ne could not believe there was such a man...who wanted so little of others" (20). Apparently feeling himself crushed by the presences of others (31), the narrator's father shows them only an impenetrable surface, and operates in the world as an actor, presenting a "surrogate self" which is a "fabricator of tall tales" (15), a fabulator of his own, and his family's, history (22-23, 32).

The solitude in which his father seems to have existed is distinguished from the solitude into which the narrator feels himself to have withdrawn in the process of undertaking his recuperative, remedial task. In an interview Auster comments that solitude, rather than being a

[3] "His refusal to look into himself was matched by an equally stubborn refusal to look at the world, to accept even the most incontrovertible evidence" (25). Auster writes this about his father's response to his [Auster's] sister's mental illness.

synonym for "loneliness and isolation" ("Interview LM&SG" 142), is for him that state within which a sense of self is formed by consciousness, within which one continues conversations with oneself (ibid. 143). Also involved, however, is a simultaneous acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of others: "you don't begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone" (ibid. 144).

Solitude allows for the discovery of self and the other in a state of silent examination: Auster is fond of evoking an image of Thoreau's "exiling himself in order to find where he was" (IS 16). "The Book of Memory" develops the biblical account of the prophet Jonah as an exemplary metaphor for a consideration of solitude. "Every book is an image of solitude" (136), Auster asserts in "The Book of Memory". "Portrait of an Invisible Man" describes Sam Auster's as a different kind of solitude, as a retreat "[i]n the sense of...not having to see himself being seen by anyone else" (16-17);[4] Auster comments elsewhere that "we can only see ourselves because someone else has seen us first" ("Interview LM&SG" 143).

The first part of The Invention of Solitude is thus Auster's response to his father's death. The two parts of the book were supposed to be separate; it was purely publishing expediency which yoked them together, Auster explains, although he admits that there was some movement of material between the parts ("Manuscript/Book" 180-82). Auster's project in "Portrait of an Invisible Man" prepares for that of "The Book of Memory": in the former he attempts to "recognize his determinedly isolated father", in the latter, "to make that reconstituted person a defining situation for himself, a father in turn" (Creeley 36). At one point in "The Book of Memory" A. imagines what his own son sees when he looks at him, and is moved to find himself "becoming his own father"; he is moved by "the thought of standing inside his father" and by "what he sees in the boy of his own vanished past" (IS 81).

Auster and his first wife separated shortly after his father's death, between the writing of "Portrait" and "The Book of Memory" ("Interview LM&SG" 138, IS 101). Auster fears that separation from his son may perpetuate "the curse of the absent father" (IS 117), and he must

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[4] Auster recalls that his father's voice sounded as if he were "making a great effort to rise up out of his solitude" (29), and that he seemed to see everything "only through the mists of his solitude, as if at several removes from himself" (24).

thus identify and come to terms with the affliction so identified so as not to pass it to the next generation (Baxter 42): "[b]y giving birth to his own parent through words, the author repairs a broken communication and makes it possible for himself, in turn, to become a father" (Bruckner 27). Auster's fear of losing his son, Daniel, or of being a distant father, as his own father was to him, is poignantly described. The idea of losing a child, Auster writes in his preface to the bilingual edition of his translation of Mallarmé's "A Tomb for Anatole", "is the ultimate horror of every parent, an outrage against all we believe we can expect of life, little though it is. For everything, at that point, is taken away from us" ("Mallarmé's Son" 86). Auster's translation of a selection of the fragments of notes for a poem which Mallarmé made in an attempt to write about the death of his only son, Anatole, was first published in The Paris Review in Summer 1980. Anatole died of child's rheumatism in October 1879, after a long illness, at the age of eight (Auster, "Translator's Introduction: 'A Tomb for Anatole'" 135).

Auster writes in "The Book of Memory" of the serious illness of A.'s son (in other words, of his own son, Daniel) (IS 106-108). A. recalls working up the final version of an earlier translation of "A Tomb for Anatole" soon after his son's illness, and realizes that he was moved to complete this translation as a means of reliving his panic at his own son's condition (IS 109). Both Quinn in City of Glass and Paul Benjamin in Smoke suffer the loss of a child.[5] Auster's fiction returns repeatedly to the concern with fatherhood which is initially represented in The Invention of Solitude. Father/son relationships are important in Ghosts and Moon Palace. Auster also uses a story which Blue considers in Ghosts about a French skier who discovers the body of his father perfectly preserved in ice (150-51), in Smoke (92), where Paul Benjamin tells the story to 'Rashid'/Thomas Cole, who is himself in search of his absent father, with whom he is reconciled in the fourth 'part' of the film.[6]

Part of Auster's strategy in "The Book of Memory" in seeking to avoid his father's

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[5] As does Anna, through a miscarriage, in In the Country of Last Things (128). In Moon Palace, Kitty Wu has an abortion (278-81), as does Felicity in Smoke (89).

[6] The notion of a father being younger than his son, which is present in the story of the two skiers – the father went missing while skiing and died at a younger age than the son is now – is toyed with in an episode in which 'Rashid'/Thomas claims to be Paul Benjamin's father (Smoke 96).

destructive solipsism, to acknowledge the alterity which his father refused, and to explore further those issues of memory and subjectivity raised in the first part, is to conceive of himself as another. "In order to write about myself, I had to treat myself as though I were someone else", Auster explains ("Interview JM" 106).[7]

The image of a son saving a father is repeated. Auster considers Gepetto (in Pinocchio) in the belly of the shark (in the original version) and wonders whether it is true "that one must dive to the depths of the sea and save one's father to become a real boy?" (IS 79). In the Disney version of the story, Pinocchio swims with Gepetto on his back; this evokes for Auster "the image...of Aeneas bearing Anchises on his back from the ruins of Troy" (133):

> [t]he son saves the father. This must be fully imagined from the perspective of the little boy. And this, in the mind of the father who was once a little boy, a son, that is, to his own father, must be fully imagined. Puer aeternus. The son saves the father. (134)

The aim of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" is to give birth to the narrator's father in the sense of achieving a lasting memory of the man. Kierkegaard's words, cited near the end of "Portrait" - "he who is willing to work gives birth to his own father" (68) - prepare for allusions to birth at the beginning of "The Book of Memory", where A. is described as being alone on Christmas Eve in the sparsely furnished flat which has been his home for a significant nine months (76-77). The sense of expectation thus evoked is validated by the information that "sudden knowledge" about the nature of his project was acquired by A. on Christmas Eve, 1979, alone in his room on Varick Street (139), in a kind of birthing experience. Auster's text is presented as a factual account, yet the presumably coincidental correspondence of this significant experience with Christmas Eve makes a typical contribution to the tone and mythic resonance of the work as a whole.

II On becoming more than just oneself: writing a Book of Memory

The eighty fragments of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" are separated by white spaces suggestive of all the threats to Auster's project. "The Book of Memory" - in a sense, the record of the

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[7] Just as he tells his son stories in which the little boy is the hero, so, "A. realizes, as he sits in his room writing The Book of Memory, he speaks of himself as another in order to tell the story of himself. He must make himself absent in order to find himself there. And so he says A., even as he means to say I" (IS 254).

attempt to write the impossible – consists of eighty-seven fragments, some no more than a few lines, many more than one paragraph in length. This second part of The Invention of Solitude is particularly rich in quotations from and references to other writers or written sources, creating the impression of a conversation with all those literary parents to whose wisdom Auster turns in the absence of his own father, all those writers and thinkers whose thoughts he finds constitutive of his own. If "Portrait of an Invisible Man" presents an attempt to deliver the narrator's father from the past, then "The Book of Memory", in the course of an investigation into the possibilities of remembering, becomes an investigation of the manner in which we conceive of the possibilities of our own selfhood, and the relationship between our own past and present. A close examination of the first eleven fragments of "The Book of Memory" may be useful in canvassing both the major concerns of Auster's "Book" and the method of exposition of these concerns.

The first fragment is as follows: "[h]e lays down a piece of blank paper on the table before him and writes these words with his pen. It was. It will never be again" (75). This fragment includes a simple statement of loss – "[i]t was. It will never be again" (75) – ostensibly written by an as yet unnamed protagonist.[8] The present tense employed by the narrator suggests initially that an impression of immediacy is desired: the reader is invited to imagine the man laying out a piece of paper and writing the statement of loss. The self-reflexive potential of the opening sentence soon becomes clear, however, suggesting that the words being written by the silent individual – "these words" – refer to the short statement of loss which follows, as much, perhaps, as to the sentence in which he is said to "write these words"; the words which he writes might thus not only be "It was. It will never be again", but the first fragment in its entirety. Later fragments offer less ambiguous attributions of activity, but this once the reader has learnt in the third fragment that the protagonist has decided to refer to himself as another (75).

The first person narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" has decided to substitute "he"

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[8] The fragments discussed will be referred to as "the first fragment", or "fragment one", and so on. I take the first eleven fragments to be the eleven prose sections separated by large white spaces, beginning with the first paragraph after the epigraph, to the end of the paragraph ending "this is what he haunts" (81).

and "A." for the first person singular pronoun in order to imagine himself as a character in a story: "he speaks of himself as another in order to tell the story of himself" (154). The loss of subjectivity is thus a technique employed in a text which investigates memory, but which appears also to investigate the condition of subjectivity, suggesting a connection between them. Auster, I feel, would wholly endorse the fragment, quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, from Joseph Joubert's notebooks, a selection from which Auster published in translation, and which, in an interview with Stephen Rodefer, he calls one of the texts which belongs to his "inner world" ("Translation" 103).

In "Portrait" Auster had written of the need to "enter the absolute darkness of earth" in order to understand his father's death (33); in "The Book of Memory" he enters this darkness by relinquishing his subjectivity. Fragment seven makes reference to the fact that it has just been winter solstice, "the darkest time of the year" (78); Auster comments that Jonah, the only one among the prophetic books written in the third person, is "more dramatically a story of solitude than anything else in the Bible" because it comments seemingly objectively on that solitude from a distance: "plunging into the darkness of that solitude, the 'I' has vanished from itself. It cannot speak of itself, therefore, except as another" (124). He finds in this the statement of a necessary relation with others, an important issue to which I will return.

Fragment two gives the first indication of the impossibility of signifying that which has been lost. A. struggles not just to read, but to decipher, to decode, what he has written; those words he does understand do not convey the meaning which he intended. Language, as he writes later, "is not truth. It is the way we exist in the world" (161). The writer of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" had to reconcile himself to the incommensurability of his story with language (32-33); it is clear that, in the process of working on a linguistic record of his past and present, he is attempting to come to terms with what it means to exist in the world.

The fourth fragment, beginning with a record of the present in which it is written, "Christmas Eve, 1979" (76), states more explicitly A.'s problems with conceptualizations of time. He has difficulty conceiving of the present; he imagines current affairs bulletins as bringing news of the distant past and feels about the present as if he is "looking at it from the future",

from whence it appears as an "antiquated" "present-as-past" (76). The problem is how to live in the present moment, and how to retain in the present a memory of the past, which was once the present. Every present is made into a past by time's progress, so as present yields to future, present recedes to past, and experience becomes apparently irretrievable, consigned to the ill-defined condition of memory. This inability to conceive of the present repeats itself in an obsession with projecting the future condition of that which he observes. He perceives in this future – to quote, as Auster does, Flaubert – "the antithesis" of everything that is present (87). Each time he sees a child or a beautiful young woman he attempts to envisage the child as an adult, the woman as aged, "as if...compelled to hunt out the future, to track down the death that lives in each of us" (ibid.).

The following fragment engages explicitly with memory through references to "classical memory systems" (76), none of which are capable of adequate temporal capture.[9] Both fragments five and six are phrased as notes from the writer to himself to include this material in his "Book of Memory". This lends to Auster's text the appearance of an outline rather than a completed text, because the latter is the object, as countless repeated intimations evidence, of a desire incapable of linguistic realization. The fragments also acquire the quality either of an Ur-text, something which precedes, or of a trace, that which is left of an inadequately realized intention. Both indicate a relationship of removal from an achieved present or presence – what comes before, what remains after – engaging in this (structural) way with the text's overarching relationship with time.

The sixth fragment presents, "as if running parallel" to the concern with memory, the importance of the site within which these contemplations occur – the room. Fragment seven presents a statement in summary of the terms of the project outlined in the preceding fragments. Auster sketches the conditions within which the work of attempting to record his own present, and what is past, is undertaken. As if to emphasize that he thinks he can begin, a heading – "The Book of Memory. Book One" (76) – prefaces a restatement of the time, and a more precise

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[9] Two quotations from Pascal relating exactly this are later given as possible epigraphs for Auster's "Book" (139-40).

statement of the space, of his writing: a small room at 6 Varick Street, Manhattan (77, also 101). The irony in the appearance of a formal beginning with which the heading dignifies this fragment is that the writer apparently keeps having to make a new start. There are twelve more such headings, numbered consecutively; the ambiguity which arises suggests not only that there are thirteen parts to the Book, but perhaps also that there are thirteen books, thirteen attempts to start the Book.

Work performs a recuperative function in "Portrait of an Invisible Man". Auster deleted a line about his father not having "a work to be remembered by" from an early draft ("Manuscript/Book" 181), and the idea of achieving visibility – or even being – through work done, informs the "Portrait", a text which seeks to rescue an image of the writer's father. "The Book of Memory" seems likewise to be concerned with work: A. lives in a building which "used to be nothing but a work place", but the barely furnished room in which he lives also requires from him "work, real spiritual work" to achieve a sense of presence (77, emphases added). The "Book" as a whole is a work which seeks to reflect the results of the work done in the room. Auster writes later in discussion about Pinocchio that "it is only in the darkness of solitude that the work of memory begins" (164, emphasis added), where work might refer to the activity or an artefact. In "Portrait", Auster writes of a preoccupation with lines from the work of Maurice Blanchot which assert the importance and profundity of that which is spoken when one stops speaking. He follows this with a gloss on his undertaking in "Portrait": "[t]o begin with death. To work my way back into life, and then, finally, to return to death" (63, emphasis added). Awareness of the work necessary to define himself in the present, in the solitude of his room and of his work, is – as it was for the creator of Max Work in City of Glass – self-evidently important to the narrator of "The Book of Memory", and finds expression in a manner bearing comparison with some of Blanchot's ideas.

Auster published a translation of Blanchot – Vicious Circles: Two Fictions & "After the Fact" – in 1985, some years after the publication of The Invention of Solitude.[10] He included a

[10] Auster also translated, with Rosmarie Waldrop, an essay by Blanchot – "Interruptions" – on Edmond Jabès (Kronick 983), whose relation to Auster will be discussed later in this chapter.

translation of Blanchot's essay on Joseph Joubert as the afterword in The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert: A Selection (published 1983), which Auster edited and translated. His first wife, Lydia Davis, translated several Blanchot texts, and, in her translator's introduction to one of these texts, acknowledges Paul Auster's "constant encouragement and thoughtful advice, and for first pointing the way to the works of Maurice Blanchot" (quoted in Nealon, "Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer" 108).

Blanchot enjoys an imposing reputation among literary intellectuals in France, where his concern with the nature of literature has been enormously influential. Auster was very familiar with French literature. A. has recently returned from a work-related visit to Paris in November/December 1979 (80, 82, 93, 109); Auster was at the time editing The Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry, to which he contibuted 42 of his own translations. Blanchot's L'Espace littéraire, translated as The Space of Literature, investigates the meaning of "solitude", and many of Blanchot's primary contentions in this text seem to inform Auster's.

Blanchot argues that the "essential solitude" is not that of the individual or artist, but of the work itself (21). This implies that the more impersonal third person substitutes for the writer in the work which is produced: "[t]he third person substituting for the 'I': such is the solitude that comes to the writer on account of the work" (Blanchot 28). Blanchot argues further that "[t]o write is to surrender to the fascination of time's absence", a time in which "the 'I' that we are recognizes itself by sinking into the neutrality of a featureless third person" (30).

The implication is that Blanchot regards this as a description of what happens in the process of writing, as something over which the writer has no control. Whether or not the writer writes of an individual as "I", such objectification takes place. Auster's text applies this experience as a literal technique; his self-objectification is conscious, and with the purpose of finding out how to be himself in the present moment. For Blanchot the absence of time to which he refers is "a real time in which death is present....The dead present is the impossibility of making any presence real - an impossibility which is present" (31). It is just this problem with which Auster's A., the "featureless third person" which he himself becomes, struggles. Blanchot

discerns in this absence of time, and of subjectivity, a "faceless third person" representing all which one is not (31). The notion of another, represented metonymically by a face (or absence of a face, as for Blanchot), will be explored further in the following chapter.

Auster describes as a womb the room in which his friend, the composer S., works on a musical composition which, somewhat like Auster's "Book", is a "work-to-be-done-that-is-done-in-the-process-of-doing-it" (91 emphasis added). This room is also a dark space in which a relationship with the self is sought:

> [t]he room he lived in was a dream space, and its walls were like the skin of some second body around him, as if his own body had been transformed into a mind, a breathing instrument of pure thought. This was the womb, the belly of the whale, the original site of the imagination. By placing himself in the darkness, S. had invented a way of dreaming with open eyes. (89)

In a later fragment of "The Book of Memory", Auster writes of certain rhyming words sharing some link, and postulates a connection between, amongst others, the words 'room', 'tomb' and 'womb' (160). The room at 6 Varick Street is profitably construed as both womb and tomb, as site of a birthing experience which involves a curious form of self-annulment through objectification. A. becomes the invisible man of the second half of The Invention of Solitude: entering the void of his small room is like "being forced to watch his own disappearance" (77), it is "as if he were living somewhere to the side of himself" (78).

The former work-place in which Auster lives invites intertextual comparison with the office in Melville's "Bartleby". The room becomes a site of extreme solitude, of "a long moment of inwardness" (IS 78), a description which concedes to the concerns with time and enclosure in its formulation. A. experiences a feeling of "doors being shut, of locks being turned", but the room is nonetheless not the site of a destructive or fruitless retreat (78); on the contrary - as the whale saves rather than destroys Jonah (125) - being in the room forces Auster to confront his own self-conception, to assess the conditions and possibilities of his own existence: "[t]he world has shrunk to the size of this room for him, and for as long as it takes him to understand it, he must stay where he is. Only one thing is certain: he cannot be anywhere until he is here" (79). Auster alone in his Varick Street room is a Thoreau in the midst of Manhattan, in his "Walden Pond in the heart of the city", as Auster describes the protagonist of Ghosts

("Interview JM" 110).

Other images of solitude are employed. Fragment eight introduces what is to become a major comparative circumstance, the experience of Jonah in the whale. The manner in which this is introduced, as a "gloss", with a "[p]arallel text" on elements of the story of Pinocchio, introduces the idea of commentary, which is an important element in my later discussion of Auster's possible debt to a Jewish literary tradition. Much of "The Book of Memory" is constituted of fragments from other sources, other voices. Fragment nine conflates images of Crusoe alone on his island, with George Oppen's expression of the solitariness of urban existence, "the shipwreck of the singular" (79).[11] There is no Friday on this island, no intimation yet of the importance of the other – "[e]verything that happens is prior to that moment" (80), the long moment of inwardness in the room during which Auster's concerns become paramount. The importance of the room is reflected in Auster's conflation of the space of the room with the space of memory, literal and metaphoric sites of ethical discovery.

There are numerous other rooms in the text. Auster recalls visiting Emily Dickinson's room (122-23), and discusses Hölderlin's mental breakdown, and the 36 years he subsequently spent alone in a room built by his friend Zimmer – German for "room" (98). Anne Frank's room features too. Memory is repeatedly figured as a space, "the space of memory". A. conceives of an "immense Babel inside him", and imagines the din of a thousand languages and conversations echoing inside the space of memory as if through "a maze of rooms, corridors, and stairways, hundreds of stories high" (136). Memory is "a place...a building...a sequence of columns, corridors, porticoes" (82), a "room...a body...a skull that encloses the room in which the body sits" (88); he imagines "[t]he body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there, going from one place to the next" (82).[12]

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[11] The motif of the shipwreck appears in a discussion of Jonah, during which these words of Oppen's are repeated (IS 126). The importance of Oppen's thought and poetry for Auster's work is discused in a later chapter. I believe that "O." in one of the fragments in "The Book of Memory" refers to Oppen (IS 145). The physical description fits that of Oppen, who was a friend of Auster's.

[12] Memory is also conceived of as a voice (123). Auster considers the prophetic voices of Cassandra, Jeremiah and, of course, Jonah.

It is in the space of the room, and thus also in himself – the space of his mind, of memory – that something happens, a process or an event fundamental to the concept of individual subjectivity in Auster's oeuvre. "It begins, therefore, with this room" (80):

> everything he is trying to record in The Book of Memory, everything he has written so far, is no more than the translation of a moment or two of his life – those moments he lived through on Christmas Eve, 1979, in his room at 6 Varick Street. (136)

This moment is figured as one of "illumination", and likened to a similar experience recorded by Pascal (137). The extent to which Auster's realization implies a sharing of the substance of Pascal's experience is not made explicit. The suggestion in the eleventh fragment that to be reduced to saying nothing is to arrive at a moment in which all is explained, "at some instant of experience that defies all sense" (81), appears at first to suggest that A.'s experience of illumination does not repeat Pascal's apprehension of a transcendent presence and certainty of a supreme being (137). The extent to which Auster invokes the idea of a (divinely) authored state of being is for obvious reasons important for any consideration of his relationship to postmodernism; in "Portrait" he speculates that what is of paramount importance is an attempt "to arrive at the core of human feeling, in spite of the evidence" (28). However, the "meaninglessness" which A. "[a]t his bravest moments...embraces...as the first principle" suggests a belief that this meaninglessness demands an active engagement which conflates the aesthetic and the ethical:

> he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees. He is in his room on Varick Street. His life has no meaning. The book he is writing has no meaning....Then he writes: to enter this room is to vanish in a place where past and present meet. (147-48)

Fragment ten introduces Auster's concern with chance, the heading engaging once more with the idea of commentary. Chance is construed as the often seemingly inexplicable relation between things in the world, underlining the existence, for Auster, of a comprehensive though incomprehensible "complex network of connections", a "grammar of existence" (161). Auster speculates that Freud's notion of the unheimlich, or uncanny, as the unexpected revival of the manner in which one perceived the world as a child, explains our experiences of unease at such moments (148-49).

Just as words can rhyme, so too can events, establishing "a connection in the world, adding one more synapse to be routed through the vast plenum of experience" (161). One tends not to see such connections in the world, but when one does chance to do so, one's mind becomes "a bridge for things across time and space, across seeing and memory" (ibid.). From this is developed an enunciation of Auster's most important experience, that

> even in the solitude of his room, the world has been rushing in on him at a dizzying speed, as if it were all suddenly converging in him and happening to him at once....The mind, therefore, as that which contains more than itself. (162)

What A. discovers in his solitude is the importance of a relationship with others; his room "is not a retreat from the world" (78). Rather, as he writes, he feels

> that he is moving inward (through himself) and at the same time moving outward (towards the world). What he experienced, perhaps, during those few moments on Christmas Eve, 1979, as he sat alone in his room on Varick Street, was this: the sudden knowledge that came over him that even alone, in the deepest solitude of his room, he was not alone, or, more precisely, that the moment he began to try to speak of that solitude, he had become more than just himself. Memory, therefore, not simply as the resurrection of one's private past, but an immersion in the past of others....Everything, therefore, is present in his mind at once, as if each element were reflecting the light of all the others, and at the same time emitting its own unique and unquenchable radiance. (139)

The ethical imperative of engaging with alterity, exactly what Sam Auster is shown in "Portrait" to have failed to do, is present too in Auster's use of the story of Jonah. Auster sees Jonah's flight from the Lord as representing a "refusal to turn one's face to the other" (125). But Jonah's ordeal in the belly of the leviathan, rather than his destruction, is the occasion of an opportunity for rebirth once he has accepted the demands of the other – in his case, the Jewish God (100, 125, 159). Jonah's experience of enclosure, darkness and figurative death, informs the similar experiences of protagonists in all of Auster's novels.

III "There is no promised land": reinventing Jewishness in <u>The Invention of Solitude</u>

In conversation with Michel Contat, Auster endorses a description of the "Portrait of an Invisible Man" as attempting, in a manner evocative of the "Jewish tradition of the book", to give birth to his father "through the book that makes him visible", to examine the conditions of

selfhood, what it takes "to be a 'mensch'" ("Manuscript/Book" 182-3).[13] In Yiddish, the concept of menschlikeit connotes a standard of behaviour for persons not in an ideal, but in this imperfect, world, prescribing the assumption of ethical responsibility (Hilfer 74). Presentation of this menschlikeit has traditionally characterized so-called Jewish-American literature, notably the fiction of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud.[14] Sam Auster was concerned with how to fit into the American machine. Auster recalls his father's devotion to work and his desire to amass a fortune (IS 52). This desire to become 'someone' in a capitalist, consumer society, represents a corrupted menschlikeit through its neglect of ethical imperatives. Sam Auster wanted money for its betokening of success, but also as "a way of making himself untouchable. Having money means...that the world need never affect you" (52-53). This denial of the claims of others comes for Auster to constitute his father's greatest failing.

The extent to which Auster's project in The Invention of Solitude can be considered as evidencing Jewish traits or concerns appears to invite further examination. What exactly is meant by the designation 'Jewish' literature? How does Auster's relation to a specifically or derivative 'Jewish' approach to textuality and subjectivity affect an attempt to comment on the nature and status of identity presented in his oeuvre?

Images of the desert, diaspora and exile – which, for many, as we shall see, are particularly 'Jewish' subjects – appear in Auster's work from the very first published poetry.

> 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: (dunes

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[13] Contat examined Auster's manuscript drafts of The Invention of Solitude in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. Contat addresses this comment to Auster: "[i]n a way, we have the feeling that you were writing this book for your father, in his place, you give birth to him by writing about him and at the same time you give birth to yourself as a writer...the book is addressed to your son, so that he can take his place in the chain of generations. It is a book of immigrants" (182). Auster endorses all of these comments.

[14] Is it notable that novelist Cynthia Ozick considers the postmodern implications for ethical Jewish humanism – or vice versa – in Leviathan: Five Fictions, published in 1982 (10 years before Auster's Leviathan) (Hilfer 82)? Ozick's work considers the lack of roots for present-day Jewish Americans.

that whirled free, – scree-words
shuttled
by the grate of sand, – the other
glass-round hours, redoubling
in remembrance). 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.
("Unearth XIV" GW 20)

As if to say,
wherever you are
the desert is with you. As if,
wherever you move, the desert
is new,
is moving with you.
(from "Unearth XXII" GW 28)

The anthology in which these poems first appeared, Unearth (1974), contains poems which evoke very strongly images of rupture, separation and nostalgia, a longing for something lost, traits which commentators suggest are representative of the contemporary 'secular Jewish' experience. The suggestion of provisionality and the nomadism of discourse contained in the above quoted designation of the speaker's language as "tent-speech" is emphasized by evocations of the desert as an omnipresent figurative state – "the never-done-with / desert" is always "with you", "wherever you are" – with violent implications for any desire for closure and transcendence. The tension between the hopelessness of diaspora and the messianic hope – paradoxically the defining and sustaining characteristic of the former – is neatly balanced in the reference to "the tent-speech / of our forty-dark, alodial-hued / next year". Forty days were spent in the ark of Noah, forty years in the desert; the invocation "next year" echoes the final words of the Passover Seder uttered by the ever-hopeful faithful: "[n]ext year in Jerusalem" (IS 117).

More disturbing evocations of Jewish suffering are suggested in later poems. Are the

"cursed and radiant" "murdered ones" suffering "the knives / of their humbled, birth-marked silence" in "Lies. Decrees. 1972." (GW 37), for example, the same as those the speaker joins in having the sky pin "a vagrant star / on my chest" ("Fore-shadows" GW 40)? This is clearly an allusion to the yellow Star of David which the Nazis compelled Jews to wear sewn onto the front of their clothing. The description of the star as "vagrant" further emphasizes the Jewish conditions of exile and wandering, whilst suggesting the designation of Jews by the Nazis as other, and stateless. Norman Finkelstein suggests that "Fore-shadows" is "addressed to victims of the Holocaust generally, but perhaps to lost Jewish writers in particular" ("In the Realm of the Naked Eye" [hereafter "Naked Eye"] 49). The poem ends with a pledge that the poet-speaker is become their "most necessary and most violent / heir" (GW 40).

The violence of the inescapable burden of exile enunciated by countless secular Jewish intellectuals is evidenced in Auster's poem "White", a movingly austere elegy for Paul Celan, who drowned himself in the Seine in 1970. The remarkable control exercised in the poem achieves a simplicity of utterance suggestive of a ravishing pain and sense of loss. The poem ends with a statement of exile and hopelessness: "forty days / and forty nights / have brought no dove / back to us" (GW 47). Auster, in his 1975 essay on Celan, "The Poetry of Exile", quotes Celan's comparison of poems to messages in bottles, thrown out to sea:[15]

> [p]oems...even in this sense are under way: they are heading toward something. Toward what? Toward some open place that can be inhabited, toward a thou which can be addressed, perhaps toward a reality which can be addressed. (157)

This search for a home, for a space to be occupied, and for a meaningful relationship with others, also aptly describes the search in Auster's poetry – clearly influenced by Jewish concerns – for an impossible completeness.[16] Finkelstein considers Auster to be "haunted by Jewish themes, and perhaps more importantly, by the Jewish attitude toward writing: to witness, to remember, to play divine and utterly serious textual games" ("Naked Eye" 49).

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[15] Hence the first verse paragraph of Auster's poem "White" reads: "For one who drowned: / this page, as if / thrown out to sea / in a bottle" (GW 47).

[16] "Auster's relation to Judaism and to poetic tradition...often become congruent in his poetry" (Finkelstein, "Naked Eye" 48). Auster is an instance of "the Jewish poet writing in tongues compounded by exile (the Egyptian French of Jabès, the American English of Auster, the German – unspeakable irony! – of the Romanian-born Celan): this is a special instance of otherness and a more pressing crisis of identification" (ibid. 49).

Other poems with explicitly Jewish echoes include "Song of Degrees" (GW 50-51), "virtually a midrash on the story of Jacob" (Finkelstein, "Naked Eye" 50), a theme revisited in the later poem "Between the Lines" (GW 96). The title of the poem "Covenant", with its imagery of the unleavened bread associated with Passover (GW 44), emphasises the employment of the idea of the Jews in Egypt for a specific effect in this poem. The words "Blood Hebrew" appear in the poem "Hieroglyph" (GW 46).

How strongly does Auster, a member of the second generation of his family born in the United States of America, identify with his own Jewish heritage?[17] In "Portrait of an Invisible Man" he recalls his father taking him as a small boy to Jewish restaurants in unfamiliar neighbourhoods, "dark places filled with old people" (IS 28). He recalls how he would watch his father eat traditional Eastern European Jewish food with a mixture of fascination and revulsion – "I, who was being brought up as an American boy, who knew less about my ancestors than I did about Hopalong Cassidy's hat" (28). Just as he comes to learn about his family's past (the murder of his grandfather), so the death of his father propels Auster into a (re)discovery – through his attempts to recuperate a memory, and a humane construction of his father – if not of the substance, then certainly of the implications and characteristics of the condition of Jewishness. In a long meditation on the personal meaning of baseball in "The Book of Memory", which demonstrates the extent to which he was an 'all-American kid' with an uncertain relation to his cultural/ethnic/religious identity, A. remembers that, "[i]n his own Jewish childhood", he would confuse

> the last words of the Passover Seder, "Next year in Jerusalem," with the ever-hopeful refrain of disappointed fandom, "Wait till next year," as if the one were a commentary on the other: to win the pennant was to enter the promised land. (117)

His later poetry and literary appreciation demonstrates a fuller understanding of the nature of hope for the promised land. The poem "Late Summer" ends with the assertion that "[t]here is no promised land" (GW 55). Similar, if more mundane, doubts are expressed in "Song of Degrees": nothing can "conjure you home" (GW 50). Auster's meditation in

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[17] "He remembers his grandmother telling him how she remembered coming to America from Russia when she was five years old" (IS 169).

appreciation of Kafka, "Pages for Kafka: on the fiftieth anniversary of his death" (1974), plays repeatedly with this idea.[18] In this essay, Auster writes of Kafka as follows:

> [h]e wanders toward the promised land. That is to say: he moves from one place to another, and dreams continually of stopping. And because this desire to stop is what haunts him, is what counts most for him, he does not stop. He wanders. That is to say: without the slightest hope of ever getting anywhere....He wanders. On a road that is not a road...an exile in his own body....For to enter the promised land is to despair of ever coming near it...in the least stone touched, he recognizes a fragment of the promised land. Not even the promised land, but its shadow. And between shadow and shadow lives light. And not just any light, but this light, the light that grows inside him, unendingly, as he goes along his way. (116-18)

Further direct references to a Jewish past are made in The Invention of Solitude. His father is impressed when Auster has articles published in Commentary: "he felt that if the Jews were publishing me, then perhaps there was something to it" (61). Several instances of anti-Semitism are also recalled. Auster suggests that the newspaper reports of his grandmother's murder trial evidence "scandalmongering and sentimentality", "heightened by the fact that the people involved were Jews - and therefore strange, almost by definition" (36); the reports describe the funeral proceedings as involving "short ritualistic ceremonies" (40, emphasis added). Auster's father worked briefly in Thomas Edison's laboratory, but was fired because he was Jewish (52).[19] Auster also remembers "refusing to sing Christmas carols at school because he was Jewish", and an incident in which, "coming home from the first day of Hebrew school wearing a new suit" he was "pushed into a creek by older boys in leather jackets who called him a Jew shit" (168).

Evocations of personal loss are balanced against a subtext constituted by references to loss on a far greater scale: the devastating wound of the Holocaust, or Shoah. Recalling a visit to Anne Frank's room, the narrator of "The Book of Memory" realizes that his book began at the moment he began crying in her room (82-83); he later quotes from her diary (157), and

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[18] The title of Auster's appreciation of Kafka suggests a familiarity with Walter Benjamin's essay, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" (Benjamin 108).

[19] Auster discusses in an interview how his father was hired as an assistant at Edison's laboratories at Menlo park, "but just a few weeks after he started the job, Edison discovered that he was Jewish and fired him" ("Interview LM&SG" 121). Moon Palace also offers an unflattering portrayal of Edison.

quotes Himmler's stated desire to "annihilate every Jewish child from the face of the earth" (98). Auster also quotes from the last testament of a Jew written in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. Israel Lichtenstein's record attests to the power and importance of memory; he prays that his daughter will be remembered, and that the Jews who await their death may "be the redeemers for all the rest of the Jews in the whole world...Jews will not be annihilated" (84).

The first mayor of Jerusalem in post-independence Israel shares Auster's son's name, Daniel Auster (85). There are other minor Jewish references and suggestions, but less immediately apparent Jewish concerns and techniques are appropriated and used in The Invention of Solitude. In order to discuss these, it is first necessary to ask what might constitute Jewishness in literature, or rather, what concerns and techniques are utilized in and can be said to characterize contemporary Jewish thought and writing.

Norman Finkelstein, who comments so perceptively on Auster's poetry in the essay cited above, raises the question of what constitutes and characterizes Jewish writing and thought in The Ritual of New Creation: Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Literature (although not once does he mention Auster).[20] Finkelstein's study suggests that no matter how distant from organised or orthodox Judaism, the work of modern Jewish intellectuals displays an affirmation of the importance of text-centredness, the use and acknowledgement of the importance of commentary, and the transformation of tradition to speak to needs in the particular writer's contemporary moment.

The defining characteristic of the modern Jewish sensibility is, according to Harold Bloom, "text-centredness", rather than strict adherence to any religious system (quoted in Finkelstein 1). Auster's own relation to Judaism is not made explicit beyond the obvious subtexts and reminiscences from personal experience. No explicit connection is established by Auster between his own work and specifically Jewish traditions. Auster clearly belongs to a generation of more assimilated Jewish-Americans; one might speculate too, given the years Auster spent in France and his affinity with French literature, about the influence of the cultural and intellectual conditions of French Jewish writers, whom Alan Astro observes tend to be

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[20] For the rest of this chapter, further references to Finkelstein are to The Ritual of New Creation.

almost thoroughly assimilated into French culture and society, expressing their Jewish particularities with reserve (Astro 1).

There has been a shift in the conception of Jewish writing from literature emphasizing the responsibility of regulating one's life according to the holy law - Halakah - to literature of "imaginative freedom", known as Aggadah (Finkelstein 133, 150). No division is allowed in orthodox Judaism between the secular and religious spheres, "thus the founders of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature - adherents of the Jewish enlightenment movement known as the Haskalah - were acutely aware of their distance from traditional Jewish thought" (Astro 11).[21] For many modern Jewish intellectuals and writers, literature can no longer possess any Halakhic certainty. Their literature does, however, still maintain links and develop new relationships with the tradition and uses of rabbinic Judaism's employment of commentary. This tradition resulted from the belief that commentary was the only method of approaching the truth and has, asserts Gershom Scholem, "survive[d], however translated, the entrance of Judaism onto the modern world-stage" (quoted in Finkelstein 1).

The book, the text, thus serves for (some) modern Jewish writers as a record of a necessary journey in search of truths in a world from which the old certainties have been dismissed as no longer credible: "[f]or Scholem, and certainly for Bloom, to be Jewish in a modern sense is to problematize Judaism - to wander, to question, to agonize, and to appropriate" (Finkelstein 42).[22] It is suggested that, just as the Kabbalists adopted and reworked rituals of rabbinic Judaism into "transformative, magic rituals", so contemporary Jewish intellectuals forge new works through similar acts, in a "ritual of new creation" (Finkelstein 2, 3).

The Jewish devotion to textuality or the experience of exile cannot be regarded as an ideology, so widely do writing practices and levels of engagement with orthodoxy diverge; one

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[21] The Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment (c 1781-1881), was aimed at the secularization of Jewish life and the reduction of the authority of legalistic scholars (Carmi 262).

[22] "Bloom is a vivid example of Scholem's assertion that even in an age of secularization, 'so many people from opposing camps, such as that of the pious and that of the consciously and emphatically irreligious, nevertheless confess their identity as Jews', making the question of modern Judaism's relation to tradition still one of great moment" (Finkelstein 41-42).

can only comment on individual works or writers. Yiddish and American studies scholar Rachel Ertel suggests that Jewish literature "is created in the image of the Jewish people": it is "diverse", reflecting the condition of Jews as being "geographically and linguistically dispersed, partaking of various national, social and cultural groupings" (quoted in Astro 11). What the diverse groups share, is an adherence to notions of text-centredness. As Jean-François Lyotard suggests: "the Jews are not a nation. They do not speak a language of their own. They have no roots in a nature, like the European nations. They claim to have their roots in a book" ("Europe, the Jews, and the Book" 159).

The sense of radical incompleteness and frustration caused by the condition of the diaspora means that the impossibility of existential closure is always already inscribed in Jewish texts. Hope for the Messiah and for deliverance constitutes an overwhelming sense of longing in the Jewish tradition, a longing which has sustained the hope of Jews throughout the diaspora, but which simultaneously entails an entrapment in a condition of waiting. According to Gershom Scholem, the condition of living in hope entailed in the Messianic idea involves both the consoling and the unreal. The incompleteness of this state, and of any attempt to achieve a manifestation of that which is hoped for, "eliminates precisely what constitutes its highest value. Thus in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished" (quoted in Finkelstein 7).

Despite the ambivalence of many Jewish intellectuals to postmodernism, the concept of différance enunciated by Derrida, himself the product of a secular Jewish background, is apposite. The conclusion of Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" suggests, Finkelstein observes, that one has two options for regarding the status of interpretation in the West: one "either remains perpetually aware of the predicament of interpretation as exile or one accepts a home in the homelessness of free-play, rejecting the origin that is also the goal" (50). Finkelstein points to the Jewish, even Kabbalistic, resonances in Derrida's words.

Auster's presentation of an understanding of the inevitably fragmented and incomplete nature of the project undertaken in "The Book of Memory" engages with these Jewish ideas of

textuality, exile, and longing.

IV Wandering in the desert, finding a voice in the silence

One modern Jewish intellectual and writer who offers in his thought and work an extreme conflation of Judaism, exile and writing, is Edmond Jabès. Auster owes arguably not only the formula for the title of the second part of The Invention of Solitude - "The Book of Memory" - but also much of his conception of the nature of textuality, memory, and the 'book' evident in The Invention of Solitude, to the influence of Jabès.[23] The author of the multi-volume The Book of Questions, as well as of The Book of Margins, The Book of Resemblances, The Book of Shares and several more, Jabès has exercised a powerful influence on Auster, who has stated that the older poet was "like a grandfather" to him; "[w]e had a very warm friendship" ("Manuscript/Book" 186-87). Jabès appears in "The Book of Memory" as "a friend...J., a well-known French writer", whose dinner party A. recalls attending (IS 109).[24] Auster's fulsome praise is quoted on the jacket of From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader:

> I first read The Book of Questions over twenty years ago, and my life was permanently changed by it. I can no longer think about the possibilities of literature without thinking of the example of Edmond Jabès. He is one of the great spirits of our time, a torch in the darkness. (back cover)

Auster published a review of The Book of Questions entitled "Story of a Scream" in The New York Review of Books in 1977. A slightly different version, entitled "Book of the Dead", appears, dated 1976, in Ground Work and The Art of Hunger. Auster has also published a transcription of an interview conducted with Jabès on 4 November 1978.[25] Jabès was born into

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[23] Marc Chénetier considers Auster's poetry to be influenced by Jabès: the deserted landscapes of Auster's poems, he argues, owe "more to ascesis than to dereliction. We are in the desert of Jabès" ("'Un lieu flagrant et nul': la poésie de Paul Auster" 268, quoted in translation in Merivale 191). Patricia Merivale is of the opinion that the examination of Auster's relationship with European "contemporaries", like "Jabès, Perec, Handke, Celan...is work that largely remains to be done" (195-96).

[24] The passage continues: "There was another American among the guests, a scholar who specialized in modern French poetry" (IS 109); Mary Ann Caws identifies herself as this other American, and J. as Edmond Jabès (Caws 30).

[25] This interview is included in The Art of Hunger under the title "Providence" (144-169), and is included as part two of "Book of the Dead" in Ground Work (190-210). In order to reference the interview separately under Jabès, page numbers refer to the interview printed as "Providence", while for "Book of the Dead" the essay in Ground Work is cited.

a wealthy Jewish family in Egypt in 1912. He grew up in Cairo's Francophone community, published several books of poetry, and made important literary friendships with surrealist poets like Jacob, Char and Éluard. In 1956, in the wake of the Suez Crisis, Jabès, one of many Jews forced to leave Egypt, settled in France. In the interview which Auster conducted with him, Jabès talks about his non-religious upbringing in a bourgeois family who kept few Jewish observances; his expulsion from Egypt forced him for the first time "to live...the condition of being Jewish" (Jabès, "Providence" 146).

Jabès began a study of Jewish writings of the Diaspora after his own exile to France. The informing impulses and structures of rabbinical Talmudic commentaries, and the writings of the Kabbalah, furnished him with the means for an affirmation of his Jewishness (Auster, "Book of the Dead" 184). For Jabès, as Auster explains, "[i]n the long interval between exile and the coming of the Messiah, the people of God had become the people of the Book...the Book had taken on all the weight and importance of a homeland" (ibid.). Jabès considered his life in exile and, perhaps more startlingly, his life as a writer, to be representative of the "historical Jewish condition": "I feel that every writer in some way experiences the Jewish condition, because every writer, every creator, lives in a kind of exile" (Jabès, "Providence" 149). At one point in "The Book of Memory", Auster quotes a similar sentiment expressed by the poet Marina Tsvetayeva: "[i]n this most Christian of worlds / All poets are Jews" (IS 95).

Auster discusses the poetry of Charles Reznikoff in an essay entitled "The Decisive Moment". Reznikoff's conception of the poet as a "solitary wanderer" involves, Auster comments, more than loneliness, "exile": an "outsider by temperament", Reznikoff was also "born into a state of otherness" as a Jew, and consequently "whatever idea of community he had was always ethnic rather than national" (217). As a secular Jew, "[n]either fully assimilated nor fully unassimilated", Reznikoff was also exiled from Judaism, occupying an ill-defined middle ground (219).[26] Auster's description of Reznikoff is perhaps the closest statement we have of

[26] Critic Michael Heller detects in Reznikoff's poetry "the aloneness of the moral witness, a solitude having little to do with the 'alienation' normally ascribed to Jewish writers"; in Reznikoff's work, Heller suggests, "this isolation seems...a product...of insistence and fundamental choice....It is a choice referring back to a deeper set of traditions...embedded in Jewish religious and philosophical themes" ("Charles Reznikoff, 1894-1976" 450).

how Auster might place himself in relation to his Jewishness. He notes that while some regard Reznikoff primarily as a Jewish poet, others see him as quintessentially American; Auster rejects such mutually exclusive categorization, claiming that Reznikoff's are

> the poems of an American Jew, or, if you will, of a hyphenated American, a Jewish-American, with the two terms standing not so much on equal footing as combining to form a third and wholly different term: the condition of being in two places at the same time, or, quite simply, the condition of being nowhere....The point is that Reznikoff the Jew and Reznikoff the American cannot be separated from one another. Each aspect of his work must be read in relation to the oeuvre as a whole, for in the end each view inhabits all the others. ("The Decisive Moment" 219-20)

Jabès writes about the need to approach the constitution of "an absolute, mythical book, which every book tries in vain to reproduce" (Jabès, The Book of Memory [hereafter BM] 175). He ended a speech to the Foundation for French Judaism with the observation that being both Jewish and a writer entails engaging simultaneously with the "unsurpassed fullness of a Jewish beyond and the beyond of a book"; "the boldest challenge", he continued, is to seek "the secret measure of the incommensurability of any relation to the absolute" (176). One needs to refuse the inevitable failure to "go beyond", in order to "transform the impossible into adventurous possibility" (ibid.). Just as the "Portrait of an Invisible Man" can be nothing but incomplete – Auster wonders what his son, Daniel, will make of it when he is old enough to read it (IS 69) – so Auster's "The Book of Memory" can never be completed. A record of memory is realisable only in fragments which can never achieve the fullness of anything beyond merely transitory recollection in the present. But Auster finds the courage to continue, regardless of the inevitability of failure, and can thus repeat as his conclusion the opening statement of "The Book of Memory", with one addition, asserting an adventurous possibility: "[r]emember" (IS 172).

The narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man", acknowledging the impossibility of entering another's solitude (19) and recognizing the futility of his project (20), accepts the "vanity of trying to say anything about anyone" (63), but simultaneously realizes that the essence of his project is – like Shehrzad's (sic) deferment of death through narrativization, as discussed in "The Book of Memory" (149-54) – the deferment of a literally deathly silence. The

white spaces which threaten Auster's project in both parts of The Invention of Solitude – the past, the blank sheets of paper repeatedly mentioned – deny narrative, interpretive or emotional 'closure'. So Auster can write that "[n]o 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).

Auster's inability to match to his project a technique, or tools, guaranteed to record his father's memory, approximates to the absence of Halakhic certainties faced by secular Jewish intellectuals and writers. Faced with a deathly silence, the writer must wander in a textual desert of fragments, deferring the silence, but likewise exiled from the attainment of what is in any event an unattainable goal. Auster realizes this: "[m]y choices are limited. I can remain silent, or else I can speak of things that cannot be verified" (20). Jabès's work shares this understanding of the nature of writing as exilic, figuring loss in an interrogative discourse whose lack of closure repeats the movement of the Jewish diaspora, represented by Jabès in the metaphor of the vast and silent desert (Stamelman, "The Graven Silence of Writing" ix-xx). This is a metaphor of which, as we have seen from a glance at some of his poetry, Auster is likewise particularly fond.

During the composition of "The Book of Memory", A. begins slowly to understand the futility of his task. He expresses a feeling of displacement and loss, "of going off in many directions at once", and exclaims: "Just because you wander in the desert, it does not mean there is a promised land" (IS 32). This echoes statements in the poem "Late Summer" and the prose piece "Pages for Kafka", and reflects an anxiety that "the path towards my object does not exist"; "the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language" (IS 32), is a story which cannot be spoken.

In Auster's insightful commentary on The Book of Questions he describes Jabès's work as a mosaic of fragments and commentaries that circle ceaselessly around a central question: "how to speak what cannot be spoken". This question, Auster continues, is the Shoah, but also the question of "literature itself" ("Book of the Dead" 183). Jabès is quoted as replying to Adorno's belief that poetry could not be written after the Holocaust, for which he substituted

Auschwitz as a generic designation - with the counter-assertion that poetry must be written, but can only be done so with "wounded words" (quoted in Mark C.Taylor ix), in a writing of "hesitancy, discontinuity, and fragmentariness" (Stamelman, "The Graven Silence of Writing" xviii).[27] While that which cannot be spoken in Auster's The Invention of Solitude is more precisely that which cannot accurately be spoken, and is, initially at least, expressly in relation to specific memories, Auster's scope likewise broadens to include the questions and possibilities of literature.

Despite the imperfections and inadequacies of writing and language, these are the only media that Auster has at his disposal in which to attempt his Book of Memory; but the writing must, like Jabès's, reflect in its tone, technique and structure, the wound, and the questions which arise during the process of writing and remembering which it explores. Auster's work is thus, like Jabès's, a fragmentary mosaic. That he realizes that "[t]here has been a wound, and...it is very deep" (IS 32) makes appropriate the availability of nothing but "[f]ragments. Or the anecdotal as a form of knowledge" (61), for all the reasons outlined above.

In an interview Auster speaks about the discovery of others in the constitution of one's own consciousness. He describes the writing of "The Book of Memory" as the discovery of the world when looking down into the self ("Interview LM&SG" 144). The "many references and quotations...pay homage to all the others inside" him; "[i]n the final analysis, 'The Book of Memory' is a collective work" which "has dozens of authors" (ibid.).

Auster engages in The Invention of Solitude with material important to him in order to find a voice adequate to his task. Just as the Jewish tradition of midrashic commentary involves an interpretive process which works to re-evaluate the legacy of traditional concepts in the light of contemporary challenges, so Auster engages with memories, and with fragments of texts valuable to him, in order to find a language in which to attempt to recuperate an image of his father, and find a place for himself. Through a ritual of new creation,[28] Auster produces a record

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[27] Celan's famous "Todesfuge" showed that poetry could be written after the Holocaust.

[28] Under the pressure of changes in cultural or intellectual conditions, "[m]idrash comes into play as a way of...reaffirming continuity with the traditions of the past" (Holtz quoted in Finkelstein 79-80). For Finkelstein, this "ritual of new creation" is the condition of all secular Jewish writing: "[c]ommentary, which becomes virtually

which seeks to explore the possibility of remembering. His endeavour results in a profoundly ethical statement of the position of the self in relation to time and others. The 'lessons' which Auster draws from the portrait he presents of his father, and which are enunciated most clearly in the portrayal of A.'s solitude, inform the presentation of what the protagonists in the fiction which follows must experience in order to learn similar 'lessons' about the nature, status and construction of identity.

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The absence of a single, informing or controlling 'text' or narrative embodies for many the experience of postmodernism. Yet the impression created by the secular Jewish writer's - but not necessarily Jabès's or Auster's - use of commentary and intertextuality is often not so much that of an incredulity toward metanarratives - as Lyotard describes the postmodern condition ("The Postmodern Condition" 482) - as a longing for some lost state of unity, some sense of nostalgic remembrance. A sense of unity is of extreme importance to Judaic thought. "Like Benjamin's angel", Finkelstein comments, such work "is always looking backward toward Paradise, from which a disastrous wind hurtles it into the future" (128). Some thus see much contemporary secular Jewish literature as sharing an affinity more with a high modernist than with a postmodernist programme.

Derek Rubin detects a Jewish nostalgia in Auster's The Invention of Solitude, noting: the centrality of the past, evident in Auster's historical search into a private past, as well as a family and larger Jewish past; the importance of scripture, of commentary and interpretation; and "the characteristically Jewish trait of longing, of 'hunger'" (Rubin 61). This, Rubin argues, becomes an end in itself, "so that the man...seeks to return to his yearning as much as he does to escape it" (63).

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synonymous with 'Jewish writing', both records and enacts these longstanding conditions" (3). "The Book of Memory" quotes from, refers to, or comments on texts by, amongst others, Pascal, George Oppen, Wallace Stevens, Cicero, Israel Lichtenstein, Descartes, Flaubert, St Augustine, Marina Tsvetayeva, Gregory Altschuller, Sir Walter Ralegh, Himmler, Friedrich Hölderlin, Stéphane Mallarmé, André du Bouchet, Leibniz, Jeremiah, Jonah, Lycophron's Cassandra (in Lord Royston's translation), Collodi's Pinocchio, Beckett, Van Gogh, Tolstoy, Freud, the Tales of 1001 Arabian Nights, Anne Frank, Nadezhda Mandelstam.

Auster comments on a similar longing of the protagonist of Hamsun's Hunger:

> [h]is fast, then, is a contradiction. To persist in it would mean death, and with death the fast would end. He must therefore stay alive, but only to the extent that it keeps him on the point of death. The idea of ending is resisted in the interests of maintaining the constant possibility of the end. ("The Art of Hunger" 109)

In "The Decisive Moment", Auster notices the same quality about the condition of exile in the poetry of Charles Reznikoff. Reznikoff seeks "a way of coming to terms with exile that somehow, for better or worse, manages to leave the condition of exile intact" (217). Complex and paradoxical figurations of similar desires inform characters' struggles in The Locked Room, In the Country of Last Things and Moon Palace.

Ruth Wisse discusses an American Jewish redefinition of the schlemiel figure, the scapegoat character in Yiddish folklore who is not unlike the figure of the sometimes wise but more often hapless fool (Wisse x, 4). In American Jewish literature, Wisse writes, the schlemiel "learns to live within a continuing tension between belief in man and radical frustration" (90). She discusses Bellow's examinations of the "honest...struggle of the individual striving to define himself as a man within a narrowing range of active possibilities" (Wisse 93). Auster's writing often presents projects which balance despair with hope. The tension in The Invention of Solitude between the difficulty of speaking about the individual, threats to writing and remembering, and the desire to conceive of another's individuality and define one's own subjectivity, might be read as taking Bellow's explorations of modern subjectivity – specifically Jewish, but certainly intended to be representative – further in an intellectual environment in which it is impossible to talk about the self without confronting the many assaults made on its traditional humanist conception.

In the opinion of some, like Cynthia Ozick, the contemporary Jewish writer attempting to maintain a connection with past tradition must rule creativity and individuality with moral judgment, ethics and religion (Finkelstein 135). Others do not subscribe to such prescriptions. Given the frequent classification of Auster's work as postmodernist, the extent to which an ethical imperative is, or is not, compatible with postmodernist ideas, will be further examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Self and Other:
Auster, Theory, Ethics and Alterity

> [There is a need for] recomplexifying oversimplifications....Contraction has been so systematic that we need to reopen the field if we are to see anything but our own eyeballs.
> (Marc Chénetier, "Charting Contemporary American Fiction: A View from Abroad" 662)

> What it boils down to is the old mind-body problem. Descartes. Solipsism. Self and other, all the old philosophical questions.
> (Paul Auster, "Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory" 142)

I Accommodating Auster's ethics

Patricia Merivale ends a review article on the three existing volumes of Auster criticism by suggesting some directions which scholarship on his oeuvre might take. One of the most contentious areas of extant criticism concerns what Merivale terms the "is-he-or-isn't-he postmodern" debate. Most American critics regard Auster's fiction as postmodernist, and, says Merivale, "use the term to beg other questions and assume rather than demonstrate continuities" in a body of work which, if it was postmodernist to begin with, seems in the later novels to be decidedly less so (195). Some, including the majority of Francophone critics, do not regard Auster's work as postmodernist. They believe either that it only appears to be so without being committed to the implications of such techniques (ibid.),[1] or that Auster parodies postmodernism, deconstructing it from within its own assumptions (Chard-Hutchinson quoted in translation in Merivale 186). Merivale regards these critics as labouring under the inconvenience of the belief that "a moral purpose disqualifies an author from being postmodern" (191), and use this "(largely ethical) criterion" to deprive "American literature of its premier fabulator...[and] virtually of any postmodernism at all" (195).

While some do not find it problematic to regard Auster's work as postmodernist and ethical, examining the "consequences of actions taken in one's self-fashioning" (Barone,

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[1] According to Charles Grandjeat, Auster merely 'winks' at the postmodern, but is really interested in representing a moral, quasi-religious search (Grandjeat 158), "a moral, even stoically religious quest, to which metafictional games are secondary" (Merivale 189); "in vain Auster sprinkles his stories with winks, pirouettes, and joky hints of the postmodern" (Grandjeat 156, quoted in translation by Merivale 189).

"Introduction" 5),[2] others view Auster's fiction as owing greater allegiance to the aims and ideals of modernism. For Sven Birkerts, despite its "concern with the slipperiness of perception and identity", Auster's fiction "has a solid modernist grounding. [Auster] has not given up on the idea that art can discover new meaning from experience" ("Postmodern Picaresque" 36).

Interpretations of Auster's position within the somewhat inadequately defined boundaries of critical categorization vary enormously. One's stance in this debate is necessarily coloured by one's view of postmodernism. Barone makes the claim that to construe Auster's fiction as the illustration of any specific definition of the postmodern is to limit it (6), but he falls into this trap himself by claiming that Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction describes Auster's techniques exactly (Barone 5).[3]

The problem for these commentators seems to be the possibility of regarding many of Auster's protagonists as being involved in moral or ethical endeavours. Given my claim that The Invention of Solitude can be read as Auster's ethical manifesto, and given that I have attempted to place Auster within a secular Jewish intellectual tradition in order to speculate on the resultant implications for his attempts to investigate the conditions of subjectivity, certain further explorations must be made. Cognizance must be taken of what some commentators see as a Jewish intellectual dis-ease with postmodernism's attack on the humanist subject. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish what the implications of a postmodern aesthetic are for any examination of identity, and ask whether ethical concerns can be accommodated within postmodernism.

II The 'self' under attack

Any discussion of the representation or status of identity in contemporary literature must confront the problematization of the self – or rather of what many European philosophers have taken to be "standard, traditional conceptions" thereof (Cooper 714) – which has marked

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[2] All further references to Barone in this chapter will be to "Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel", his introduction to Beyond the Red Notebook.

[3] Merivale criticizes Barone for this "inexact" equation of Hutcheon's definition "not only with all of Auster's work...but also with postmodern fiction generally" (194).

twentieth-century European and North American philosophical discourse. The notion of subjectivity implicit in humanism asserts the unity and autonomy of a rational, knowing, human subject. Michel Foucault's prediction that this concept would be "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (quoted in Dean 1), represents the drawing out, to its logical conclusion, of almost a century of aesthetic and philosophical questioning. Nietzsche is regarded as the modern progenitor of this intellectual climate, his (in)famous pronouncement of the "death" of God the most daring and influential statement of what is now a widely held view that all belief systems which claim to be transcendental are "arbitrary, fictional, [and] merely invented" (Nealon, Double Reading 74-75).

The self, subjected to the decentring approaches of numerous thinkers, is construed as "no longer the master of the world through reason, but 'mired in and constituted by culture'" (Dean 1). The best known spokesman for this late twentieth-century scepticism is undoubtedly Jacques Derrida, whose 1966 paper, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", announced an intellectual break from the past, presenting a conceptual universe without absolute points.[4]

Investigations of how we represent ourselves to ourselves and conceive of the human agent in the late twentieth century underpin much recent literary, philosophical and cultural theory and criticism. The existence of a transcendentally authored real is questioned and the notion of reference problematized. Meaning as construed by assumptions of traditional realist transparency is replaced by a recognition of the role of signifying systems and networks of contingent conditions in meaning-making processes.[5]

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[4] Derrida posits a rupture in Western philosophy, claiming that there is no centre which can be "thought in the form of a present-being" or a "fixed locus" for thought or belief; instead there is only "a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 280). Derrida famously ended his paper with a statement of "the two interpretations of interpretation" between which we must now choose: "The one...dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign....The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who...throughout his entire history...has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play" (292).

[5] As Hutcheon avers, "all we have ever had to work with is a system of signs, and that to call attention to this is not to deny the real, but to remember that we only give meaning to the real within those signifying systems" (Hutcheon 229-30). Patricia Waugh neatly refers to postmodernist discourses being "premised upon a rejection of the philosophical and aesthetic assumptions underpinning realism" (128).

Earlier twentieth-century thinkers like Saussure, Wittgenstein and Heidegger problematized the status of representation in language and literature through considerations of the nature and locus of meaning (Thiher 91-92). The so-called 'linguistic turn' of theory and philosophy has led to a belief that ideas cannot be construed apart from the language system that produces them (Anderson 8).

The status of systems through which we construct 'knowledge' is closely examined by structuralist and poststructuralist criticism. Poststructuralist thought views the subject as a

> meeting point of pre-existing social practices and – especially – discourses. Poststructuralist thought would have it that the 'individual' in the humanist world view is fully as much a creature of coded discourse as any post-humanist is, but that it is part and parcel of the humanist world view to veil this fact by projecting the ideal of the 'individual'. The difference, and hence the epistemic caesura, is then to be located in the post-humanist's awareness of his being a coded creature of his time and society's discourses. (D'haen 162-3)

"Postmodernism" is a term which seeks to describe discourses informed by, but not necessarily identical to, this awareness of the meaning-making role of signifying practices.

Any foray into the minefield of postmodern theorizing risks producing one more obfuscating précis, requiring the valorization of one or more of often conflicting interpretations, an endeavour which itself compromises the spirit of postmodern pluralism. When intended for 'application' to the work of a particular author, such an endeavour is likely to produce a biased reading. I have no intention of formulating a neat pattern of postmodern characteristics gleaned from an attempt to amalgamate divergent interpretations, preparatory to imposing such an 'alloy grid' on Auster's work to see what postmodern tendencies 'show through'. Nevertheless, some understanding of what postmodernism is generally taken to mean is important to any attempt to understand Auster's work.

Most theorists emphasize the impossibility of neat definition, before themselves offering a list of supposed characteristics.[6] Jerry Flieger, for example, refers cynically to the preponderance of "familiar litan[ies] of para-postmodernist discourse" ("The Listening Eye" 91),

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[6] Niall Lucy comments that "[a]ttempts at defining postmodernism are notoriously unsatisfactory. So much so, that it has become a standard move in the game of defining postmodernism to say that attempts at defining it are notoriously unsatisfactory" (63).

but nonetheless offers her own such list in The Purloined Punch Line. Ihab Hassan was one of the first to champion or advertise literary postmodernism, and to make lists: "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography" appeared in New Literary History in 1971, and in The Postmodern Turn he further refined this eccentric tabulation. Most theorists suggest a critique of representation, a crisis of legitimation, and a preoccupation with disjuncture, as primary postmodernist 'characteristics'.

Possibly the most influential discussion of postmodernism is that of Jean-François Lyotard, for whom "postmodern" refers to the "state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" ("The Postmodern Condition" 481); "[s]implifying to the extreme," he defines the "postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (ibid. 482). But even this statement is not unproblematic. Lyotard's description of an incredulity toward "grands récits" implicates his own metanarrative theory of postmodernism's incredulity to metanarratives. Any attempt to make sense of postmodernism results in an inevitable implication in some or other metanarrative (McHale 5-6). Most postmodern theory realizes that postmodernism's deconstructive unmasking of rhetorical strategies itself lays claim to a privileged position. In Hutcheon's words,

> Rorty, Baudrillard, Foucault, Lyotard, and others seem to imply that any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative...what they add, however, is that no narrative can be a natural 'master' narrative: there are no natural hierarchies; there are only those we construct. (Hutcheon 13)

Finkelstein contends that the strongly historical Jewish perspective resists postmodernism's dismissal of (historical) metanarratives (The Ritual of New Creation [hereafter Ritual] 12, 14-15); that Jewish attraction to the notion of inwardness rejects postmodernism's supposed privileging of simulacra (13); and consequently that "self-conscious Jewish writers and intellectuals...tend to be wed to what Jameson calls 'the older anomie' of the centred subject" and "cling, however nostalgically...to themselves", "to history and to cultural metanarratives" (15). In fact, Jewish nostalgia can be regarded as a mini-metanarrative itself. But the postmodernism with which Finkelstein contrasts Jewish views is that as defined by

Jameson and Baudrillard, whose accounts are just two of many; as Stephen Bernstein comments, we find in Auster's work "neither the 'glossy skin' [simulacrum] nor the terrified figuration of multinational capitalism" (102), which are at the centre of these theorists' interpretations.[7]

The anti-detective impulse from which Auster develops The New York Trilogy is strikingly postmodernist. The use of availabile techniques associated with postmodernism informs aspects of The Invention of Solitude – for example, the abundance of intertextual references and the presentation of language's impossibility of signifying adequately. Auster writes at one point in "The Book of Memory" that "each word is defined by other words" (IS 160); language in postmodernist fiction often exploits the Saussurean idea that "words signify in terms of the latent 'traces' of what they do not signify" (Nash 151). "Language" states Auster, "is not truth. It is the way we exist in the world" (IS 161); "it is language that creates us and defines us as human beings" ("New York Babel" 125). While the later works appear more 'realistic' and less self-consciously postmodernist, Auster never loses his interrogative and problematizing voice, nor abandons the presentation of a self-enclosed, grounded, self-knowing subject as illusory. His oeuvre demonstrates the near impossibility of claiming that a contemporary writer either completely embraces or rejects postmodernism. While he may move away from the overt and exaggerated embodiment of postmodernist stances, his fiction retains what Barone calls a "sufficient realism" (6 emphasis added), implying that Auster is always conscious of the artifice of his fiction, although what Barone and others may claim as evidencing artifice – particularly the recurrence of chance and the suggestiveness of some protagonists' names – Auster would claim merely reflects his view of the world as irremediably

[7] Various broad, but by no means mutually exclusive groupings of postmodernist readings are discernable. A sceptical tradition, inspired by Heidegger and Nietzsche, and continued by Baudrillard, emphasizes radical uncertainty and the demise of the subject. Purely negative, the aim is a methodological 'exposé' of the inadequacy of traditional theories of knowledge and linguistic meaning (Rosenau 104; Cahoone 17-18). An affirmative tradition seeks non-dogmatic or ideological intellectual practices (Cahoone 18; Rosenau 105). "Post-modernism is stimulating and fascinating, and at the same time it is always on the brink of collapsing into confusion" (Rosenau 103).

strange, mysterious, and unknowable ("Interview LM&SG" 116-18).[8] In a discussion of "New Realism" in contemporary American fiction, Winifred Fluck argues that while the work of writers like DeLillo and Abish - and, we might add, Auster - is more experimental than 'new realists' like Carver or Ford, the fact that these authors "still retain an illusionist mode of representation as the basis of their aesthetic effects" (79) suggests that "experimental and realistic modes of writing mix and merge in new and unforeseen ways" (82), producing what might be termed a "postmodern realism" (83).

Auster's description in the essay "Truth, Beauty, Silence" of a movement in Laura Riding's poetry "somehow to peel back the skin of the world in order to find some absolute and unassailable place of permanence" (138) is close to his description of the predicament of Blue in Ghosts ("Interview JM" 110-11). Yet if this seems to be the valorization of a modernist aesthetic, what is to be made of Auster's claim, in the essay "The Art of Hunger", that the hunger artist as he appears in works by Hamsun and Kafka understands what Auster verbalizes, significantly, as the nature of "death as we live it today: without God, without hope of salvation. Death as the abrupt and absurd end of life" (114)?

The absence of consoling metanarratives assails the protagonists of Auster's fiction, and Auster seems to imply that this state - present in Hamsun and Kafka, and understood by one of Auster's great mentors, Samuel Beckett - has obtained "much longer than we have been willing to admit"; "I do not believe that we have come any farther than this" ("The Art of Hunger" 115). Not only his fiction, but his critical responses to other writers, clearly evidence a complex and categorically unquantifiable response to theoretical boundaries. "The Art of Hunger" supports Beckett's view that the modern writer needs a form which does not attempt to order the chaos of experience, "an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers" (113); perhaps Auster criticism must find the same form.

Hutcheon criticizes absolutist binary oppositions of modernism and postmodernism (18). Neat theory does not account for messy practice; postmodernism's relationship with modernism

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[8] Auster states the following: "[i]n the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist. Chance is a part of reality" ("Interview LM&SG" 116).

is a complex one of consequence, difference and dependence, involving both appropriation and subversion (Hutcheon 3, 14, 23, 37-38). It becomes increasingly easy to become bogged down in redefining definitions, regrinding lenses through which to look at a particular writer, and while awareness of the strategies of modernism and postmodernism is important, any examination which seeks to classify categorically "tinges, selectively occults, and [moulds] contemporary works which, from the start, were composed of more than met the eye on the lookout for theoretical comfort" (Chénetier, "Charting Contemporary American Fiction" 658).

The debate is further complicated by varying interpretations of particularly influential theorists. Charles Jencks points, for example, to a tendency to elide poststructuralism and postmodernism (28), transposing what is perceived as the negativity of deconstruction onto the latter.[9] This is what philosopher Charles Taylor seems to me to be doing.

In Sources of the Self, Taylor discusses the twentieth century's practice of "'decentring' subjectivity", which, he claims, reaches its culmination, or parody, in deconstruction and other "recently fashionable doctrines from Paris" (465, 487). Taylor implies that both Derrida and Foucault draw on a misreading of Nietzsche, focusing on a sense of the arbitrariness of interpretation and ignoring possibilities of affirmation, thus perpetuating what he calls

> the negative thrust of modernism – its anti-Romanticism, its suspicion of the supposed unity and transparency of the disengaged self, of the alleged inner sources of the expressive self – while negating its opening to epiphany. (488)[10]

What results is "an endless free play" (488), which Taylor then claims is "held up as the essence of 'post-modernity'" by the likes of Lyotard, marking postmodernism as "a prolongation of the least impressive side of modernism" (489). Taylor's assertion that "[d]ecentring is not the alternative to inwardness; it is its complement" (465), echoes French Jewish intellectual Olivier Revault d'Allonnes's call to oppose the "deconstruction of the human subject" with "'the duty of inwardness'" (quoted in Finkelstein, Ritual 13).

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[9] Linda Hutcheon agrees with Jencks (Hutcheon 223-29); Etienne van Heerden thoroughly canvasses views on the problematic relationship between poststructuralism and postmodernism (21-22, 27-28, 30-31, 42, 33, 46-47, 54-56).

[10] Ihab Hassan's definition of postmodernism, as read by Charles Jencks, appears to share with Taylor the view that postmodernism is "the continuation of Modernism in its ultra or exaggerated form" (Jencks 30).

Other philosophers and critics argue that such readings embody a perennial misinterpretation of Derrida and deconstruction. Christopher Norris, for example, draws attention in a pointed retort to John Ellis's book, Against Deconstruction – which criticizes poststructuralism's supposed emphasis on the impossibility of meaning – to what he terms the "widespread déformation professionelle that has attended the advent of deconstruction as a new arrival on the US academic scene" (151). Jeffrey Nealon discusses and supports Rodolphe Gasché's view that the Yale school's influential (mis)reading of Derrida fails to take into account that aporia and unreadability are not the 'conclusion' of any deconstructive project, but the first gestures in a double reading which prepares for a reinscription (Nealon, "The Discipline of Deconstruction" 1269-70). Some seek to interpret Derrida's famous statement "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" not as denying the existence of anything outside of the text, but as asserting that there is no 'outside-text', that "human experience is inseparably entangled with our descriptions of it" (Anderson 83).[11] Perry Meisel agrees:

> [d]econstruction is a highly exact mode of reading designed, not to throw texts or the world into chaos, but to show how the world we think we find only gets – and has gotten – made in the shapes and terms that we take for granted as given, self-evident, natural. (228-29)

Given Derrida's statement that there is no alternative to traditional Western foundationalism, his supposed rejection of the bases of Western thought appears as "similar to various forms of scepticism familiar within the Western tradition" (Cahoone 18). Hutcheon quotes Derrida's insistence that "'[t]he subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it'" (quoted in Hutcheon 159). Derrida claims that "the only definition" which he has ever "dared to give of deconstruction [is] 'more than one language'" (Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint" 27).

It is thus impossible to appropriate an unproblematic theoretical apparatus to explain Auster's presentation of subjectivity. What is clear is that if Auster uses postmodernist

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[11] Derrida makes this remark, often translated as "there is nothing outside the text", in considering his own method of interpreting Rousseau's 'Essay on the origin of languages'. Peter Barry regards Derrida as meaning that "[t]he writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely" (Barry 69-70).

techniques it does not necessarily follow that he subscribes to the apocalyptic rhetoric of some postmodern gurus. Equally, if his examinations of individual protagonists' conceptions of self partake of processes akin to deconstruction, he need not have given up the hope of finding an accommodation of self and world which preserves some sense of private selfhood. An understanding of the broad, though contested, nature of critical theory is thus relevant only if it helps us to say something useful. Marc Chénetier - who has lately written on Auster - quotes Joyce's remark about Vico: "I would not pay overmuch attention to these theories, beyond using them for all they are worth!", and suggests that the scholar of contemporary literature do the same ("Charting Contemporary American Fiction: A View from Abroad" 659). Urging that "[c]urrent theoretical debates...feed but not mechanically dictate literary judgments", Chénetier suggests that theoretical terms, such as postmodernism, not be applied in haste (662).[12] We must "foreground individual specificities.... Mere cataloguing cannot do" (ibid.).

In "From Cakes to Stones: A note on Beckett's French" Auster writes of the "itinerary" of characters in Beckett's work involving movement "toward a kind of unburdening, by which [Beckett] leads us to the limits of experience - to a place where aesthetic and moral judgments become inseparable" (150). This is a conflation which evidently fascinates Auster; essays on two Jewish poets, Charles Reznikoff and Paul Celan, also feature observations of this kind. Celan's poems are seen, for example, as "more than literary artifacts", rather as "means of staying alive" (Auster, "The Poetry of Exile" 157). Time and again the aesthetic and the ethical are treated as coterminous. And it is this phenomenon, rather than the "is-he-or-isn't-he postmodern" debate, that would seem to merit further investigation.

III Encountering otherness: Auster and the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas

Auster states in an interview that freedom is not possible for Nashe in The Music of Chance

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[12] "The pragmatic rage that seizes academe in this country when a new theory becomes available, applying it at all costs, is not only smotheringly cumbersome, but it can also, as in the case of Derrida, run counter to the assumptions behind a method" (Chénetier 662). A dismissive reaction to 'theory' is equally unproductive, however: "[w]e must...be patient of theory. Terry Eagleton, among others, has pointed out that those of us who dislike theory or claim to get along better without it are simply in the grip of an older theory" (Selinger 9).

"until he...takes on responsibility for something, for some other person" (interview with Mark Irwin, quoted in Barone 12). Barone notes that several aspects of Auster's work – which he does regard as postmodernist – privilege ethical relations: "Instead of blurred boundaries and trivialized distinctions", Auster's work affirms that "in the postmodern world new connections are established" (8). Chénetier comments that Auster's fiction presents the belief that the self cannot be defined without the Other, that Auster's protagonists inscribe a relationship with alterity in everything they do ("Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World" 36-38). This inscription has precedents in the influences on Auster's work discussed in the previous chapter. Jabès states succinctly that "if we say 'I' we already say 'difference'" (quoted in Waldrop xxv); the notion of a condition of exile – which informed part of my discussion earlier – is conceived of by Maurice Blanchot as "the affirmation of a new relationship with the Outside" (quoted in Stamelman, "The Strangeness of the Other, the Otherness of the Stranger" [hereafter "Strange/Other"] 123).

What has emerged as an important element in Auster's work in the first chapter of this study, been preliminarily explored in the discussion of The Invention of Solitude, and will continue to inform further consideration of the construction of identity in Auster's fiction, is his presentation of the importance of encounters with alterity as fundamental to any character's identity and subjectivity. In this regard it is useful to consider the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, at the centre of which is a similar recognition.

Levinas has exerted an important influence on Jabès and Blanchot,[13] and it is thus not unlikely that Auster is acquainted with Levinas's work through their writing, if not at first hand. It is nonetheless pointless to attempt to posit a direct influence, and, given the discussion above, it would be foolish to present Levinas's work as a theoretical framework which explains Auster's entirely. Levinas does, however, provide an engaging argument that subjectivity depends on alterity. To my knowledge, no one has yet mentioned Levinas and Auster in the same context and I believe that to do so – even though it is impossible to give a thorough account of Levinasian thought here – will enrich critical discussion of Auster's fiction.

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[13] Levinas published "The Servant and her Master" in 1966 on Blanchot's work; they were students together in Strasbourg, and Blanchot later saved Levinas's wife from being deported by the Nazis during the occupation of France (Hand 150).

Levinas's longstanding enquiry into ethical questions is only now being fully appreciated. His reading of Western philosophy demonstrates that everything other than the self has been considered separate but ultimately reconcilable with the self: "Knowledge as perception, concept, comprehension, refers back to an act of grasping" (Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy" [hereafter EFP] 76).

In an essay written in 1957, a few years before the publication of the work which was to gain him international recognition, Totality and Infinity (1961), Levinas describes philosophy as a search for truth ("Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" [hereafter PII] 88). This search, he continues, has two implications for the philosopher: firstly, the truth is conceived of by the thinker as a reality, something other, separate and distinct from himself (88-89); secondly, the thinker seeks to preserve his own identity despite his investigation of this otherness, "despite the unknown lands into which thought seems to lead" (91). Philosophy thus conceived, Levinas asserts, is "engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as other" (ibid.), and consequently neglects the other and the notion of responsibility to alterity:

> [a]utonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further....When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other...it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life...truth is just this victory and this integration. (PII 94)

> The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the impregnable fortress of its singularity...becomes a theme and an object...It falls into the network of a priori deas, which I bring to bear so as to capture it. (ibid. 97)

For Levinas, however, the other is precisely 'impregnable', irreducibly strange and utterly beyond one's comprehension. He seeks to analyse the possibilities and conditions of its appearance in our lives, and to formulate the ethical significance of the encounter with it, and the response which it demands.

The violence directed at Lucky in Beckett's Waiting for Godot is interpreted by Jeffrey Nealon as representative of Levinas's discernment of the inherently violent modes with which Western philosophical systems seek to order and subsume anything other ("Samuel Beckett and

the Postmodern" 524). In Godot, Estragon and Vladimir cannot think beyond the rigid limits placed on their actions and thoughts by "the modernist metadiscourse represented by Godot" (ibid. 525-26).

In Auster's The New York Trilogy, Quinn and Blue labour under similar restrictions in the form of the belief that observed details will yield meaning to interpretive scrutiny. The traditional detective's attempt to overcome the otherness of the crime or puzzle being investigated perfectly reflects Levinas's claim that alterity is conventionally viewed as a "temporary interruption to be eliminated as it is incorporated into or reduced to sameness" (Davis 3).[14] The subversion of the expectations of the positivistic mind – represented by the traditional detective – exists in substituting for traditional closure the "decentering and chaotic admission of mystery" (Tani 40) of the anti-detective novel. Auster does this, particularly in City of Glass and Ghosts, and this chaos and frustration of teleological imperatives and interpretive capture, approximates Levinas's understanding of the other.

Levinas's thought developed in response to a study of and eventual disaffection with the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Levinas was instrumental in introducing their phenomenology into France; his La Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl (1930) being the first complete work on Husserl in French ("Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics of the infinite" [hereafter EI] 52). Husserl had sought to examine the role of a perceiving consciousness in the constitution of the perceived world: "The equivalence of thought and knowledge in relation to being is...formulated by Husserl in the most direct manner" (Levinas, EFP 78). Husserl developed the notion of 'intentionality', adopting a method of phenomenological reduction to reveal a transcendental Ego constituting the knowable through its intentional acts (Davis 10-13). Levinas explains that "Husserl...describes [knowing] as intentionality, which is understood as 'consciousness of something', and so is inseparable from its 'intentional object'" (EFP 77).

In Husserlian 'intentionality', the idea that meaning is completely given by the subject in

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[14] Arthur Saltzman recognizes this impulse in ratiocinative detective ficiton, describing it as reflecting the "aim of coercive Western structures of consciousness, spurred on by positivistic zeal...to reorient fugitive clues and fragments beneath 'the vantage point of a final rational cause'" (Saltzman, Designs of Darkness 58).

its intentional engagement with the world implies for Levinas that what is engaged with is completely within consciousness. Husserl "continues to base his theory on representation, the objectivizing act", which "suspends all independence in the world other than that of consciousness itself" (Levinas, EFP 78-9). Nothing truly other can be encountered by the Husserlian subject, because everything encountered is already within consciousness.

What Levinas calls the "non-intentional", "non-reflective" or "pre-reflective" consciousness (EFP 79-80) – that which, in its passivity "precedes the formulation of any metaphysical ideas on the subject" (EFP 82) – threatens Husserl's 'intentionality' thesis. The problem is primarily (and stated here simplistically) that if intentionality presents to the subject a world already the subject's own possession, that world cannot be shared with anyone else. Husserl sees the Other as a reflection of the self, for whom the existence of others is ascertained by analogy: if the world is constituted for me by intentionality, it must be so for others too. So, Husserl would claim, "[a]lthough the Other is never fully present to me, he or she is known by empathy and assimilated because conceived as a reflection of myself" (Davis 28).

While Levinas gained several important insights from Heidegger's phenomenology, which he credits with showing him the temporal and historical situatedness of our phenomenological encounters (EI 52), similar problems presented themselves. Heidegger continues to conceive of meaning being available exclusively through an intentional engagement with the world, an idea with which Levinas became increasingly to disagree. Levinas grants that Heidegger attempts to overcome the solipsism of Husserl's phenomenology by introducing the notion of a shared world – Heidegger's concept of Dasein is qualified by the term Mitsein or 'Being-with' – but Heidegger ultimately makes the same mistake as Husserl, because an actual encounter with the Other is not important for his concept of Mitsein. Levinas draws attention to the fact that, in Being and Time, Heidegger describes the concept of "mineness" as one of the chief characteristics of Dasein. Levinas interprets this as implying that "I become I only because I possess my own Being as primary" (Levinas, EI 62). On the contrary, Levinas claims,

> I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I', precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'....Ethical subjectivity dispenses with the idealizing

> subjectivity of ontology which reduces everything to itself. (EI 62-63)

The "supremacy of the Same over the Other seems to be integrally maintained in the philosophy of Heidegger" (Levinas, PII 99-100).

Levinas increasingly sees subjectivity as demanding an engagement with the Other which does not seek to absorb it into some category of knowledge or representation. This requires a redefinition of intentionality through which consciousness encounters an unknowable, rather than transparent, world. Having drawn attention to the implication of 'intentionality' in the possessive, totalizing imperative of Western philosophy, in which things are conceived of as ideas to be "conquered, dominated, possessed" (PII 95), Levinas concedes that this may be the case with objects (PII 109), but the encounter with the Other – which he likens to the concept of an infinity – is an encounter with something the nature of which cannot be grasped in such a manner:

> the alterity of the infinite is not cancelled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it...The infinite does not enter into the idea of the infinite, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely, other. (PII 107)

How then is one to conceive of the Other? Levinas attempts to do so by thinking about death. Death is something which cannot be grasped by the subject in the way that 'intentionality' seeks to present everything as constructed and understood: in death, "the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself" (Levinas, "Time and the Other" [hereafter TO] 40). Death represents the possibility of something outside the self:

> something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. (TO 43)

Death shows that it is possible for the subject to "lose its very mastery as a subject" (TO 42), but at the same time reveals the paradoxical fact that the subject's "solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it" (TO 43), in that a relationship with something other is posited. Auster's fiction appears to demonstrate an understanding of something very like this, an understanding which informs the confinement, suffering and 'stripping' undergone by most of his protagonists.

A concern with the idea of the stranger, and related interrogations of estrangement and

alienation, presented as fundamentally implicated in the nature of existence, mark Jabès's work as appearing to share much of Levinas's endeavour. Jabès seeks to retain the notion of alterity in his figuration of writing as exile, and of the Jewish condition as characterized by interrogation: "For the Jew, to question means always to keep open the question of difference" (Jabès, quoted in Stamelman "Strange/Other" 129). The theme of otherness in Jabès's work employs the figure of the Jew as a challenge "to our craving for unity (which is the basis of intolerance)" (Waldrop xxv). Jabès voices this link with the other as a "blind attraction for the distant face that blinds" (Jabès, BM 163). Levinas offers a similar formulation in terms which suggest that the Other forces an interrogation of one's "[r]esponsibility for the Other", a "guiltless responsibility" that "goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other" (EFP 83).

The Other is thus not for Levinas strictly another person, but a condition of radical alterity, a relationship with which is not "an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place", but rather "a relationship with a Mystery" (Levinas, TO 43). The notion of a face plays a key role in Levinas's presentation of this mysterious other. The 'face' is a complex term denoting neither image nor physical entity, neither metaphor nor metonymy: "[t]he proximity of the other is the face's meaning" (Levinas, EFP 82). Jabès's "There Is No Trace But in the Desert: With Emmanuel Levinas" (BM 160-167) is a sustained meditation on the relationship with alterity figured as this face, represented in by now familiar Jabèsian terms as a trace in the desert.

Alterity underwrites the separateness of the self, prompting what Levinas insists is an ethical encounter. That Levinas's ethics provides no expected ethical rules means that it "represents the best example of an attempt to think through the ethical consequences of the postmodern situation" (Davis 53).[15] Critical consideration of Levinas's thought has increased lately. He occupies a position defined with difficulty, though, for he problematizes both

[15] Levinas himself faces the problem of how to talk about the other while maintaining its alterity, given that an exposition implies the bringing of something into a realm of familiarity. In a sense, Levinas must fail adequately to enunciate his subject, maintaining the difficulty of writing in a paradoxical attempt to write outside of a philosophical system premised on the subordination of alterity to knowledge (Davis 32, 37-38, 41, 62).

humanism and contemporary anti-humanist attacks on the (humanist) subject.[16]

The central thesis of Levinas's ethics may be conveniently restated by reference to a late essay in which he summarizes the movement of his thought towards the ethical question of the nature of being. The climax of this summary, stated in an immensely convoluted paragraph, can be pruned to reflect what I consider to be his most relevant claims in this context, as follows:

> [h]idden behind the affirmation of being persisting analytically...in its being[,]...the miracle of the ego vindicated in the eyes of the neighbour...is thus like the suspension...of the eternal and irreversible return of the identical to itself....What is suspended is its real priority, which wipes out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalizing thought....It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty...that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification. (Levinas, EFP 85 emphasis added)

IV Theory and practice

Eric Wirth is one of the few critics to have looked to the philosophy of phenomenology to inform discussion of Auster's work. He argues that Auster's documentation of "the reduction of the mundane subject" owes much to Husserlian phenomenological reduction (Wirth 173). In Wirth's reading, individuals in Auster's work are reduced to a ground zero state (174) and become "prone to vanishing" (175) precisely because "consciousness, in graduating to absoluteness through the phenomenological reduction of the world...is itself identically reduced" (173). But Wirth does not take cognizance of Levinas's critique of Husserl, or acknowledge that it is a kind of graduation to absoluteness which those characters who are 'reduced' desire, but cannot attain.

Because Levinas's conception of radical alterity regards the other as something which is always, by definition, unknowable and unrepresentable, no work of fiction could accurately 'embody' Levinasian phenomenology. Auster's work does, however, repeatedly figure a condition of otherness as something which its protagonists must acknowledge, and with which some relationship must be negotiated. The other for Auster's protagonists is either another

[16] A statement of this complex relationship can be found in "Substitution" (117). Levinas is "no more converted to the assault on subjectivity than he is to contemporary anti-humanism" (Davis 123).

person – or relationships with other people generally – or an inhuman alterity, often figured, as the last chapter will explore, as chance. Levinas presents relationships with other people as the concrete embodiment of his abstract notion that experience reveals itself in relation to the infinite, to an unfigurable, radical alterity. In "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" he states that the "idea of the infinite is the social relationship" (108). Levinas repeatedly emphasizes the primacy of an "ethical exigency to be responsible for the other", which

> undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of Being; it unsettles the natural and political positions we have taken up in the world and predisposes us to a meaning that is other than Being, that is otherwise than Being. (Levinas, EI 59).

In retrospect, Levinasian thought proves of great illuminatory value in considering City of Glass and Ghosts. It is particularly useful in providing a means of thinking about that which frustrates Quinn's asceticism, by which he seeks to deny all claims of alterity, physical or metaphoric. Radical otherness, refusing totalization, forces disruptions to Quinn's conception of the order which it is the detective's task to maintain.

The 'reductions' of Quinn and Blue take place not because they understand or embody a Husserlian phenomenological engagement with the world, but because they do not understand the necessary relationship between themselves and alterity – either how consciousness engages with the external world, or, more appositely, how relations with other people are important in self-constitution. Their 'reduction' is less the inevitable result of an application of Husserlian intentionality, than the necessary breakdown – in a re-education of sorts – of untenable conceptions of the relationship between the self and the external world of events and others.

The realization and assertion of the importance of others made by the writer of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" and "The Book of Memory" is likewise understood better with reference to the ideas explored above. In The Invention of Solitude, the condition of solitude provides the occasion for a realization that one cannot be completely alone. One's identity is premised upon relationships with others. The conditions in which one must strive to understand oneself are furthermore defined in tension with that alterity which cannot be understood, which threatens projects of recording and memory.

Other humans, physical objects, and chance, are three types of 'others' which loom

importantly in Auster's project. It is fruitless to seek an exact correlation for these in categories of otherness in Levinasian thought. It is hoped rather that from this lengthy apparent detour will emerge an acknowledgement of the usefulness of regarding Auster's recurring invocation of encounters with otherness as a fundamental component in his figuration of identity. An awareness of the profoundly ethical imperative that the authenticity of a conception of identity which makes no room for otherness of whatever kind be refused, will inform a clearer understanding, I submit, of the status of the self in Auster's work.

In The Invention of Solitude, the story of Jonah is used to emphasize the notion of justice as all-inclusive, insisting on responsibility for others. Auster presents the kernel of the story, of the 'lesson' Jonah learns about the Ninevites, as follows:

> [t]hese sinners, these heathen – and even the beasts that belong to them – are as much God's creatures as the Hebrews. This is a startling and original notion, especially considering the date of the story – eighth century B.C.(the time of Heraclitus). But this, finally, is the essence of what the rabbis have to teach. If there is to be any justice at all, it must be a justice for everyone. No one can be excluded, or else there is no such thing as justice. (IS 159)

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I will return later to consider the importance of perception in the constitution of the identity of Auster's characters. That discussion will inevitably be informed by the above discursus, as will my consideration of that peculiarly recurrent feature of Auster's plots, chance. Further evidence for my contention that alterity is important to the nature of identity as figured in Auster's work will emerge in the following chapter, as the final novel of The New York Trilogy, The Locked Room, and the next two novels published by Auster – In the Country of Last Things and Moon Palace – are briefly discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The story...is in the struggle": Three Witnesses Record

Remember with me today - the word
and counter-word
of witness
(Paul Auster, "Clandestine" ll 1-3 Ground Work 79)

I The Locked Room: narrating the other, narrating the self

The Locked Room (1986) is profitably considered in this rather than the first chapter because it shares distinct characteristics with In the Country of Last Things (1987) and Moon Palace (1989). All three are presented as records of a protagonist's attempt to make sense of experience, particularly in relation to others or conditions of otherness/decay/blankness. The idea of writing to remember and of the document as a record seeking to affirm the value of the individual in trying circumstances, inform all three novels, in which protagonists struggle against language and against their own assumptions about identity.

The Locked Room and the two novels which follow make use, ostensibly, of a first person narrator as the main character or protagonist, whereas City of Glass and Ghosts do not – although first person narration is used at times in these earlier novellas. At the end of City of Glass the reader learns that the book has been narrated by a nameless friend of the writer-character "Auster". This narrator, freshly returned from "Africa" (a non-specific, uninscribed space), travels with "Auster" to the Stillmans' apartment through the blankness of a white New York winter's day (CG 132). Just as the elder Stillman claims to have discovered Dark's treatise, so the narrator claims to have been present at the finding of Quinn's notebook, which, he claims problematically, has been followed faithfully in his narration.

Ghosts is narrated in an unnervingly opaque, objective, and mysteriously omniscient third person voice, which makes peculiarly oracular pronouncements. Near the beginning, for example, we read that

> [i]t is 3 February 1947. Little does Blue know, of course, that the case will go on for years. But the present is no less dark than the past, and its mystery is equal to anything

> the future might hold. Such is the way of the world: one step at a time, one word and then the next. There are certain things that Blue cannot possibly know at this point. For knowledge comes slowly, and when it comes, it is often at great personal expense. (136)

A similar statement is made near the end of the novella, before the narrator co-opts the reader into speculating about Blue's possible fate beyond the artificial boundaries of narrative representation:

> [f]or we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood. Anything is possible, therefore. I myself prefer to think that he went far away....In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China. (195-96, emphases added)

Even though the narrative situation of City of Glass is apparently clarified in the closing paragraphs of that novel, and the third person narrative voice of Ghosts casts aside his omniscient mask to reveal an "I", a completely different narrative style confronts the reader on the first page of The Locked Room: a sustained and very personal first person account of a retrospective attempt to make sense of a relationship with another. The Locked Room and the later Leviathan, the plot of which shares some of the former's concerns, constitute Auster's contribution to, or particular version of, the elegaic romance: "my story about him which is really my story about me" (Merivale 193). The previous parts of the Trilogy ended in bare or sparsely furnished apartments; the first two sentences of The Locked Room indicate that another person comes to constitute a place no less traumatic for the narrator: "[i]t seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am" (199). It seems that this first person narrator is the same as the one who appears at the end of the previous two novels. "The entire story comes down to what happened at the end", asserts the narrator of The Locked Room,

> and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. The same holds for the two books that come before it, City of Glass and Ghosts. These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about. I don't claim to have solved any problems. I am merely suggesting that a moment came when it no longer frightened me to look at what had happened....I have been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle. (294)

This claim can be read in a manner which challenges the conventional boundaries of text and world; but is it, made as it is by a character in a fiction, to be interpreted as anything more than a (perhaps too) clever metafictional ploy on Auster's part? The narrator does not claim to have written City of Glass and Ghosts as fictions, but while the supposed discovery of Quinn's notebook at the end of City of Glass presents the occasion for that novel's narration, the narrator has clearly not "refrained from any interpretations" (CG 132) as he claims to have done. The Quinn who appears in The Locked Room as the disappearing detective engaged by Sophie to find Fanshawe (202) might then be either a model for the fictional protagonist of City of Glass, or the same Quinn on whose incomplete notebook the narrator bases the account which he claims to have authored (Quinn also appears in In the Country of Last Things; Anna Blume finds "the passport of a man named Quinn" [36]).

There are many intertextual references in Auster's novels: Henry Dark (LR 310) and Stillman (LR 287) – both in City of Glass – also appear in The Locked Room, but as completely different characters, while Thoreau's Walden appears to have inspired the naming of Dennis Walden (LR 210). Suggesting that The Locked Room's narrator is narrator of the earlier books poses a question about what most critics focus on as the overtly 'postmodernist', highly wrought metafictional techniques of the earlier novels: is the reader invited to regard these as just that – techniques which Auster wishes us to read as being employed by the narrator of The Locked Room, and of the other two novels? The claim that the earlier stories represent different stages of the narrator's awareness of the meaning of his own story serves to suggest that the 'lessons' learned by Quinn and Blue – who are either 'real' personages for the narrator, or fictional surrogates in previous, experimental attempts at self-narrativization – are regarded as valuable for his own attempt to evaluate his relationship with Fanshawe.

The narrator, in a manner echoing much in The Invention of Solitude, presents extensive discussion of the difficulty of understanding and recording the life of another. "Every life", he states, "is inexplicable....No matter how many facts are told...the essential thing resists telling" (247). This uncertainty extends, he claims, to knowledge of ourselves:

> as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, 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)

The narrative validation of characters' lives make stories attractive, but falsely reassuring, he claims, for "[l]ives make no sense" (250) and "[n]othing is ever known" (251). Indeed, "the circumstances under which lives shift course are so various that it would seem impossible to say anything about a man until he is dead" (253). The narrator notes the details of various individuals whose lives have taken dramatic turns, claiming that these, while ostensibly true, are also "parables", which "mean what they mean only because they are true" (254), reflecting accurately on the incoherence of experience. The narrator notes that Fanshawe's notebooks record numerous anecdotes, such that "one begins to suspect that Fanshawe felt they could somehow help him to understand himself" (254); this, it seems, is the value of these "parables". The narrator's observation invites comparison with that made, supposedly by the same narrator, in and about City of Glass: "The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell" (CG 3). Stories may be imaginary, the narrator claims in The Locked Room, but they may "tell us truths more important than the ones we can find elsewhere" (250).

The narrator, writing about his difficult task of winning Sophie back after the separation which follows his return from Paris, records that their son Paul was born on 23 February 1981 (300). The narrator has adopted Sophie's son by Fanshawe, Ben, and the names of these children – Paul and Benjamin – together comprise the pseudonym under which Auster wrote Squeeze Play, Paul Benjamin, which is also the name which Auster used for the author character in his screenplay, Smoke. In an interview Auster states that becoming a parent

> connects you to a world beyond yourself, to the continuum of generations, to the inevitability of your own death. You understand that you exist in time, and after that you can no longer look at yourself in the same way. It's impossible to take yourself as seriously as you once did. You begin to let go, and in that letting go – at least in my case – you can find yourself wanting to tell stories. ("Interview LM&SG" 134)

It is interesting to note the striking similarity between these ideas and those expressed by Emmanuel Levinas in "Time and the Other". The contemplation of the proximity or inevitability of death is seen as bringing an awareness of absolute otherness, a state in which the subject is not its own master (Levinas, TO 40). In this state, the self's complacent conception of itself is

shown to be faulty - "the subject loses its very mastery as a subject" (ibid. 42) - and it "can no longer look at [it]self in the same way" (Auster, "Interview LM&SG" 134). Auster posits a connection between awareness of alterity and creative genesis.

It is significant, even though Auster repeatedly distances himself from overt autobiographical intent, that the date of birth of the narrator and Sophie's son, Paul, corresponds exactly to the date on which Paul Auster met his present wife, Siri Hustvedt, who, like Sophie, comes from Minnesota (LR 241; "Interview LM&SG" 118, 141).[1] I have already noted that Auster considers City of Glass to be a homage to Hustvedt, "a love letter in the form of a novel"; he "tried to imagine what would have happened" had he not met her, and "came up with...Quinn" (ibid. 142). Given the emphasis placed by the narrator of The Locked Room on the stories of lives as parables, and the importance he comes to place on his relationship with Sophie, it is difficult not to refer to similar ascriptions of importance by Auster in his private capacity - specifically his thoughts on parenthood and his valuation of meeting Hustvedt as a rebirth of sorts - for guidance in exploring the wider implications for Auster's oeuvre of the experience of the narrator in The Locked Room. We need particularly to examine the narrator's presentation of Fanshawe, and his response to this unfigurable other.

II Unhealthy relations

The narrator feels a connection with Fanshawe dating from a prelinguistic stage - "We met before we could talk" - and is unable to conceive of a time in which Fanshawe was not a determining other: "He is the place where everything begins for me" (199). Fanshawe had a "pronounced" influence on the narrator, even in childhood (209). Each grows up as the brother the other does not have (213).[2] Doubling or twinning is a primary structuring motif in The Locked Room, serving to emphasize the "passion" of their friendship (213): the schoolboy Fanshawe wrote a detective novel "with the outcome hinging on something like the confused

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[1] "[E]arly in 1981 (February 23rd, to be exact, it's impossible for me to forget the date) I met Siri Hustvedt, the person I'm married to now" ("Interview LM&SG" 141).

[2] On Fanshawe's 'trail' in France, the narrator, feeling like a "down-and-out private eye", shows people Fanshawe's picture "pretending to be his brother" (291).

identities of two sets of twins" (214); Fanshawe's mother tells the narrator that because they looked "almost like twins" she would confuse them from a distance (261); and in Paris the narrator is mistaken for Fanshawe by Anne Michaux,[3] one of Fanshawe's former girlfriends, whose response is significantly an "initial double take" (289, emphasis added).

The narrator stresses the difficulty of dealing clearly with his feelings for Fanshawe - "The truth is far less simple that I would like it to be" (209) - and despite admissions of his closeness to Fanshawe, in his "struggle to remember things as they really were", he sees that he "also held back from Fanshawe" (209). The narrator's recollections of Fanshawe stress the latter's apparent completeness, which seems to evidence no need for others. As a child, Fanshawe feels no need to attract attention to himself as the rest of the boys do (209):

> [w]hatever it was that Fanshawe eventually became, my sense is that it started for him back then. He formed himself very quickly, was already a sharply defined presence by the time we started school. Fanshawe was visible, whereas the rest of us were creatures without shape, in the throes of constant tumult, floundering blindly from one moment to the next...he was already himself before he grew up. (210)

Fanshawe's apparent indifference to his own status amongst their peer group as children makes the narrator both admire and resent him (209). Allusions to Conrad serve to emphasize the ambiguity of their relationship. Despite the young Fanshawe's difference from the other children, "he remained one of us" (214), claims the narrator, who was nonetheless often shocked by Fanshawe's "willingness to jump into dangerous situations" (214-15). These comments allude to Lord Jim, echoing Marlow's assertion that, despite his ignominious jump, Jim remains "one of us" (351). Fanshawe is also a Kurtz-like figure, harbouring what "seemed to be a great darkness" (LR 215), and approaching "a kind of horror" during a period of anonymity in New York (309).[4]

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[3] Michaux is the name of a French poet, about whom Auster has some interesting observations in his preface to the Random House anthology. Auster's comment that "[m]uch of [Michaux's] best writing is set in imaginary countries and reads as a bizarre kind of anthropology of inner states" ("Twentieth-Century French Poetry" [hereafter "French Poetry"] 64) could be connected with Fanshawe's novels, including "Neverland", and Fanshawe's secretive inwardness. Michaux claimed to write "sometimes for an imaginary companion, for a kind of alter-ego whom I would honestly like to keep up-to-date on an extraordinary transition in me or the world" (quoted in "French Poetry" 64).

[4] Stephen Bernstein notes some of the Conradian allusions discussed in this paragraph (103-104).

While Fanshawe's self-condemnation and imminent death at the end of The Locked Room is similar to Jim's proud last act of self-possession, and Fanshawe's pursuit of his own inwardness may be referred to in the terms of Jim's pursuit of an ideal of conduct, the comparison should not be over-extended. What is clear is that the narrator's response to Fanshawe is as ambiguous as Marlow's to his "inconclusive experiences" in Heart of Darkness (32) and Lord Jim. Despite the fact that the narrated events begin seven years before the act of narration (LR 199), and the narrator indicates that he learnt slowly "that what was good for Fanshawe was not necessarily good for me" (213), his position with regard to Fanshawe at the time of narration remains ambiguous.

At times, association with Fanshawe seems to offer the narrator an expansion of himself. A single gesture of Fanshawe's can open "a whole new world" (212) for the narrator, but Fanshawe's inwardness, so extreme that he becomes an "internal exile...contemptuous of the life he was forced to live" (216), contributes to the impression that he shares the violent and ultimately destructive hermeticism of Quinn and Black. His inwardness arises from a mistaken belief in its own immunity and from his incapacity to engage constructively with any other: Jane Fanshawe recalls her son as cold, emotionally dead, and incapable of love (261).

In retrospect, the narrator is struck by the "severity" of Fanshawe's "inwardness" (214); "beyond his surface composure, there seemed to be a great darkness" (215). Fanshawe leaves poems, plays, notebooks and novels, but, significantly, no writing of a personal or intimate nature, "no letters, no diaries, no glimpses into Fanshawe's private life" (223, see also 273, 276). Fanshawe spends a year in virtual isolation in a house in the south of France, and the experience of living close to nature and describing it vividly seems "to ground him more deeply in himself" (277). The narrator believes that this solitude seems to have offered Fanshawe a "passageway into the self, an instrument of discovery" (278). But it becomes increasingly clear that Fanshawe's solitude is much like that of Auster's father in "Portrait of an Invisible Man", the title of which would serve well as an alternative for The Locked Room.

The narrator recalls clearly that Fanshawe appeared to contain a "secret core", a "mysterious centre of hiddenness" (210), but his completeness is merely an appearance, revealed

as self-delusionary, no more than Fanshawe's self-construction over an abyss of nothingness, hinted at by the ironic titles of Fanshawe's novels, including "Neverland" (229) and "Blackouts" (242). A further ominous note is sounded in the narrator's recollection of Fanshawe's childhood predilection for "playing around construction sites...balancing on planks over an abyss of machinery, sandbags, and mud" (215).

Fanshawe's is in the final analysis thus not an exemplary inwardness. It is no coincidence that Fanshawe is named for Hawthorne's apprenticeship Gothic romance of the same name (1828) about a remarkable but doomed scholar who withdraws from the world.[5] Auster himself draws attention to this debt, stating that, "[i]n The Locked Room...the name Fanshawe is a direct reference to Hawthorne. Fanshawe was the title of Hawthorne's first novel" ("Interview JM" 111).[6] It remains to be considered how exactly the narrator responds to Fanshawe, and what the implications of his response are shown to be.

The narrator's relationship with Fanshawe is initially not one of difference, which would allow an apprehension of his own individuality in relation to another, but one in which that other is defined as a space both present in, and consuming, himself. Relationships with Fanshawe are repeatedly figured in spatial terms. The pregnant Sophie, for example, feeling that she must reclaim her life after Fanshawe's disappearance, claims that there is "no more room inside her for Fanshawe" (LR 203). The narrator seems unable to resist what appears to be Fanshawe's direction of his life; it is as though Fanshawe's "manuscripts and letters...become a meta-writing

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[5] "That Auster christens his heroine Sophie, thereby recalling the name of Hawthorne's own wife, plays further upon the autobiographical nature of Fanshawe's destructive allure for Hawthorne, whose tendency toward remoteness, both in his private life and as a recurrent theme in his writing, is well known" (Saltzman, Designs of Darkness 68).

[6] William Marling argues that "Auster rereads the American Romantics and responds to them as his 'inheritance'" (301). He notes that several commentators have traced Auster's borrowings from nineteenth-century American literature. Two of the essays in the proceedings of the Aix-en-Provence conference (Duperray ed.) - in which Marling's paper first appeared - consider other debts: Auster's use of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (Mellier), and of Poe's "William Wilson" (Gervais) (Marling 301). Marling sketches the plot of Hawthorne's 1828 novel, and proceeds to show how and what Auster 'rewrites', and which character and episode in The Locked Room is informed by which in Fanshawe (305ff). He then attempts to trace congruences between Auster's biography and The Locked Room's Fanshawe, but commits blatant factual errors. He claims that the child of Auster's first marriage is Sophie (308), whereas his and Lydia Davis's child is a son, Daniel (see The Invention of Solitude, numerous interviews, and anecdotes such as in "The Red Notebook" 12, 29); Sophie is his and Siri Hustvedt's child (see for example in "Interview LM&SG" 135); Marling claims that the narrator in The Locked Room adopts Fanshawe's child, Sam (Marling 309), but the child's name is Ben (LR 241,300).

that scripts the course of the narrator's existence" (Bernstein 91). Fanshawe requests that the narrator marry Sophie and adopt Ben (LR 237), suggesting that he intended and hoped for the narrator's relationship with Sophie. The narrator's lack of a personal appellation, and his attraction to the idea of writing under a pseudonym (236), compound an impression of subjective vacuity. He is a dummy-like host – "no more than an invisible instrument" (223) – not unlike Quinn in the triad of selves outlined in the opening pages of City of Glass. The narrator believes that he is capable of continuing with his life, despite the information that Fanshawe is still alive, but in retrospect realizes that he "was haunted, perhaps...even possessed": "Fanshawe was inside me day and night for all those months" (LR 242). In the house in France where Fanshawe stayed, the narrator senses Fanshawe's presence both in the house and inside himself:

> [i]nstead of looking for Fanshawe, I had actually been running away from him...if I could convince myself that I was looking for him, then it necessarily followed that he was somewhere else – somewhere beyond me, beyond the limits of my life. But I had been wrong. Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning. (292)

The need to negotiate a new relationship to alterity in general becomes urgent when the narrator is literally called to take responsibility for another by being asked to be Fanshawe's literary executor (205-206). This leaves him unsettled: "[h]ow could I be expected to take on such a responsibility – to stand in judgement of a man and say whether his life had been worth living?" (206). The narrator not only looks after his literary affairs, but takes Fanshawe's place as husband and father; however, his world is shattered when he receives a letter from Fanshawe, who is alive and in hiding (237). Fanshawe seems to have abdicated his responsibilities to others, but the narrator's motivation for not telling Sophie that Fanshawe is alive – he is scared she will want Fanshawe back – betrays his own selfishness (239).

The duty of responsibility of the self for the other arises for Levinas when the self responds to the necessity it should feel to interrogate the justification for its own being, and asks whether its being "is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" ("Ethics as First Philosophy" 85). The self is thus "a usurper of the place of the other" (Levinas, "Ethics of the infinite" 60). In The Locked Room, the narrator literally takes Fanshawe's place as husband and

father, assuming the responsibilities which Fanshawe has rejected.[7] The narrator's relation to the other, Fanshawe, is, however, not one of responsibility, but of usurpation and violence. He has taken the other's place, and for a while even desires to kill him (267). Likewise, the pretence of researching Fanshawe's life for the biography he is to write is revealed in his true intentions – to find Fanshawe – as an allegory of the reduction of alterity to sameness. The project of writing the biography is described in terms of a desire to kill the other; it is like consigning Fanshawe to his grave (250).

The Locked Room's narrator needs to accept his otherness from Fanshawe, and from others. His relationship with Sophie is described in terms which emphasize this need, although it is never completely negotiated:

> [b]y belonging to Sophie, I began to feel as though I belonged to everyone else as well. My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable. This was the tiny hole between self and not-self, and for the first time in my life I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world. (232)

His unhealthily unresolved relationship with Fanshawe becomes destructive, a retrospective impression conveyed in terms which invite an ambiguous comparison with Blue's terrified response to Black's alterity: "as I write this now", the narrator asserts, "I realize that even on that first day I had slipped through a hole in the earth, that I was falling into a place where I had never been before" (203). Sophie feels that he is vanishing during his search for Fanshawe (268). A sense of being in free fall into an abyss is also experienced by Quinn and Blue in the course of experiences which reveal their conceptions of self to be irresponsible.

The narrator's own 'reduction' in The Locked Room takes place in Paris. He has difficulty speaking in French, but experiences "a certain pleasure" in perceiving "language as a collection of sounds, to be forced to the surface of words where meanings vanish" (287). Yet this surface entrapment represents the relation of the narrator to any attempts to detect the 'truth' about Fanshawe, himself, or reality. A pointed instance of doubling (Anne Michaux mistakes the narrator for Fanshawe) initiates a complete ontological collapse: "[s]omething

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[7] "To be oneself", Levinas argues, "is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other" ("Substitution" 107).

monstrous was happening, and I had no control over it anymore. The sky was growing dark inside" (290). This is manifested in a recollection of the loss of control over his own agency (293), and figured linguistically, like the collapses of Quinn and Blue. Edging closer to collapse, the narrator interprets Fanshawe's isolation in the French countryside, and the language which seemed available to him there, in a manner which implies envy of what appears to him to be Fanshawe's approach to a quasi-prelapsarian state with regard to language, and selfhood (277).

The narrator's belief that he can find Fanshawe by discovering every detail about his life, is frustrated on all sides. Auster writes that in Knut Hamsun's Modernist masterpiece, Hunger, the unnamed protagonist

> peers into the darkness hunger has created for him, and what he finds is a void of language. Reality has become a confusion of thingless names and nameless things for him. The connection between the self and the world has been broken. ("The Art of Hunger" 110)

It is the acknowledgement of the role of language in creating the impression of ontological certainty, and the consequent implications of the collapse of language's signifying function, in which the depiction of the collapse of Hamsun's protagonist most closely prefigures those of several of Auster's characters. Auster quotes from Hunger:

> [a] wholesale grocer's cart came by and I saw it was filled with potatoes, but out of fury, from sheer obstinacy, I decided that they were not potatoes at all, they were cabbages, and I swore violent oaths that they were cabbages. (quoted in "The Art of Hunger" 112)

"[A]s time goes on", Hamsun's protagonist "is truly shorn of his self. What names he chooses to give himself are all inventions, summoned forth on the spur of the moment" (ibid. 110).

The narrator of The Locked Room vainly and desperately arrogates to himself the naming power of the logocentricity of which his collapse can be read as a deconstruction. In a Parisian bar he insists on calling a waitress "Fayaway, an exile from Typee" and himself "Herman Melville" (LR 295),[8] and names an American stranger Fanshawe: "He's no one...and if he's no one, then he must be Fanshawe" (295). Just as identities blur, emphasized by the

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[8] Recall that Fanshawe began a letter to his sister "Call me Redburn" (LR 272), adapting the opening of Melville's Moby Dick, "Call me Ishmael" (93) and the title of Melville's Redburn. The narrator's calling himself Melville is further manifestation of the doubling motif. Marco displays a similar naming prerogative when he calls Kitty Pocahontas during his delirium in Moon Palace (70).

instances of doubling, so entrapment on the surface of signifying structures forces a recognition of the impossibility of discovering any 'essential' truths and an awareness of the impossibility of closure. These signifying networks approximate the play of differences on which identity is predicated, both linguistic and individual. The narrator of The Locked Room realizes this:

> [t]he problem was that I could no longer make the right distinctions. This can never be that. Apples are not oranges, peaches are not plums. You feel that difference on your tongue, and then you know, as if inside yourself. But everything was beginning to have the same taste to me. (290, emphasis added)

An inability to engage in the play of differences, demonstrated in the character's relationships, together with an apprehension of the necessity of this play for the constitution of meaning, precipitates collapse.

Auster's characters, like Hamsun's, discover that language, as given, no longer works. For Blue in Ghosts, "words do not necessarily work...it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say" (G 147-48). Blue discovers that his method in writing reports, "describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described" (146), fails. He discovers that words are no longer "transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world" (146); "instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the world", his words "have induced them to disappear" (147). The narrator of The Locked Room has a similar experience reading Fanshawe's red notebook (313-14).

What is one to make of Fanshawe? Is he the epitome of self-absorbed failure, deluded in the belief that he is self-founded, and has access to the essences of things? The descriptions which imply such are all retrospective speculations by the narrator and are thus perhaps more illustrative of the narrator than of Fanshawe. Is the red notebook which Fanshawe leaves for the narrator his acknowledgement of the impossibility of his supposed completeness? The narrator senses that "the words...seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out", yet feels that "underneath this confusion...was something too willed, something too perfect, as though in the end the only thing he had really wanted was to fail – even to the point of failing himself" (LR 313-14). Is Fanshawe merely a foil for the narrator, an-other not to be interrogated for consistency of presentation, but whose

function is to highlight the narrator's response, just as the experiences of Quinn in City of Glass and Blue in Ghosts provide vehicles for the narration of what the narrator of The Locked Room would have the reader believe are various "stages in [his] awareness of what [the story] is about" (LR 294)?

Stephen Bernstein regards The Locked Room as "Auster's powerful refusal to accede to the traditional category of closure", making use of "repeated appeals to the sublime in order to frame its unimaginable task" (88). Bernstein cites various incidents to suggest that the narrator's relationship with Fanshawe can be read as incipient homoeroticism (91),[9] and argues that the narrative of homoerotic attraction never achieves closure, manifesting its status in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as 'unspeakable' and 'unmentionable' (Bernstein 94).

The narrator's detective-like quest for interpretive closure in his research on Fanshawe is constantly frustrated. "[T]he story should end" with the narrator and Sophie living happily together, and Fanshawe's work successful, "[b]ut it turns out that this is only the beginning" (LR 235). The narrator may be "nearly at the end now" (300), three years after his return from Paris, but there can be no end while Fanshawe is alive (301).

The narrator is haunted by the image of a locked room, a standard device in murder mysteries, and in the gothic figuration of the sublime (Bernstein 95). It is in this room that Fanshawe is "condemned to a mythical solitude", and the room, the narrator asserts, is in his own skull (LR 293). This tomb-like enclosedness is repeated in images of graves and boxes: the young Fanshawe would disappear into his "secret place", a cardboard box; the seventeen year-old Fanshawe climbs into an open grave on a visit to a cemetery, just before his father's death (220); the narrator reads in Fanshawe's notebook of the arctic explorer Peter Freuchen's

[9] These include the 'finger pricking' (LR 199); the narrator's mother's recollection that "we were so attached to each other that once, when we were six, we asked her if it was possible for men to get married. We wanted to live together when we grew up, and who else but married people did that ?" (213); and the fact that they loose their virginity together (215). Even in this incident Fanshawe seems to have denied the narrator adequate 'closure', Bernstein points out (92), in that the narrator recalls finding sexual intercourse "a long struggle, and even in the end I felt no real pleasure"; "things might have gone well for me if I hadn't been distracted by Fanshawe's shoes" (LR 216).

narrow escape from a "coffin of ice" (255)[10] formed when his breath freezes to the walls of an igloo in which he shelters; and the planned (fictitious) biography of Fanshawe (246) would have the effect of consigning a living man to his grave (250). Fanshawe comes to function "as a trope for death" inside the narrator, who furthermore regards his "breakdown" in Paris as a death-like experience: "I tasted death, when I saw myself dead. There is no cure for such an encounter. Once it happens, it goes on happening; you live with it for the rest of your life" (301, emphasis added).

This experience echoes Quinn's dissipation as a character, and Blue's "blacking out" in Ghosts. On entering Black's room, everything becomes "dark inside" Blue (187), and he "blacks out, collapsing to the floor like a dead man" (188). Suffering, reduction, apprehension of the closeness of death; all are experiences which fascinate Auster, as evidenced in his essays, poetry and fiction. The epigraph to Jacques Dupin's 1982 collection of poems, Une Apparence de Soupirail, which Auster translated as "Songs of Rescue", is from Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "I can truly say that I did not begin to live until I saw myself as a deadman" (Dupin 163).

All three parts of The New York Trilogy present unrepresentable death-like scenes and processes of negation in figurations of the sublime which seek to frustrate all narrative and interpretive teleological imperatives. Implicit in these presentations are possibilities for repeated beginnings and renewed conceptions of identity. The speculative nature of the narrative voice which 'closes' City of Glass and Ghosts, and narrates The Locked Room, suggests possible continuation, evidencing an engagement with the American idea of constantly expanding frontiers of promise. Terence Martin's analysis of the use of negative rhetoric to create possibilities of self-definition emphasises, as do many commentators, that America has always been writing its own identity: John Quincy Adams asked his audience in an 1821 Independence Day oration to ponder the fact that the United States as a nation was self-created, had spoken itself into existence (Martin 36).

The suggestion at the end of Ghosts that Blue sets out for the Western frontier is further

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[10] The passage quoted by the narrator from Fanshawe's notebook is a verbatim excerpt from Auster's prose piece "White Spaces" (86-7). A collection of Auster's selected essays and poems, published in 1990, is entitled Ground Work; Fanshawe's "long sequence of poems written in the country" has the same title (LR 278).

evidence of the Trilogy's engagement with issues of identity and beginnings, the West being among the most potent icons of possibility in American mythography.[11] The name 'Daniel Quinn' is, furthermore, a possible allusion to 'Dan Quin', the pseudonym of Alfred Henry Lewis (c1858-1914), an attorney turned wandering cowboy in the Southwest, who later wrote important fiction about Western frontier life (Lewis 60, Hart 370).

Although an important study by Frederick Jackson Turner declared in 1893 that the frontier had disappeared, it survived as a powerful metaphor for the need to envision the possibility of continued beginnings (Martin 198-200). Auster harnesses these ideas, and broader motifs of exploration, to suggest comparisons for processes of self-definition. Quinn reads about Marco Polo in City of Glass and Fanshawe reads Ralegh's History of the World and The Journeys of Cabeza de Vaca (LR 276). Other novels are full of such allusions, particularly In the Country of Last Things - in which a young woman travels westward across the ocean to a decaying city to find her missing brother, encountering such characters as Ferdinand and Isabel - and Moon Palace, which makes use of J.F.Kennedy's invocation of space as the "New Frontier".

III Redemptive encounters In the Country of Last Things

According to Auster, he first conceived the outline of In the Country of Last Things in college, before any of his other book-length prose works: "The idea of an unknowable place...got under my skin" ("Interview JM" 113). His description emphasises the otherness of the place of last things which the protagonist, Anna Blume, encounters in a variation on the projects of search or observation which dominated the Trilogy. Auster emphasises that In the Country of Last Things is not about a dystopic, postapocalyptic future, but about the present (ibid.) While critics and

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[11] Compare Dark's belief in the westward expansion of civilization in City of Glass, which is informed, perhaps, by a "prophecy that came to haunt much American thought and writing" (Ruland and Bradbury 47), George Berkeley's 1726 verses "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America", in which he predicts that "There shall be sung another golden age...Not such as Europe breeds, in her decay," but rather "Such as she bred, when fresh and young", and concludes:

> Westward the course of empire takes its way;
> The first four acts already past,
> A fifth shall close the drama with the day:
> Time's noblest offspring is the last.
> (quoted in Ruland and Bradbury 48)

Auster himself have identified historical precedents for details in the novel ("Interview LM&SG" 148-49, for example),[12] its vision of what it takes to redeem isolation and assert a continuing sense of humanity is what makes it a powerful document for the present, and part of the ethical project I have attempted to outline. Katharine Washburn observes that the setting is "the here and now...its ethical, spiritual, and cultural chaos" (63). Auster has stated about the novel that while some may find its vision depressing, he finds it

> the most hopeful book I've ever written. Anna Blume survives, at least to the extent that her words survive. Even in the midst of the most brutal realities, the most terrible social conditions, she struggles to remain a human being, to keep her humanity intact. I can't imagine anything more noble and courageous than that. ("Interview LM&SG" 149)

The Locked Room is written in the first person about a struggle to define a self's relation to another; In the Country of Last Things is presented as an account of Anna Blume's experiences, which she records in a kind of letter-novel addressed to an unnamed other – possibly a lover (40), known since childhood (10-11, 38). The record asserts her desire and struggle to be human, even in a much reduced environment. Whether or not posted, it is suggested, is not the point (3); the document is evisaged as something, even if not read, to be cherished by the addressee or Anna's parents as "one last thing to remember me by" (184).[13]

As with all protagonists in Auster's fiction, Anna faces situations in which her conceptions of her identity are called into question. As with the protagonists of The Invention of Solitude and The Locked Room, Anna struggles to tell her story, and feels the urgency of the need to record it:

> unless I write down things as they occur to me, I feel I will lose them for good....Each day brings the same struggle, the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then not to forget....The story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself, and between each word, what silences, what words escape and vanish, never to be seen again. (38)

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[12] Auster states: "the book has nothing to do with science fiction. It's quite fantastical at times, of course, but that doesn't mean it's not firmly anchored in historical realities. It's a novel about the present and the immediate past, not about the future. 'Anna Blume walks through the twentieth century'. That's the phrase I carried around in my head while I was working on the book" ("Interview LM&SG" 148).

[13] A number of phrases – "[t]hese are the last things, she wrote" (1); "[t]his is how I live, her letter continued" (2); "she wrote" (3); "she went on" (5); "she continued" (39) – indicate that the novel is actually being narrated by a nameless third person, possibly the addressee of Anna's letter. Anna's first person narration is thus being retold as the notebook is apparently being read by someone else. The novel ends with Anna's promise of another letter as soon as she arrives at wherever her party is going (188).

She writes her account as a letter, in a blue notebook, "adding a few more pages every day" (182) in an attempt "to get it all down on these pages before it is too late" (79). Writing the letter becomes "the one thing that matters" to her (ibid.). She tries to make her record comprehensive (39), but is inevitably not granted an approach to the comforts of narrative closure, realizing as time progresses, that

> [t]he closer you come to the end, the more there is to say. The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going, but a point comes when you realize you will never get there. You might have to stop...but that does not mean you have come to the end. (183)

Anna's story reaches a provisional ending as the notebook is used up. Like the three novels of The New York Trilogy, In the Country of Last Things has an unfigurable ending, and Anna's task of recording is made more difficult by the fact that she finds events difficult to understand (20, 22, 28). As things vanish, the words which signify them vanish too (87), further jeopardizing her project.

There is another major project of writing in the novel: Samuel Farr's history of the city, which takes on similar qualities to Anna's letter for its writer and Anna. Farr is attempting to record every detail about the city, but concedes that the "story is so big...it's impossible for any one person to tell it" (102). He writes, nonetheless, to keep alive. Anna notes that "[a]s long as we kept working on it...the notion of a possible future would continue to exist" for them (114).

Unable to leave the city, or find her brother, Anna becomes an object hunter, a scavenger for the re-usable in the city's detritus (34). However, to protect herself from attack by other object hunters, she needs to have allies, and this, Anna claims, is where she is vulnerable: "[a]nother thing that hurt me was that I stuck to myself. I...made no effort to become friends with anyone" (37). As a result, she becomes "dull inside" (43), with "no friends, no one to talk to, no one to share a meal with" (44). But then Anna's life in the city takes the first of several turns, all occasioned by purely chance encounters with others, which lead to relationships, and to the assumption of responsibility for others. She saves the elderly Isabel from danger, literally taking responsibility for the life of another, stating that her "true life in the city began at that

moment" (45).

After Isabel's death, she is turned out of the apartment in which she lived with Isabel and Ferdinand. She takes refuge in the decaying National Library, where she bursts in unexpectedly on a group of bearded, black-clad men, a Rabbi and his disciples. She recognizes them as Jews and the following exchange takes place:

> "I thought all the Jews were dead," I whispered.
> "There are a few of us left," he said, smiling at me again. "It's not so easy to get rid of us, you know."
> "I'm Jewish too," I blurted out. (95)

She visits the Rabbi regularly (111), until he and his disciples disappear, relishing a sense of community which redeems some of the alienation of the city. The Rabbi's comment that the Jewish condition involves a belief that this generation is the last – "[w]e are always at the end, always standing on the brink of the last moment" (112) – marks Anna's experience in this country of last things, and her project of recording this in her blue notebook, as sharing an affinity with the Jewish project of recording in a state of simultaneous hope and despair, discussed in the second chapter of this study.

Anna's next significant encounter with another involves her relationship with Samuel Farr. She meets him by chance (99-107), they become lovers (107), and Anna falls pregnant (117). She is lured into danger, and jumps from a window (losing the foetus), providing the occasion for yet a further opportunity for a character to assume responsibility for another: Anna is saved by Victoria Woburn (127). Anna assists at Woburn house, a sanctuary for the destitute, even though she initially wonders if she can devote herself to others (137). Sam appears at Woburn house (161), and the household prepares to head into the unknown to the west of the city.

There are many in this decaying city who do not recognize the importance of otherness, like those who raise starvation to the level of an art (3). Maud Ellmann suggests that food's status as external to the body inscribes the act of eating as confounding the boundary between

self and other (56).[14] Starvation can thus be viewed as a resistance to the ingestion of something other, which might contaminate the desired individual self-completeness with its subversive alterity (Little 143-45); "self-starvation seems to represent the extirpation of the other from the self" (Ellmann 95).[15] Those who choose to starve themselves, and those who belong to groups such as the Runners, or the Leapers, or subscribe to Euthanasia Clinics, or Assassination Clubs (CLT 11-16), all seek wholeness, a state of plenitude, through self-abnegation. Little comments that these drives towards self-renunciation have an aesthetic equivalent in Ferdinand's hobby.

Ferdinand, "a radically diminished version of the imperialist Spanish king" (Little 147), builds miniature ships in bottles (CLT 47).[16] Exploration involves encounters with others, which historically involved the oppression or denial of the value of others, precipitating binary oppositions between discoverer/discovered, conqueror/subject; Ferdinand, like Quinn and Blue, is devoted to a destructive hermeticism which seeks to deny otherness completely:

> [i]t was almost as though his obsession with ships had led him to play out the role of a man marooned on a desert island. Or else it was the opposite. Already stranded, perhaps he had begun building ships as a sign of inner distress - as a secret call for rescue. (CLT 52)

Nor does he share his creations with others, having no desire to sell or even to display his ships. His aim is to build them ever smaller, hoping to achieve a creation so small as to be, significantly, practically invisible to others (55). He is described as "embattled...thoroughly disgusted with himself and the world" (52), "adrift in his coarse, demented angers" (57). The point is finally that to survive, one must engage with others, with that which is outside of self,

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[14] Elsewhere in the same study, The Hunger Artists: Starvation, Writing and Imprisonment, Ellmann writes that "the notion of the self is founded on the regulation of the orifices. For it is at these thresholds that the other, in the form of food, is assumed into the body" and waste is expelled into otherness or nothingness (105).

[15] This notion of resisting otherness through starvation, of seeking to reject implication in the world by refusing to ingest what is seen as symbolising alterity, is discernable in slightly different form in the strange case of Louis Wolfson. Auster's essay on Wolfson's Le Schizo et les Langues comments that Wolfson's experience of violent disgust at eating, and at the English language, demonstrates the "fundamental connection between speaking and eating" ("New York Babel" 124). Wolfson seeks a system for hearing other languages in English words (121) so as to discover "a language he can live with" (125). Both English and eating come to represent an unwanted relationship with the outside world. Auster writes: "To eat is a compromise, since it sustains him within the context of an already discredited and unacceptable world" (ibid.).

[16] Ferdinand and Isabel are the first characters in Auster's fiction whose names connect them explicitly with exploration - if Jonah's appearance as a reluctant traveller forced into a reluctant encounter with God as the Other in The Invention of Solitude is discounted - but this theme haunts the fiction after In the Country of Last Things.

and this Ferdinand cannot do.

There is little critical commentary on In the Country of Last Things. Tim Woods offers the most substantial, a Marxist/ Jamesonian analysis which makes some useful points, but finally offers too restrictive an interpretation. He regards In the Country of Last Things as an exploration of the attempts, and ultimate failure, of various power structures to control the body and the world ("Looking for Signs in the Air" 109). The novel demonstrates that "social conditions determine the superstructural beliefs in a society" (126), although, Woods claims, it also demonstrates how "opportunities for social resistance" can spring from "fragmentation, ruptures, and discontinuities" (ibid.). Woods does make useful observations about the role of space in Auster's novel, and in his work in general. Auster "demonstrates that knowledge is deeply complicit with the location of the subject...the space of the production of discourse" (Woods 127).

Both The Invention of Solitude and "White Spaces", an early prose piece, make a connection between writing, thinking and traversing a space (Woods 111-12). In "The Book of Memory", Auster suggests that thought traces paths in the mind: "our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken, so that, in the end, we might safely say that we have been on a journey" (IS 122). The first person voice of "White Spaces" speaks of a similar journey in the room in which he is writing, equating each step with each word written, "as if for each word to be spoken there were another space to be crossed" (85).

Anna stresses the importance of keeping moving, one step at a time (CLT 2, 5); her writing, a means of survival, is a similar negotiation of space. Her work as an object hunter requires an alertness to the possibility of reconstituting the fragments around her, "little islands of intactness", to form "new archipelagoes of matter" (36). It is suggested that Anna needs to engage actively in creatively constituting, through perception, the physical environment which she occupies. Anna discovers that to stay alive and successfully avoid multiple threats she must, "[e]ven if it is for the hundredth time...encounter each thing as if [she has] never known it

before...it must always be the first time" (7).[17] In an observation which neatly reiterates the concerns which have been traced above, and anticipates the discovery by other of Auster's protagonists of the necessity of negotiating a relationship to the physical world as an important 'other', Anna formulates this engagement as a vital and ethical imperative:

> you cannot merely see, for each thing...is part of the story unfolding inside you. It would be good, I suppose, to make yourself so hard that nothing could affect you anymore. But then you would be alone, so totally cut off from everyone else that life would become impossible. (19)

IV In search of a space for the self in Moon Palace

Auster's next novel, Moon Palace, rehearses many of the concerns discussed above, at greater length, in a bildungsroman of sorts - Auster himself described the novel in manuscript form as "a kind of David Copperfield novel" ("Interview JM" 114). The novel is a retrospective narrative in which Marco Stanley Fogg records his experiences between 1968 and 1971. In brief, Marco, an orphan, is sent to Columbia by his guardian and uncle, Victor; after Victor's death Marco's funds become depleted, and he sinks into a life-threatening decline. Friends Zimmer and Kitty Wu save him, and he takes work as a secretary and companion to an eccentric, wheelchair-bound man, Thomas Effing, formerly an artist, Julian Barber. After Effing's death, Marco traces the deceased's son, Sol Barber, who Marco discovers is his own father. Sol dies shortly thereafter, Marco drives to Utah to find a cave in which Julian Barber had lived, only to discover that it is under the waters of Lake Powell; Marco's car is stolen, and he walks to the Pacific coast and watches the moon rise. The first paragraph of the novel suggests the centrality of concerns encountered before - the stripping imperative leading to a 'ground zero' point; the self's relation to others; a search or quest accompanied by trials leading to the apprehension of a new beginning (1) - which will be canvassed briefly here.

Moon Palace is infused with the language of beginnings, of blank spaces inviting inscription. Marco recalls the narrated events as constituting "the beginning of [his] life" (1).

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[17] Merivale suggests that this may be an echo of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who, famously, exclaims at the end of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce 252; Merivale, examiner's report).

Born 11 January 1947 (269, 1), Fogg reaches the edge of the American continent, the "end of the world" and site of a fresh start, in his twenty-fifth year: "This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins" (306). Melville regarded his life as having begun at the same age, after a number of worldly quests and experiences (Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne" 130);[18] Moon Palace clearly continues Auster's dialogue with nineteenth-century American literature. Marco's initials - MS - are read as 'manuscript' (7) by his uncle Victor, who claims that "[e]very man is the author of his own life" (7). The idea of writing to remember - explored in The Invention of Solitude and In the Country of Last Things - finds an interesting manifestation in Marco's composition of Effing's obituary (129).

Marco finds Effing's story difficult to retell, what he records "will never amount to more than part of the story I am trying to tell" (48). This difficulty is encountered in the previous novels, and is developed further in Leviathan. Many of Auster's protagonists have great difficulty in understanding and adequately expressing the importance of experiences which are central to the processes which define and redefine their identities. At one point during the collapse precipitated by his uncle and guardian's death, and the subsequent depletion of his funds, Marco exclaims (or rather, records himself as having exclaimed): "[i]f life was a story, as Uncle Victor had often told me, and each man was the author of his own story, then I was making it up as I went along....The question was what I was supposed to do when the pen ran out of ink" (41-42).

Marco's suffering turns him into a vagrant, but his physical search for shelter and security comes, like Anna's, to represent a search for a space within which he can negotiate relations to that outside himself. Marco connects his own period of suffering with the political events of his time. "Those were difficult days for everyone, of course....By the Spring of 1968, every day seemed to retch forth a new cataclysm", he writes (25). He watches an oil tank explode across the Hudson River and it occurs to him "that the inner and the outer could not be separated except by doing great damage to the truth" (25). The implication is that the political is

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[18] In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne written, it is thought, on 1 June 1851, Melville wrote: "[u]ntil I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life" (130).

personal. Despite only peripheral representation of political events, Marco acknowledges the importance for a sense of identity of a involvement in society at large. While "[e]veryone is familiar with the story of that time, and there would be no point in going over it again", Marco writes that his "own story stands in the rubble of those days, and unless this fact is understood, none of it will make sense" (25).

The idea of an encounter with otherness, with the unknown, informs the motif of exploration and discovery in the novel. Marco's very name links him with this omnipresent motif: Marco for Marco Polo, Stanley for the American journalist and famous tracker of Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, and Fogg for Jules Verne's Phileas (6). Victor gives Marco 1 492 books (15) - 1492 was the year of Columbus's 'discovery' of America.[19] Marco reads travel books and narratives of the mapping of America to Effing (110). Solomon Barber's books are scholarly examinations of early American history with titles which evoke discovery, frontiers, encounters with 'others': Bishop Berkeley and the Indians, The Lost Colony of Roanoke, and The American Wilderness (192-94).

During a hunger-induced episode of delirium, soon after watching the moon landing on television (31), the name of a Chinese restaurant, Moon Palace, haunts Marco's mind "with all the mystery and fascination of an oracle", and he begins to make startling 'connections': [t]he idea of voyaging into the unknown, for example, and the parallels between Columbus and the astronauts. The discovery of America as a failure to reach China (32). The new frontier of the Moon is a constant informing presence. Marco's thoughts on the first lunar landing explicitly reflect these concerns:

> the president...declared this to be the greatest event since the creation of man...for all the absurdity of that remark, there was one thing no one could challenge: since the day he was expelled from Paradise, Adam had never been this far from home. (31)

During his delirium, the two os in the Moon Palace restaurant sign become T.J.Eckleburg-like

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[19] There are numerous further evocations of Columbus. The 1893 Columbiad Exposition in Chicago, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery (MP 142) provides the occasion for Tesla's demonstration of "The Egg of Columbus", as Marco recalls it (142-3). This links the egg as symbol of possibility with Columbus and the possibilities of the 'New World', in a manner similar to Stillman's meandering speculations in City of Glass, which mention "Columbus's egg" (82). Fanshawe was attracted to the idea of choosing to end his life in a street - Columbus Square - named for the famous 'discoverer' (LR 310-311).

eyes of God (70), and he dreams he is 350 years earlier following a group of Indians "through the forests of Manhattan", the green breast of Gatsby's new world (Fitzgerald 171). During Marco's first night on the streets, there is "no moon in the sky" (MP 55); the passive acceptance of his decline early in his narrative is figured in lunar terms as a "total eclipse" (21). The novel's final paragraph shows Marco watching a full moon rising in the night sky, "not turning away until it had found its place", as Marco has sought to find his, "in the darkness" (307).

Marco describes his starvation as "nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition" (21). This description is clearly influenced both by Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and Knut Hamsun's Hunger, although Marco's position is not willed, as the protagonist's situation in each of these other texts is. Hamsun's nameless protagonist wanders city streets, frightens people away from him, comes into some money by chance and gives it away, and is evicted from his rooms. Marco suffers similar experiences – (he gives away Effing's, rather than his own, money [206]). Evicted from his apartment, Marco wanders the streets, as did the elder Stillman, and Fanshawe during his period of "horror" (LR 309), and as does Anna Blume in the New York-like unnamed city of In the Country of Last Things. His reduction culminates in a feeling of complete loneliness, as he crawls into a small cave in Central Park, shivering and delirious with fever.

A cave also features as the site of Effing's reinscription of his own life. Alone in the lunar landscape of the American Southwest, Julian Barber buries his dead travelling companion and, convinced that his life is over (164), suffers a breakdown, howling "almost constantly for three days" (165); "Julian Barber was obliterated" (165), "I was dead" (128). In the months that follow in the cave – in which four men, the hermit and the Gresham brothers, actually do die – Barber adopts a new identity, and renames himself (141, 184-85). Marco understands that even though Effing's story is highly imaginative, "there was the experience of a cave" (276, emphasis added) which connects Effing's locus of suffering with his own: "it struck me that he was somehow describing the same things I had felt" (183).

Just as the solitude of A. in "The Book of Memory" allows for an apprehension of the importance of others, so Marco's period of suffering provides the opportunity for others to save

him. Unsure of the time spent in the cave, Marco tells his friends that his fever lasted three days because – evoking ideas and implications familiar from The Invention of Solitude – this is "the same number of days that Jonah spent in the belly of the whale" (MP 69). Life with Kitty is much later described as his "Canaan", the "promised land" found after being "lost in the desert" (228). Loving Kitty causes an "earthquake in the heart of [Marco's] solitude" (90); being loved by Kitty and Zimmer saves him from a metaphorical fall from a cliff (50). Zimmer is also the name of the friend of Hölderlin who built the tower to which the poet withdrew in his supposed madness (IS 99-100).

But interpersonal relations in the novel are by no means ideal. Barber/Effing abandoned his wife and child, and, having traced his son, makes no attempt to contact him. Marco's relationship with Kitty founders. Marco's response to the discovery that Sol Barber is his father demonstrates the difficulty of accepting the connectedness of one's identity with others. Marco states that he has come to accept the absence of a father, regarding his non-definition in terms of a father as "an ontological necessity"; his "origins were a mystery", and, he claims, "[t]his was what defined me...I was used to my own darkness, clinging to it as a source of knowledge and self-respect" (295). Having to reject this self-reliance and self-groundedness is a profound shock (ibid.).

Moon Palace makes concrete Auster's concern with the space within which consciousness and identity are defined, through the privileging of these particular discourses. The space of the city, its physical mass, taxes Marco's practices of description. The vast spaces of the American West are mapped and represented for acquisition by some artists, but provide Barber/Effing with an avenue for self-discovery. The Moon is representative of alterity which may be responded to like the astronauts who pierce it with a flag, asserting a desire to explore, to know, to possess; or which, as figured in Blakelock's painting, signals an otherness which, in its inscrutable blankness, invites an entirely different kind of response. These issues require further contextualization in certain phenomenological ideas of Auster's which are attributable, at least in part, to particular, specifically poetic, influences, which will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

"looking for a place to enter the world", or "how things really work": Perception, Pattern and Chance in Auster's Mysterious World

> For the artist...[t]here is only communication between what sees and what is seen, an effort of comprehension, of relation - sometimes of determination and creation. To see is to understand, to judge, to transform, to imagine, to forget or to forget oneself, to be or to disappear.
> (Paul Éluard quoted in Inez Hedges, Languages of Revolt 117)

> Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have....All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already.
> (Kafka, "On Parables" 457)

I "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh"

In a short prose piece written in 1975, "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh",[1] Auster ponders Ralegh's return to England after the inevitable failure of his final mission, for which he was released from thirteen years incarceration in the Tower of London. Ralegh's crew mutinies, no gold is found, the Spanish are hostile, his son is murdered in the jungle, and Ralegh returns to England, knowing (in Auster's account) that the new king will cut off his head (167).[2] Auster emphasizes the death-like blankness of the walls which Ralegh faces: the Tower is "impervious" "stone and the solitude of stone" (164). Nevertheless, observes Auster,

> thought...determines its own boundaries, and the man who thinks can now and then surpass himself, even when there is nowhere to go. He can reduce himself to a stone, or

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[1] Hereafter cited as "Ralegh". The spelling has been standardized throughout to the more correct "Ralegh", the spelling used in Ground Work, in preference to "Raleigh" (the spelling used in the copy of the essay included in The Art of Hunger) in the interests of consistency. Auster's piece is, I strongly suspect, a response to William Carlos Williams' "Sir Walter Ralegh", a 1925 essay from his collection of meditations on figures in American history, In the American Grain, which considers the same aspects of Ralegh's life. Williams employs a consciously pseudo-Elizabethan register, within the language of which he seeks to satisfy his 'objectivist' impulses:

> Sing, O Muse and say, there is a spirit that is seeking through America for Ralegh: in the earth, the air, the waters, up and down, for Ralegh, that lost man: seer who failed, planter who never planted, poet whose works are questioned, leader without command, favorite deposed - but one who yet gave title for his Queen, his England, to a coast he never saw but grazed alone with genius. (62)

[2] In The Invention of Solitude, Auster includes Ralegh and his son, Wat, in his contemplation of a selection of father/son relationships. He writes that he would include "several sequences of reproductions" in "The Book of Memory", including "the 1602 portrait of Sir Walter Ralegh and his eight-year old son Wat (artist unknown) that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London" (97).

> he can write the history of the world.[3] Where no possibility exists, everything becomes possible again. Therefore Ralegh. (164)

Confinement and solitude, viewed correctly, offer opportunities for a kind of liberation, through the apprehension of the possibilities of an opposite state. Auster seems to suggest that an awareness of the inevitability of death allows an engagement with the possibilities of life.

> At each moment there is the possibility of what is not. And from each thought, an opposite thought is born. From death, he will see an image of life. And from one place, there will be the boon of another place. America. And at the limit of thought, where the new world nullifies the old, a place is invented to take the place of death. (165)

"The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh" foreshadows concerns developed throughout Auster's oeuvre. Ralegh is a figure in whose suffering the pattern of many of Auster's subsequent protagonists can be discerned; whose solitude prefigures the condition of subsequent loci of possibility – such as A.'s room in "The Book of Memory" – within whose blank spaces subjects are involved in versions of self-definition.

Ralegh is reinvented in the most recent incarnation of a suffering protagonist in Auster's oeuvre – Walter Claireborne Rawley, Walt the Wonder Boy – in the 1994 novel, Mr Vertigo. An orphaned urchin on the streets of St Louis, Walt is adopted by a dark and mysterious Hungarian Jew, Master Yehudi, and whisked off to an unlikely household in a ramshackle house on the Kansas prairie, which numbers, besides Walt and the Master, Mother Sue/Sioux, grand-niece of Sitting Bull, and a black orphan, Aesop. It is 1927. Walt agrees to endure a bizarre regimen which culminates in his learning to fly. He is buried alive (41-42), suffers distasteful torture (42), and endures a fever called "the Ache of Being" (32). He faces the truth of his own mortality, and is able to lift himself off the ground, skimming the surface of a pond at the same time that Lindbergh makes his trans-Atlantic flight. The orphan from, becomes the Spirit of, St Louis. The congruence is not without importance for Walt: "[i]t couldn't have been a coincidence that his plane was called the Spirit of St Louis. That was my town, too...and without even knowing it, Lindbergh had named his plane in my honor" (87). That he and Lindbergh accomplished their feat "at the same time" marks them both, for Walt, as "the first

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[3] A reference to Ralegh's text "The History of the World".

pioneers, the Columbus and Magellan of human flight" (86).

Walt's affinities with pioneers and discoverers extends to an admiration for his "namesake, Sir Walter Ralegh" (43), about whom he learns from the black Aesop's fables. From the day Aesop shows him a picture of Ralegh, he carries "Sir Walter inside [him] through thick and thin" (44). Walt shares more with Auster's version of Ralegh. He claims that being buried alive showed him the limits of existence, initiating a new awareness of the possibilities of life (42), a similar view to that expressed in Auster's essay. At the end of his memoir, Walt states that "[d]eep 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....You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that" (278, emphasis added).

In Moon Palace, Marco's surname, Fogg, is a contraction of Fogelman, and Marco, musing that "Fogel meant bird", imagines that an ancestor had been able to fly. He daydreams about a "bird flying through fog...across the ocean, not stopping until it reached America" (MP 3-4). Marco is clearly an anticipation of the flying Walt, and a descendant of Auster's Ralegh. After his uncle Victor's funeral, Marco gives a prostitute a lecture on "the poems of Sir Walter Ralegh", in the "Eldorado Hotel" (19). During his collapse, a meal at the Moon Palace restaurant reminds him of the last meal of a condemned man. As he forces himself to eat, he recalls

> a phrase from Ralegh's last letter to his wife, written on the eve of his execution: My brains are broken. Nothing could have been more apt than those words. I thought of Ralegh's chopped-off head, preserved by his wife in a glass box....I saw myself in pieces. (43)

Auster recalls in Hand to Mouth that the two years prior to his brief enrolment in Columbia's Junior Year Abroad Programme in Paris in 1967 had been spent in a textual "delirium". The works which Marco holds dear are some of those which influenced Auster: Elizabethan playwrights, pre-Socratic philosophers, Russian novelists, Surrealist poets. The young Auster "consum[ed] entire countries and continents of books", encountering during those two years "[n]early everything...in the way of literature and philosophy" that is still

important to him (30).[4]

Ralegh appears in some incarnation in almost all the novels,[5] as the images and concerns of that curious essay recur in each subsequent investigation of subjectivity. In The Music of Chance, one of the eccentric millionaires on whose estate Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi enter a disastrous game of poker, has in his collection of bizarre antiques, Ralegh's pearl earring (MC 83). The Music of Chance might further reflect Auster's claim that he was influenced by Elizabethan literature: the protagonist shares a surname with Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), versatile and controversial Elizabethan writer, the title of whose The Unfortunate Traveller, Or The life of Jacke Wilton (1594), may have suggested the name for Jack Pozzi, Nashe's fellow unfortunate traveller in Auster's novel.

Auster's Nashe sees suffering as strangely ennobling. The narrator describes Nashe's sense of 'freedom' near the beginning of the novel in a manner which conflates, in a description of existential discovery, imagery suggestive of the discovery of possibility in death or suffering, and reference to geographical exploration. Nashe feels "like a man who had finally found the courage to put a bullet through his head – but in this case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds" (10).

Nashe and Pozzi are set to work, to pay off their gambling debts, building an enormous wall out of ten thousand blocks of stone shipped from a ruin in western Ireland – where Ralegh had a castle – to this mysterious Pennsylvanian estate. Nashe's physical experiences mirror Ralegh's spiritual ones, and he reaches a point at which, against the backdrop of the blank whiteness of the first snow of the year, he takes ultimate responsibility for his life. Through reduction, once again, possibility.

The solitude of the stone walls of the tower within which Ralegh is incarcerated colonizes the great forest clearing where Nashe's wall takes shape. The year after writing "The

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[4] Marco's wide reading, during which he measures his life in the dispersal of his books, thus corresponds almost exactly to this period in Auster's life.

[5] Ralegh also appears in Auster's screenplay, Smoke. In the scene in which Paul Benjamin makes his first appearance, he tells a group of men in the Brooklyn Cigar Co. about Sir Walter Ralegh's wager with Elizabeth I "that he could measure the weight of smoke" (25; see 24-26).

Death of Sir Walter Ralegh" Auster started a one-act play, "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven", a two-hander quite clearly modelled on Beckett's Waiting for Godot. Published for the first time as an appendix to Auster's memoir, the play suggests itself as a development of the ideas of the Ralegh essay, and a source for the central action in The Music of Chance, in which Pozzi refers to Flower and Stone as Laurel and Hardy (30), and Nashe, Murks and Floyd visit a pub called Ollie's (206, 208).[6] "Stan Laurel" and "Oliver Hardy", both "builder[s] of walls", struggle under the weight of eighteen enormous stones, which must be placed in a certain order to form a wall. At one point they see a man – "a piece of...human flotsam" ("Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven" 153, ellipses Auster's) – standing in the distance under two trees (151-54). But this Godot-figure never makes a more direct appearance. His disappearance heightens the duo's doubt about whether they are being watched (160). Even if the stranger has no connection to the mysterious authority which provides orders for the building of the wall, he is representative of this force, a deus absconditus not unlike the authority represented by the disappearing duo, Flower and Stone, in The Music of Chance.

The mysterious authority is as enigmatic as authority always is in Kafka, whose "The Great Wall of China" is one of the play's strongest informing intertexts. In this story, Kafka's first-person narrator considers possible reasons for the strategies employed in the construction of the Great Wall of China, which he likens in the enormity of its enterprise to that of the Tower of Babel (Kafka 238). His narrative soon turns to a consideration of the nature of the ruling authority, the Emperor, who for all practical purposes is but an idea: people "do not know what Emperor is reigning, and there exist doubts regarding even the name of the dynasty" (244-45). Kafka's provincial thinker asserts that to question the existence of this power would mean undermining "the very ground on which we live" (247), for which reason he proceeds no further in his investigations (248).

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[6] Auster discusses some of the "conscious sources"of the novel in an interview. He wanted "to get back inside [Fogg's car, stolen near the end of Moon Palace], to give myself a chance to go on driving around America" ("Interview LM&SG" 152). He also wanted "to explore the implications of the windfall I received after my father's death....This led me to start thinking about the question of freedom, which is ultimately the true subject of the book. As for the wall – those stones had been standing inside me for years" (153). He speaks about the play, stating that he was "never satisfied by it....It plagued and haunted me for all those years" (ibid.). He also comments that the novel has the same form as a fairy story (ibid.).

Doubt in constructive and comforting meta-narratives of existence, as Lyotard defines the postmodern condition, marks Kafka's work as powerfully and anachronistically contemporary. Auster's oeuvre demonstrates an understanding of these concerns from the very beginning. The poem "Quarry", written at about the same time as "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven", encapsulates the ideas presented in Kafka's story, and in Auster's play, echoing with by now familiar imagery:

> 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,
>
> as if it were the place
> I do not return to –
>
> 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.
> (from "Quarry", GW 80)

The fates of Auster's protagonists – Nashe's apparent death at the end of The Music of Chance, for example – and Walt's comments at the end of Mr Vertigo that one must learn to stop being oneself in order to fly, will be further examined later in this chapter; the implications of Ralegh's incarceration – in which he apprehends his own mortality, and is forced into a contemplation of obdurate reality – will also be revisited. First it is necessary to examine another aspect of Auster's concern with the self's negotiation of a position in relation to difference. This requires closer acquaintance with elements of and influences on Auster's poetry.

II "We want to be here": Auster and the 'objectivists'

Any reader encountering Auster's poetry for the first time is likely to be struck by his apparent preoccupation with perception, and the repeated use of the image of the eye. The violent

hermeticism[7] of "Unearth" emphasizes the necessity of learning "[t]o carry the burden / of eyes" ("Unearth" XI, GW 17); "[t]he eye / does not will / what enters it: it must always refuse / to refuse" ("Lackawanna", GW 36); the eye, after all,

> is evanescent,
> clings only to what is, no more here
>
> or less there, but everywhere, every
>
> thing.
>
> ("Obituary in the Present Tense", GW 90)

Auster writes that Laura Riding's poetry is concerned with "the notion of what is seeable" ("Truth, Beauty, Silence" 139). His poetry similarly forces the reader to acknowledge the imperative of an active engagement through perception with the physical world, in the process of which the perceiver is able to assert a notion of selfhood, of subjectivity, independent of – but only by virtue of its interdependence with – everything else. Auster's poem sequence "Disappearances"[8] makes this relationship clear:

> He is alive, and therefore he is nothing
> but what drowns in the fathomless hole
> of his eye,
>
> and what he sees
> is all that he is not:
>
> (from "Disappearances" 1, GW 61)

As these last two quoted lines indicate, subjects for Auster define themselves in opposition to what they are not. For a voice to be able to speak in the first person, to define itself as a writing and speaking subject, it must avoid the pitfalls of much modern poetry which risks triviality in opting for exclusive interiority or exclusive exteriority (Finkelstein, "In the Realm of the Naked Eye" 47, 52).

Strategies of perception are repeatedly investigated in Auster's poetry, which, in its understanding of the need for the measurement of the relationship between the seer and the

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[7] Auster describes his poems as being "very short, compact lyrical poems...very dense, especially in the beginning – coiled in on themselves like fists" ("Interview JM" 104-105).

[8] "Disappearances" refers in my text to the specific poem sequence. The selection of poems published in Ground Work was previously published in one volume as Disappearances.

seen, clearly demonstrates his acknowledged influence by the 'objectivist' group of poets ("Interview JM" 105). This section seeks to explore the characteristics of these influences, as many of the ideas encountered in Auster's novels about the status and construction of an 'identity' of subjects in the world, are clearly affiliated to ideas in his poetry.

The 'objectivists' were members of a 'group' of poets influenced by and including William Carlos Williams which came to prominence in the 1930s (Hart 482). Other 'objectivists' included George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky and Carl Rakosi (Auster, "Resurrection" 129). Williams, who set up the short-lived Objectivist Press with Oppen and Reznikoff, defined their aim in his autobiography as an attempt to develop beyond Imagism, to emphasize the status of the poem as an object presenting its meaning in the form it assumes (The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams 264). Objectivism implied, Williams argued, that the poet should strive to "make of his words a new form", presenting "an antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse" (264-65).

Reznikoff's explanation of his writing of poetry as a setting down of what is seen, abstaining from comment (quoted in Auster, "The Decisive Moment" 213), echoes Williams's injunction that the "object of...attention be presented without further comment", declamation or explanation (Williams quoted in Horace Gregory xviii). Auster writes, in an essay entitled "Resurrection", that Carl Rakosi treated the poem as an "equalizing gesture between subject and object" (132). Oppen's poetry presents a belief that "an experiencing / subject is one occasion of a sensitive reaction to an actual / world" ("Of Being Numerous", Oppen 155).

The integrity of the objectivist impulse, involving a scrupulous measurement of even minimal encounters between self and world, proved attractive to many young poets in the 1970s (Finkelstein, "In the Realm of the Naked Eye" 52). Auster comments, for example, on the "ruthless and salutary" honesty of Oppen's work in an essay tellingly entitled "Private I, Public Eye" (118).[9] Auster writes that Oppen's poetry develops from "the perception of objects...the primal act of seeing" (116). A similar act of perception constitutes the basis of Reznikoff's

[9] Hereafter cited as "I/Eye". Auster claims that of all the 'objectivists', Oppen had the most influence on his poetry, and became a close friend ("Interview JM" 105). In conversation with Michel Contat, Auster reiterates that he was friendly with Oppen and Bronk ("Manuscript/Book" 162).

work: "[n]o American poet has ever adhered so faithfully to the Berkeleyan formula [esse est percipii] as Reznikoff" (Auster, "The Decisive Moment" 211).[10]

According to Auster, Reznikoff's poetry seeks to present the necessity for engaging with the inert confusion of the real through a quasi-religious effort, an intense "purity of perception" reflecting an understanding that "we do not find ourselves in the midst of an already established world....Each moment, each thing, must be earned" (ibid.), each thing must be seen "as if for the first time" (ibid.).

That Auster is drawn to other poets who, while different from one another, share similar visions of existence, is evident in his regard for little known upstate New York poet William Bronk, and for Francis Ponge, Paul Celan,[11] and others.[12] Auster regards Bronk's poetry as an attempt "to come to grips with the given" ("Native Son" 141). Bronk's "basic premise", according to Auster, "that there is no inherent order or truth to the world, that whatever form or shape we feel it possesses is the one we ourselves have imposed on it" (ibid. 141-42), bears comparison with Auster's own view of the importance of chance in human life and the need to construct a view of the world through active engagement with it. In The Invention of Solitude Auster recalls meeting Ponge twice, and writes that Ponge's work teaches that "[i]f a man is to

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[10] Auster recalls the circumstances of his first meeting with Reznikoff in "It reminds me of something that once happened to my mother...". Auster gave Reznikoff a copy of his first volume of poetry, Unearth, receiving a letter praising the work (31). After Reznikoff's death, the older poet's heavily annotated copy of Auster's volume was found amongst his papers (32).

[11] Finkelstein confirms that Auster wrote the poem "White" - subtitled "For one who drowned" (GW 46) - for Celan, who committed suicide by drowning in the Seine in 1970 ("In the Realm of the Naked Eye" 47). Auster claims that he was attracted as a young writer to the work of "the German poet Paul Celan, who in my opinion is the finest post-War poet in any language" ("Interview JM" 105).

[12] Another poet who evidently influenced Auster is little-known Anthony Barnett. Excerpts from several of Auster's letters to Barnett are included in a 1993 collection of essays, reviews and other material on the poet, entitled The Poetry of Anthony Barnett.They seem to have shared an admiration for Celan's poetry in the 1970s ("From 'Letters to Anthony Barnett'" 145) – one of the poems in Barnett's Blood Flow is titled "Celan" (Barnett, 17) – and in Barnett Auster found a sympathetic fellow-poet, and a model. About Barnett's Fear and Misadventure, Auster wrote to the poet in 1973:

> It has helped me with my own work very definitely, too, to have been reading and living with these poems so closely. Forced me into my own best instincts: never to waste, to hold fast, to keep my fists clenched (with flowers, with stones). All this makes me extremely happy. Because there are so few poets, and so far fewer young poets I feel kin with - that to read you is to be brother with you.
>
> ("From 'Letters to Anthony Barnett'"148)

Four years later Auster still felt 'the deepest bond' with Barnett's work (150). In 1982 he wrote Barnett a letter thanking him profusely for his extremely positive letter about The Invention of Solitude: "We do not write for others – but when another can respond to our writing as you have done – it means the entire world" (150).

be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees. He must forget himself in order to be there" (138).

Auster quotes Celan's assertion – "Reality is not. It must be searched for and won" – in his essay on the latter's poetry, "The Poetry of Exile" (156). Celan does not suggest a retreat into subjectivity or solipsism, but asserts a belief akin to that of Reznikoff and Oppen that the poem offers not a transcription of the world, but a process of discovery; he seeks through his poems to "take his stand in the world" (157). Auster suggests that, for Celan, reality is posited only with a "simultaneous effort to penetrate it" (158).

This effort involves a wrestle with language, with its inexactitude and ideological implications. Auster is clearly interested in the politics of language, having written about Louis Wolfson's Le Schizo et les Langues in "New York Babel"; and about Celan's relationship with his own German language after the Holocaust.[13] The New York Trilogy bears ample witness to this concern, and the projects of A. in "The Book of Memory", the narrator of the "Portrait of an Invisible Man", and Anna Blume in In the Country of Last Things, evidence similar difficulties with the signifying power of language. Auster's own poetry engages with the same problems. The speaker of "Interior" claims to "find" himself in the "impossibility" of language: "in the unspoken word / that asphyxiates" (GW 31).

The 'objectivist' poets, too, experience a profound dis-ease with language. In "The Building of the Skyscraper" Oppen connects the experience of a construction worker who knows not to look down, with our learning not to question the substance of words: "[t]here are words that mean nothing" even though "there is something to mean" (Oppen 131). Language, not "the 'preponderance of objects'" ("Leviathan", Oppen 68), hovers uncertainly:

> The steel worker on the girder
> Learned not to look down, and does his work
> And there are words we have learned
> Not to look at,

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[13] Distinguished translator and critic Michael Hamburger comments in the introduction to his translation of the Poems of Paul Celan that Celan "both loved and mistrusted words to a degree that has to do with his anomalous position as a poet born in a German-speaking enclave that had been destroyed by the Germans. His German could not and must not be the German of the destroyers. That is one reason why he had to make a new language for himself" (28-29).

Not to look for substance
Below them. But we are on the verge
Of vertigo.
(from "The Building of the Skyscraper", Oppen 131)

An extraordinary connection is made between language and the American identity at the end of this poem, in the presentation of a moment which evokes the glimpse of the forests of Manhattan – the green breast of the New World – in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: "We look back / Three hundred years and see bare land. / And suffer vertigo" (from "The Building of the Skyscraper", Oppen 131).

One might speculate on the influence on Auster's imagination of imagery and ideas evident in this and other Oppen poems, given Auster's recurrent use of the Tower of Babel image (Auster's version of Oppen's skyscraper); and on whether the titles of Auster's Leviathan and Mr Vertigo were partially inspired by Oppen's "Leviathan", and lines in "The Building of the Skyscraper". The 'objectivists' provide Auster with even minor detail. Carl Rakosi, for example, who was of Hungarian-Jewish parentage, changed his name to Callman Rawley (Hamilton 438). Mr Vertigo features Walt Rawley, and Master Yehudi, a Hungarian, whose father and grandfather were both rabbis (MrV 21).

Oppen's poems move "as dialectical occasions between sight and naming", and the encounter, extreme in its selflessness, reflects a "profound examination" of "the effects of modern life upon the self" (Heller, "Conviction's Net of Branches" 285). He is neither a purveyor of alienation who rejects the world out of pessimism, nor one who affirms narrow avenues of safety (Enslin 281-82). This is expressed in this poem:

WORLD, WORLD –

Failure, worse failure, nothing seen
From prominence,
Too much seen in the ditch.

Those who will not look
Tho they feel on their skins
Are not pierced;

One cannot count them
Tho they are present.

It is entirely wild, wildest
Where there is traffic
And populace.

'Thought leaps on us' because we are here. That is the fact
of the matter.
Soul-searchings, these prescriptions,

Are a medical faddism, an attempt to escape,
To lose oneself in the self.

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being
More than oneself.
(Oppen 143)

The claim that "[w]e want to be here" constitutes, for Auster, Oppen's "fundamental article of faith", expressing a quasi-theological mystery ("I/Eye" 118). A similar ascription of significance recurs in various of Auster's own writings.

In "Northern Lights", a 1976 essay on the paintings of Jean-Paul Riopelle, for example, Auster incorporates echoes of Oppen and of "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh" – written only a year earlier – to record a series of powerful responses to Riopelle's work. He detects in the artist"a desire to be here, at the limit of himself, as if this limit were the core of another, more secret beginning of the world" (178, emphasis added);

> [a] need to be here. As if he, too, could cross into life and take his stand among the things that stand among him: a single thing, even the least thing, of all the things he is not. There is this desire, and it is inalienable. As if, by opening his eyes, he might find himself in the world. (ibid., emphasis added)

We must be here, the art and poetry that moves Auster inclines him to pronounce, and "[s]eeing" is "a way of being in the world" ("Northen Lights" 181). Oppen's awe of the physical

displays an attempt, Auster thinks, to seek a means of expression which celebrates humanity in the "simple fact of presence" ("I/Eye" 116). Auster muses in the prose piece, "White Spaces", on the possibility of abandonment "to the supreme indifference of simply being wherever we happen to be" (GW 82). He refers repeatedly to the pleasure of remaining "in the realm of the naked eye" (83, 85, 87-88) - so much so that he wishes "[n]ever to be anywhere but here" (88).

There is however a need for a re-situation of the subject, which requires the apprehension of limits. The importance of self-constitution through perception seems to entail, some of Auster's comments in his essay on Riopelle suggest, something apparently different from, but allied with, the process of differentiation so clearly privileged in statements such as that in "Disappearances": "what he sees / is all that he is not" (GW 61). Auster remarks in relation to Riopelle that:

> although he begins as a witness of the things he is not, once the first step has been taken, he becomes a participant in a motion that knows no boundaries between self and object...what the quickness of the eye discovers, the body must then follow into experience. ("Northern Lights" 178, emphasis added);

Auster's response to a particular Riopelle painting, "Disappearance",[14] employs images of dissipation in a suggestion that, preliminary to the ability of subjects to define themselves in distinction to that which they are not, they must reach the limit of themselves. At that point at which one comes closest to losing a sense of identity through an apparent assimilation into the world, "the world can begin...again" ("Northern Lights" 180). In "The Book of Memory", A. begins to feel a similar renewed awareness of and connection with the world and with others at that moment in which, in trying to speak out of his absolute solitude, he reaches what he regards as the limit of himself (139). "Where no possibility exists," Auster had written about Ralegh, "everything becomes possible again" ("Ralegh" 64).

Riopelle's paintings, for Auster, record a "process of penetration and mutual

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[14] Auster's essay does not make it clear whether the sub-headings are the titles of the paintings to which he is responding, though this seems to be a tenable assumption. If so, the essay suggests a direct influence for Auster's poem sequence "Disappearances", which dates from the same period as the essay on Riopelle's paintings, in which one of the sub-headings (and the name of one of Riopelle's works) is "Disappearance" ("Northern Lights" 179). The poem which follows the sequence "Disappearances" in the selection of poems published as Disappearances (reprinted in Ground Work) is entitled "Northern Lights" (GW 69).

dependence" ("Northen Lights" 181). Painting for Riopelle, like writing for Auster, reflects "a necessary struggle" to situate the self in the world (182). Auster's poem "Search for a Definition (On Seeing a Painting by Bradley Walter Tomlin)", deals, in a manner echoing Rakosi's desire "to penetrate the particular" (quoted in "Resurrection" 131), with exactly this. The speaker seeks:

> a way of looking for a place
> to enter the world, a way of being
> present
> among the things
> that do not want us – but which we need
> to the same measure that we need
> ourselves.
> (GW 94)

The desire to be here reflects a realisation that there is perhaps nowhere else to be: "to enter the promised land", Auster wrote in "Pages for Kafka", "is to despair of ever coming near it" (117); "[t]here is no promised land", the final line of Auster's poem "Late Summer" proclaims (GW 55). In "The Book of Memory" A. realizes that "he cannot be anywhere until he is here" (IS 79); "there is nowhere to go / but here" (from "Disappearances" 7, GW 68). As Auster suggests about Oppen, the poet's burden of speech is placed in the realm of ethics, as the necessity of seeing the world and being in it requires a commitment from a viewer to accept that it is a shared world, to enter and stand in the community of others ("I/Eye" 118-19). In The Invention of Solitude, Auster writes that Jonah's flight from the presence of the Lord, a rejection of the demands of the Other, results in "the doom of shipwreck", which Auster connects with Oppen's phrase, "the shipwreck of the singular" (IS 126, see Oppen 151). Elsewhere Auster links Crusoe's state to this shipwreck (IS 79), which echoes the literal or figural fate of the numerous 'isolatoes' of nineteenth-century American literature who are alluded to from time to time in Auster's novels: Melville's Ishmael, Ahab and Bartleby; Poe's Pym; Hawthorne's Wakefield.

The struggle to find a language adequate to the exacting imperatives detailed above is dealt with in several of Auster's poems: "Scribe", "Wall Writing", "Disappearances", and most maturely in "Facing the Music". Learning requires an unburdening, like that which Auster finds

in the work of another kindred spirit, the contemporary French poet Jacques Dupin, one of a group of postwar French poets whose work Auster admires ("Twentieth-Century French Poetry" 68). In the preface to his translation of Dupin, Auster draws attention to the process whereby, discarding "his garments, his tools, and his possessions", the poet assumes "the fullness of being" through the "spiritual purification" of the stripped poem ("Jacques Dupin" [hereafter "Dupin"] 180). Dupin's poetry, always attentive to what Auster terms "phenomenological detail" ("Twentieth-Century French Poetry" 68), reflects a search for a habitable space ("Dupin" 182). Auster's "Search for a Definition" voices a similar desire:

> To the very end
> I want to be equal
> to whatever it is
> my eye will bring me, as if
> I might finally see myself
> let go
> in the nearly invisible
> things
>
> that carry us along with ourselves and all
> the unborn children
>
> into the world.
> (GW 94-5)

Celan spoke of poetry discerning "some open place that can be inhabited" (quoted in Auster, "Poetry of Exile" 157). A similar relationship is construed in Oppen's poetry between perception and the discovery of, in Auster's words, a "common ground of belief on which all men can stand" ("I/Eye" 115-16), a locus of possibility in which "humanity transcends isolation" (Pevear 286).

In "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh" Auster had written about the need for a similar 'space': "[t]o begin, then, we must find a place where we are alone and nevertheless together, that is to say, the place where we end" (165). Solitude – as is seen in The Invention of Solitude – allows an apprehension of community, death of life, reduction of possibility.

Where is this space to be discerned? There is a palpable tension throughout Oppen's "Of Being Numerous" between the necessary discovery of a shared public space, and the threats to

individuality posed by modern urban existence (for example sections 6-9). This is echoed by Auster in "Disappearances", in which the "monstrous" city's mouth "suffers / no issue // that does not devour the word / of oneself" (GW 67). For Charles Reznikoff, the city provides the only possible location for his poems - Michael Heller regards him as America's "quintessential urban poet" ("Charles Reznikoff, 1894-1976" 449) - for, as Auster observes in "The Decisive Moment", self-effacement is for Reznikoff an avenue to self-definition:

> only in the modern city can the one who sees remain unseen, take up his stand in space and yet remain transparent. Even as he becomes a part of the landscape he has entered, he continues to be an outsider. Therefore, objectivist. That is to say - to create a world around oneself by seeing as a stranger would. What counts is the thing itself, and the thing that is seen can come to life only when the one who sees it has disappeared....Seeing is the effort to create presence. (214)

These comments encapsulate as successfully as any Auster's attraction to and influence by 'objectivist' poetics, and the work of other creative writers and artists which shares similar concerns. Reznikoff exemplifies the condition of the poet as exile, as "solitary wanderer... faceless scribe", engaged in an effort to "posit the reality of this world" ("The Decisive Moment" 217), and to find the self in relation to what is encountered in the world.

III In search of "some secret harmony"

The influence of these poets, and the application of Auster's interpretive evaluation of their views, is discernable in parts of Moon Palace, particularly in Marco's interaction with the wheelchair-bound and apparently blind Thomas Effing. Effing enquires during their first interview whether Marco is "a man of vision" (102), and promises to reveal the hidden purpose in everything he does, so beginning Marco's aesthetic re-education. Sven Birkerts's perceptive review of Moon Palace in The New Republic stumbles in its assertion that Marco's tale is considerably weakened by the introduction of Effing (39). Birkerts misses the importance of Effing's role as educator, and the opportunity which his introduction affords Auster to engage in his fiction with the concerns evident in his poetry and criticism, as demonstrated above.

Effing demands detailed descriptions of streets, clouds and buildings during their walks across New York. Marco, "plunged into a world of particulars" (MP 121), finds himself

singularly unprepared for the challenge of engaging meaningfully, and evoking successfully in language, what Oppen called the "preponderance of objects" (Oppen 68). He finds it difficult to achieve the level of engagement with the physical which the 'objectivist' poets advocated, as enunciated, for example, in a line from a poem by Carl Rakosi: "I mean to penetrate the particular" (quoted in Auster, "Resurrection" 131). "To get what he wanted," Marco quips, "Effing should have hired Flaubert to push him around the streets" (MP 121). Marco struggles with the imprecision of language, marvelling at the distance between eyes and mouth (122); the "demands of words" are too great for any satisfactory description (123). Realizing that he has never acquired the habit of looking closely at things (121), he must learn, as must Anna Blume (CLT 7), à la Reznikoff, to "look at the world as if...discovering it for the first time" (MP 122). Informed by a moral and no longer an aesthetic imperative (123), Marco begins to consider it a "spiritual exercise" (122): "the effort to describe things accurately was precisely the kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn" (121). Echoes of Oppen, Reznikoff and Celan abound in these presentations of perception. Marco errs, however, in hoping to access any absolute truths; his process of education cannot conclude with this lesson.

Effing's previous existence as artist Julian Barber is presented as having involved a search for a new artistic conception of reality. Barber, judged retrospectively by Effing, set himself against the romantic school of nineteenth-century American realists whose canvases of canyons and deserts showed East Coast America what the West looked like. He characterizes them as mapping out "Manifest Destiny" in their art, digesting it into the national machine of progress, driving a "golden spike" through the last blank spaces of the continent (149).[15] Yet Barber distanced himself from the "[m]echanical abstraction" and "intellectual art" of modernists, despite alleged friendship with and acclaim from the American avant-garde of the Stieglitz circle (148-49). Barber's was a "passion for the real world", an interest in "the force of light when it hits the eye", a desire to understand space (150).

Steven Weisenburger argues that representational art is submitted to the same critique as

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[15] Is it ironic that Barber's companion on the ill-fated expedition is an aspirant topographer, Teddy Byrne, armed with "sextant, compass, theodolite, the whole works" (151), ready to map out the uncharted spaces of the West, to assist in their digestion into appropriative representation.

other traditionally privileged hierarchies of value in Moon Palace, citing Effing's critique of nineteenth-century realists Moran and Bierstadt. He regards Blakelock and his canvas, "Moonlight" – which laments the destruction of native American/White cross-cultural contacts by the ruthless narrative of progress and destiny[16] – as constituting "a standard of aesthetic, moral, and ideological values in this novel" (Weisenburger, Review 76). Seeking to emphasize the apparent renunciation in the text of "paternal authority, genealogical determination, and the cash nexus" of "American artistic production and consumption", Weisenburger views Marco's method of describing objects to Effing – focusing on the spaces around the objects (MP 123) – and his description of Blakelock's "Moonlight", merely as examples of the privileging of indeterminacies which a "deterministic or genealogical metaphysics" would reject (Weisenburger, Beyond the Red Notebook 140-41).

The moons at the centre of "Moonlight" and other Blakelock paintings are viewed by Marco as "holes in the canvas, apertures of whiteness looking out onto another world" (MP 137), seeming both to invite and represent a participative visual interpretation. Effing asserts that, alone in the vastness of the desert, he discovered that the "true purpose" of art is not the creation of beautiful objects, but, Marco writes, in a formulation which echoes writers discussed above, "a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it" (170, emphasis added). The whole of Moon Palace is a record of Marco's search, as hapless detective, for his place in the world, and that space, as the 'objectivists' and Auster show us, must always be shared.

In the retrospective introduction to his reminiscences, Marco states that he met Kitty Wu by chance, and came to see chance as a "readiness, a way of saving [himself] through the minds of others" (1), suggesting that an openness to chance is one way of penetrating the chaos of existence in an attempt to discern redemptive opportunities. Chance directs his car towards the end of the novel (302), and earlier, amazed at the coincidence of finding a sentence in

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[16] One notes, in support of this point, Marco's reading of the painting as a "death song for a vanished world" (MP 139), and the fact that "one of the panels from a series of paintings by Thomas Cole entitled The Course of Empire, a visionary saga of the rise and fall of the New World" hangs in the room in Effing's apartment which Marco occupies (108). In Smoke, Rashid's real name is "Thomas Jefferson Cole" (58).

Tesla's autobiography which he had previously found in a fortune cookie, Marco considers exploring the "question of coincidences" in an essay, but finds it too complex an issue (234).

Weak, delirious and struggling with an uncontrollable urge to tell his extraordinary story, Marco Fogg tells an army doctor during a medical examination that "[o]ur lives are determined by manifold contingencies...and every day we struggle against these shocks and accidents in order to keep our balance" (80). During his period of physical and spiritual collapse Marco thought that by "abandoning [him]self to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony...some form or pattern" to help him to "penetrate" himself (ibid.). This belief in an immanent pattern is shown to be misguided, but represents a desire felt by many of Auster's characters.

Despite the accusations of some critics that his plots are "implausible", Auster considers himself a realist, with an obligation "to write fiction as strange as the world" in which he lives ("Interview LM&SG" 117). Rather than a mechanical plot device, chance is an attempt to reflect the "utterly bewildering" nature of human experience (ibid.), and as such performs a fundamentally important role in Auster's conception of how we relate to the world. Perception of the world around us, of physically other things, is complemented in Auster's view by encounters with the "unexpected" which "occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives" (ibid. 116). Auster's curious collection of apparently true stories of coincidence, "The Red Notebook", bears witness to the presence of chance in his own life. Why Write? contains similar anecdotes, and "The Book of Memory" offers several further accounts (IS 80, 88, 94, 134, 143).

Auster seems to experience the workings of chance with some regularity. A recent Granta contains an extract – "The Life and Death of a Homosexual" – from Auster's translation of French anthropologist Pierre Clastres's Chronique des indiens Guayaki (since published in full in Auster's English translation), to which a typically Austerian tale of chance is attached. A note explains that Clastres's study was published in French in 1972, and intrigued Auster, then living in Paris. He began to translate the work on his return to America, corresponded with the author, and found an American publisher for the translation. But the publisher went bankrupt, Clastres

was killed in a car accident, and the manuscript lost. Some twenty years later, in 1996, after a lecture in San Francisco, Auster was presented with a set of galley proofs of the long lost Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians, which a young man had bought in a second-hand bookshop (Auster, "Translator's Note" to Clastres, viii-xi). Auster sees the survival and recent publication of Clastres's Chronicle as "nothing less than a victory...against the crushing odds of fate" (ibid. xi).

The importance which Auster assigns to chance in his view of the world is clear in his screenplay for the film Smoke. That Paul Benjamin "ran out of luck" (Smoke 27) is how Auggie Wren explains Benjamin's pregnant wife's death, and Auggie tells his retarded "protégé", Jimmy Rose, that "[y]ou never know what's going to happen next, and the moment you think you know, that's the moment you don't know a goddamn thing" (115).

The fact that Auster acknowledges a long-standing appreciation of Surrealist poets (HM 30) and has translated the work of several, suggests that his engagement with chance may owe something to the Surrealist notion of hasard.[17] Surrealism involved linguistic and visual disruption of the conventions of the status quo to effect a restoration of the powers of the individual mind (Hedges xiii, Matthews 4, 8, 117). It sought, in its representation of the physical, to "surmount the debilitating sense of the arbitrary", projecting instead a "refreshing feeling of unity, in which the inner existence of consciousness and outer reality are no longer in conflict" (Matthews 184).

Freud's thought was decisive in the development of Surrealism, adding to Dada's project of radical freedom from rationality a belief in the existence of a deeper, unconscious logic, discoverable through techniques based on "psychic automatism" which sought to eliminate the regulatory controls of logic and lucidity – the enemies, for Surrealists, of revelation (Breton quoted in Hedges xvii; Hedges xvi; Matthews 25). Breton wrote of his inclination to a

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[17] Paul Bray wonders in "The Currents of Fate and the Music of Chance" whether Auster has been influenced by Mallarmé's notion of the unintelligible – "hasard" (86), but no critic has considered Auster's relation to Surrealism. Christo Doherty first suggested that I consider Breton's hasard objectif in relation to Auster. Auster has translated Breton, Éluard, Char, Péret, Tzara, Artaud, Soupault, Desnos, Aragon and Arp (Drenttel 190-91). He published A Little Anthology of Surrealist Poems in translation, and contributed translations of five early Char poems to Selected Poems of René Char, and translations of Miró's French writings to Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews (ibid.).

"philosophy of immanence" positing the existence of patterns of surreal significance in reality (quoted in Matthews 20). Chance was for Breton "the great veil to be raised", the "form of manifestation for outer necessity forcing its way through the human unconscious" (quoted in Matthews 118). He claimed that these patterns were to be divined by administering a 'jolt' to reality, a jolt equated – under the influence of Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" – with the agency of chance, which Breton designated hasard objectif, "objective chance", the manifestation of mysteriously significant occurrences. Breton claimed in 1925 that this kind of chance "shows a man, in a way that is still very mysterious, a necessity that escapes him, even though he experiences it as a vital necessity" (quoted in Hedges xvii; Matthews 117-118).

This formulation echoes Freud's explanation that the uncanny forces a perception of "something fateful and unescapable" in what would otherwise be regarded as "'chance' only" (Freud quoted in Krauss 85). In The Invention of Solitude Auster regards Freud's uncanny as implying less a sense of immanent order, than that "we are thrust out from the protective shell of our habitual perceptions" and are thus "adrift in a world we do not understand" (148),[18] facing a world which, in its irreducible alterity, is always mysterious. A brief consideration of The Music of Chance and Leviathan will examine to what extent this view of chance is demonstrated in these novels.

IV How do things "really work"?

In The Music of Chance, an unexpected inheritance leads Jim Nashe to buy a new car. Returning to Boston from visiting his daughter in Minnesota, he misses the ramp to the freeway (6).[19] Impulsively taking the next ramp with the knowledge that this commits him to the

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[18] Although Auster does continue that "A. is more than willing to accept" a definition of the uncanny as "[u]nhomeness...as a memory of another, much earlier home of the mind" (IS 149). Krauss explains that "[i]n Freud's argument this ascription of meaning to happenstance...can be understood as the reassertion within adult life of more psychologically primitive states"; the shock of the uncanny thus constitutes a "breakthrough into consciousness of earlier states of being, and in this breakthrough, itself the evidence of a compulsion to repeat, the subject is stabbed, wounded by the experience of death" (Krauss 85).

[19] An unexpected windfall is a motif which recurs in Auster's work, possibly because of the small inheritance which he received on his father's death ("Interview LM&SG" 127): Marco inherits money from Effing (MP 226-28), and Nashe inherits on the death of his absent father (MC 1-4).

incorrect road, the "dizzying prospect" of the freedom so discovered precipitates surrender to an impulse to traverse the continent (6-7). He becomes compelled to continue this life of apparent freedom, resigning as a firefighter - which involved attempting to control the unpredictable as embodied in fire (Irwin 80) - to drive across the vast open spaces of the United States, relishing his reckless "new life of freedom and irresponsibility" (MC 11). Nashe's life appears to be governed by its abandonment to whatever chance delivers, and much of what subsequently happens to him involves chance (14): he gambles in Las Vegas (13) and enjoys a brief liaison with an old acquaintance, Fiona Wells, whom he meets again by chance (14). But Nashe's 'luck' begins to run out: he loses more than he wins at gambling (19), and Fiona's ex-boyfriend returns (18).

Nashe comes across Jack Pozzi - "Jackpot" to his friends (23) - in, it is emphasized, "one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air" (1). The opportunity presented by Pozzi is envisaged by Nashe as a hole in a wall (36), a means of ameliorating his decline in fortune: literal and figural. Nashe's trust in Pozzi is, as suggested by the episode from Rousseau's Confessions about which Nashe dreams (36-37), nakedly self-deceptive faith in luck, whereas chance for Surrealists is more of a revelatory agent (Matthews 123-25). Nonetheless, loss in the poker game precipitates the revelation of an order which, while not initially apparently beneficent - in fact, ruthlessly cruel - leads Nashe to a point at which loss allows, paradoxically, for what Auster sees as gain. This will be examined when I return to a further consideration of this novel,

Chance also functions prominently as plot device and preoccupation in Auster's next novel, Leviathan. Peter Aaron remarks flippantly yet not without resonance that artist Maria Turner is "the reigning spirit of chance...goddess of the unpredictable" (102).[20] Maria is goddess of chance for Benjamin Sachs too; the indirect cause of his freak accident (106-16), she becomes "the embodiment of his catastrophe" (126). With such impeccable attributed

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[20] Peter Aaron's initials are Paul Auster's. Aaron's wife is named Iris, which spells "Siri" in reverse: Siri Hustvedt is Paul Auster's wife. Aaron's first wife is named Delia, a phonetic anagram of Lydia: Lydia Davis was Auster's first wife. Auster met Siri Hustvedt on February 23, 1981 ("Interview LM&SG" 141), the same day on which Aaron meets Iris in Leviathan (101).

credentials, Maria Turner seems to offer an introduction to the presentation of chance in the novel. Her art is not easily categorized, Aaron informs us. She is a photographer-conceptualist-writer, and her work reflects a desire not to create aesthetic objects, but to "indulge her obsessions, to live her life precisely as she wanted to live it" (60). This description suggests a comparison with Effing's presentation of art as a means of penetrating the world to find one's place in it, in Moon Palace. Maria's whole life is an exploration of the bounds of the self; her elaborate charades, rituals and routines are, according to Aaron, conceived by Maria as "studies in the shifting nature of the self" (78).

On her return to New York after wandering across the continent, visiting every one of the Lower 48, the young Maria is said to have found herself lonely and disoriented in New York. In a manifestation of an apparent belief in the revelatory function of chance, she took to following strangers chosen "at random", in an attempt to discern some pattern in an empty existence, allowing the choice to "determine" her movements for the rest of the day (62). The artist becomes, in Maria, private investigator, voyeur and Surrealist seeker of hasard objectif.

There are analogies between Reznikoff's poetic aesthetic and the art which results from Maria's excursions. Both artists privilege perception and both base their art on urban, specifically New York City, life. Furthermore, the "feeling that emerges from [Reznikoff's] glimpses of city life is roughly equivalent to what one feels when looking at a photograph" (Auster, "The Decisive Moment" 216-17). Turner is an "artist of the eye" (Lev 63), for whom art and life are bound; Auster labels Reznikoff "a poet of the eye" ("The Decisive Moment" 211). Turner's art reflects the "drama of watching and being watched" (Lev 63), privileging perception to the extent of freezing it in film in order to sustain the moment of interaction, of immediate experience, in which the perceiver is part of the process of constituting that which is perceived. Aaron writes of Maria that the "camera was no longer an instrument that recorded presences, it was a way of making the world disappear, a technique for encountering the invisible" (64).[21]

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[21] Auster was commissioned to write a short story for The New York Times for Christmas Day, 1990, "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" (on which Smoke was based). The story, like Leviathan, features a photographer with an interesting 'project'. Auggie Wren, who runs the Brooklyn Cigar Co., takes a photograph of his shop, the street,

The poetry of Charles Reznikoff evidences a belief in the poet's obligation to "make himself invisible" in order to privilege that which is seen, in an attempt to objectify the seer's inner state, and thus penetrate and find a place in the world: "[a]s if the eye were the means by which the stranger could find his place in the world he has been exiled to" ("The Decisive Moment" 214). Sachs appreciates the "objectification of inner states" (Lev 127) in Maria's work, which is able to make Sachs see himself through her eyes, through her lens. So withdrawn that he was "no longer able to see himself...in a phenomenological sense", Aaron believes that, through Maria's camera, "Sachs's soul was gradually given back to him" (129-30).

Several of Maria's specific projects are outlined by Peter Aaron: she hires a private detective to follow her, then reads the resulting report (what Black/White does in Ghosts); she works as a hotel chambermaid, inventing life stories for guests whose possessions and objects she photographs (63); she follows a man to New Orleans in disguise, documenting his visit (64); she finds a black address book and plans to project a life of the owner by interviewing those named in the book (65-67).

Auster based Maria Turner on the French artist Sophie Calle,[22] who, like Maria, spent years travelling. On her return to Paris, Calle began following people at random (Pincus 192). She explains that, since she had "lost the ability to know what to do" herself, she would "choose the energy of anybody in the street...and just do what they did" (quoted in Weintraub 67). Critics observe that Calle's art seeks to give form to the void inside the artist, investigating her own hollow soul and relying on others to give the emotional content to work which describes

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and surrounding buildings, at the same time every day ("Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" 152). The narrator can initially make no sense of the "numbing onslaught of repetition...an unrelenting delirium of redundant images", which he confronts in these photographs (ibid.). As he learns to look at the photographs slowly and carefully, however, he realizes that "Auggie was photographing time...both natural and human time, and he was doing it by planting himself in one tiny corner of the world and willing it to be his own, by standing guard in the space he had chosen for himself" (ibid.). This description echoes Auster's essays on the 'objectivists', and is usefully compared to his view of Reznikoff, and his presentation of Maria in Leviathan, on which he was working shortly after (and probably before and during) "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" was written ("The Making of Smoke" 4).

[22] This fact, initially a supposition, was confirmed by recently acquired information that their collaborative exhibition opened at the Site Gallery in Sheffield in October 1998. Calle's work for this show is based on scenarios created by Auster, who describes them as "Personal instructions for Sophie Calle on how to improve life in New York City (because she asked...)". Their jointly authored book, Double Game and the Gotham Handbook, is due to be published by Robert Violette. Further information was available at http://www.photo98.com/1seasons/s3_sophie.htm (last checked December 1998).

the mental tenor of the time (Weintraub 66,68). Maria's projects are almost exactly Calle's: in La Filature (The Shadow) (1981) Calle presented complete emotional disengagement from the self by having her mother hire a private detective to follow and report on her activities during one day – she was not to know when – in a particular week (Weintraub 70, Pincus 195); Calle worked as a chambermaid, like Maria, producing Hotel in 1986 (Weintraub 69, Pincus 194); in Suite Venitienne (1980) she followed a man to Venice in disguise; and her 1983 work, L'Homme au carnet (The Notebook Man), involved publishing a series of newspaper articles portraying Pierre D – whose notebook she found and copied before returning – in the words of the acquaintances listed in his book (Weintraub 69, Pincus 194). Calle's first American exhibition was staged in 1980, roughly the period of Aaron's involvement with Maria.

Sachs, like Maria, seems to seek "some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real" (Lev 24). His fall is a freak accident, a chance event which sets his life on a different course: he sees himself disappear (109,117), his life flies apart in midair (107), and he seeks thereafter to sustain this life-changing experience (119). While resisting the temptation to chronicle the spectacular course of events in Sachs's life, as tentatively recounted by Aaron, it seems fair to note that his life is a study in unpredictability, ambiguity, multiplicity and a peculiar tryst with coincidence: "Sachs is consistently portrayed as an embodiment of the difficult balance between unpredictability and pattern that Aaron tries to emphasize in his record" (Saltzman, "Leviathan: Post Hoc Harmonies" 163-64). There are as many versions of Sachs's life as acquaintances on whose evidence Aaron bases his account, and the 'truth' is, finally, for Peter, a matter of imaginative projection: "I can't dismiss the possibility that...the truth is quite different from what I imagine it to be" (Lev 22).

Through Fanny's eyes, for example, Aaron discovers that Sachs was "more complicated and troubled" than he thought (86). While principled to the point of being imprisoned for refusing to serve in Vietnam (19), Sachs lies either to his wife, or to Peter, about his affairs (95). Given that Aaron has difficulty enough interpreting the life of a friend – the text of his ostensible record is peppered with disclaimers – what is the reader to make of Benjamin Sachs?

Does Leviathan imply a judgment of Sachs, or suggest that Peter Aaron should reject his

example? Despite the fact that Aaron is writing about Sachs after fifteen years of friendship (9, 13), and while it is clear that Sachs's character has changed dramatically, the manner in which Peter chooses to introduce Sachs into his record is coloured with an ambiguity of response. Commenting on how personable Sachs had been, Aaron notes, however, that "there was always something impersonal" about Sachs's interaction with others, "as if he weren't trying to make a human connection with you so much as to solve some intellectual problem for himself" (16). Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs bear the names of biblical personages significant for their status as brothers, Aaron of Moses, Benjamin of Joseph. Aaron and Sachs's relationship, in its initial closeness, and in Aaron's difficulty in 'interpreting' Sachs, mirrors the 'brotherly' relationship between Fanshawe and the narrator of The Locked Room,[23] as well as the narrator's ambiguous response to this other.

Sachs seems initially to respond like Quinn to the chaos, disorder and immanence of mortality which his fall reveals, and retreats to Vermont to write, ordering his life and partially isolating himself so as to eliminate "surprise" or chance (140). But, as Aaron observes, "you can't live without other people" (141), or eliminate chance: "[a]nything can happen" (160). The chance encounter with Reed Dimaggio in the woods, its violent, tragic result (147-55), and the coincidental connection between Maria and Lillian Dimaggio which Sachs subsequently discovers (160-67), sets him "rushing headlong toward some dark, unnameable disaster" (2), propelled along a course opened up by chance. The "nightmare coincidence" of Maria's friendship with Lillian becomes "a solution, an opportunity in the shape of a miracle", providing occasion for embracing the "uncanniness of the event...to breathe it into himself as a sustaining force" (167). Yet in this response to chance, Sachs has not relinquished, but rather believes that he has found a means to satisfy, his search for a pattern, an explanatory meta-narrative.

Envying Dimaggio's willingness to transform ideology into action, Sachs surrenders to Dimaggio's persona, assuming his cause and agenda. Sachs explains to Peter that on discovering

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[23] Saltzman also notes this, stating that "Aaron and Sachs reenact the relationship between the narrator and the spectral Fanshawe in The Locked Room, as well as verify the impasse that disqualifies the notion of congenial transactions between Self and Other" ("Leviathan: Post Hoc Harmonies" 165). Furthermore, as Peter Aaron must engage in an interpretive act, the Biblical Aaron had difficulty interpreting for the Israelites the conception of and commandments given by God, as relayed by Moses.

Dimaggio's dissertation on the Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman (223) during his bizarre entanglement with Lillian, he discerned a purpose in adopting the pattern of another man's existence, a purpose expressed in terms drawing on a language intimating a belief in an underlying order or necessity:

> I started to think about Dimaggio all the time, to compare my life to him, to question how we'd come together on that road in Vermont. I sensed a kind of cosmic attraction, the pull of some inexorable force. (224, emphases added);
>
> [a]ll of a sudden my life seemed to make sense to me....It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambitions. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together. For the first time in my life, I would be whole. (228, emphases added)

Any observant reader of Auster's novels should immediately hear alarm sirens when a character expresses desire for, let alone belief in the possibility of achieving a state of completeness. Sachs's beliefs echo the elder Peter Stillman in City of Glass, whose views are explained to Quinn at one stage using the story of Humpty Dumpty, "the purest embodiment of the human condition" (CG 81). Sachs's fall from the balcony repeats Humpty's. Aaron notes in a formulation which echoes the nursery rhyme that "from that moment until his death four years later", Sachs "never put it together again" (Lev 107, emphasis added).

Sachs's novel, The New Colossus, Aaron informs us, repeats references to the Statue of Liberty (35), and intimates in its opening chapter, through the image of Thoreau's compass, that "America has lost its way" (38). Thoreau is a model for Sachs, who acknowledges deep admiration (26), and Civil Disobedience, Aaron suggests, had a profound influence on Sachs. Sachs muses on "living like a hermit in the woods" in Vermont (141), while Aaron's book is produced in the same surroundings (3). Sachs's opinions, actions (blowing up replicas of the Statue of Liberty), the allusion to Hobbes's political classic in the title of Sachs's unfinished work (whose title Aaron takes for his own work [142]), a direct reference to the politics of the Reagan years (104), and a possible echo of Conrad's The Secret Agent,[24] suggest that politics is a primary concern of Leviathan. The Phantom of Liberty claims to have detected the real

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[24] Lillian Dimaggio, like Winnie Verloc, suspects her husband of being an agent provocateur (Lev 239); Sachs's fate repeats the grisly death of Stevie in Conrad's novel.

pattern of existence in a directionless, selfish, spiritually impoverished and uncaring America (38, 104, 217).

Tim Woods claims that Auster's interest is in the extent to which the subject is consistently the "victim of fictions" - in the sense, perhaps, that all we can know about Sachs is through the version constructed by Aaron - struggling for definition within power formations which seek to deny the subject's freedom (Woods 145).[25] He discerns in The Music of Chance a constant shift between

> the notion that mental and conceptual representations passively reflect the structure of an ultimately fixed and unaltering reality of essences, and, alternatively, the recognition that existence is largely an aesthetic act, and that one can become the author of one's own life, become one's own supreme fiction. (Woods 145-46)

Woods claims that The Music of Chance considers the "perennial postmodern anxiety of neurosis and paranoia about the extent to which everything is plotless or totally plotted" (149).

This anxiety is reflected, for example, in an exchange between Pozzi and Nashe one night in their trailer. Reflecting on his personal belief that "once your luck starts to roll...the whole world suddenly falls into place" (MC 136), Pozzi blames his spectacular loss to Flower and Stone on Nashe, who "broke the rhythm" (137). Pozzi says:

> [w]e had everything in harmony. We'd come to the point where everything was turning into music for us, and then you have to go upstairs and smash all the instruments. You tampered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does that, he's got to pay the price. (138)

Pozzi believes that Nashe's theft of a figurine from Stone's model, the "City of the World", disrupted a pattern figured, as it was for Sachs, as a cosmic force. Nashe dismisses this accusation, and accuses Pozzi of wanting to "believe in some hidden purpose", of believing that "there's a reason for what happens in the world. I don't care what you call it - God or luck or harmony....It's a way of avoiding the facts, of refusing to look at how things really work" (139). Nashe's criticism of Pozzi's desire to perceive a pattern to existence allows for two interpretations which seek to "rend the veil of illusion about humanity caught in the grip of

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[25] All references to Woods in this section are to his essay "The Music of Chance: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies Within 'The City of the World'" and will be cited as Woods hereafter.

fatalistic control", either urging reliance on empirical fact, or representing a postmodern refusal of grand narratives (Woods 156).

Nashe and Pozzi must constantly adjust their perceptions. What is initially work engaged in to repay a debt becomes enforced labour: Murks carries a gun after being attacked by Pozzi, and the two unfortunate travellers realize that they had all along "been working under the threat of violence" (MC 144); "Nashe was the one who had tricked himself into a false reading of the facts" (145). It seems almost impossible to discern how things really do work. During the tour of Flower and Stone's mansion, Nashe had realized that everything about the two was "ambiguous, difficult to pin down" (87). The "atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust" which Nashe had observed in the meadow (125), and the "hint of violence...[and] atmosphere of cruelty and revenge" (87) observed in Stone's model city, come to correspond. Nashe thinks about Stone's model while building the wall, going "so far as to imagine that he was already living inside the model" (178). Nashe and Pozzi come to occupy positions metaphorically within what Woods regards as a hegemonic Puritan capitalism (Pozzi mockingly calls Murks "Brother Calvin" [120]), governing by force with structures, reflected in Stone's model city's "Four Realms of Togetherness" (80), analogous to Althusser's "Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses" (Woods 152-53). The violence and omnipresence of this system is evident in the assault on Pozzi. How are we to read the fate of Nashe and Pozzi? Are they victims of a violent Puritan capitalist hegemony? Is this how things really work, a dark necessity revealed by chance?

Nashe seems initially to agree with Flower and Stone's assertion that building the wall in repayment of the gambling debt will be redemptive and therapeutic (MC 108), and seems strangely relieved when it becomes clear that he has no alternative to the labour. The wall becomes a "chance to redeem himself in his own eyes...a way to atone for his recklessness and self-pity" (127). It is the "only solution to his predicament" (109), and is not a "punishment so much as a cure" (110); Nashe must "take his medicine" (106) and he tells Pozzi that they might "learn something before it's over" (139). These statements are all made before the violence of the absent and inscrutable authority becomes clear to Nashe. But does chance in

the final analysis reveal anything to Nashe? Having stated that Pozzi refuses to see how things work, it becomes clear that Nashe struggles to do so himself. Where chance seems initially to open possibilities of freedom for Nashe, his experiences in the meadow reveal chance to offer very little.

Systems of power seem ultimately to be victorious in both The Music of Chance and Leviathan. Woods regards Nashe and Pozzi as being forced into an entrapment which suggests that The Music of Chance offers a critique of a late 1980s American society "totally sewn up by the power of capital" – by "American capitalism based on Puritan expansionism" (145) – "leaving little or no room for reflexive manoeuvre or ideological critique" (160).

In Leviathan, Aaron's record is an attempt to resist the interpretive violence on Sachs's story by that most ubiquitous of American 'authorities', the FBI, who, throughout Peter's narrative, are "busy writing their own story" (7). The comparison between Sachs and Thoreau suggests that the former is one of the many characters in Auster's fiction engaged in a quest, however misdirected or doomed, to "reject everyday American life, to go against the grain, to discover a more solid foundation for oneself" ("Interview JM" 110-11). Given the apparently bleak prognosis for freedom – Auster has even stated that, despite initially envisaging a different ending for The Music of Chance, "the book was heading for a much darker conclusion", and he "had no choice" in the matter ("Interview LM&SG" 152) – can either novel be interpreted as offering anything but defeat for the idea of the autonomy of the individual ?

V Making the negative positive

For Sartre, contingency was the "essence of human existence in its relation to a totally meaningless and Godless world", "an undeniable sign of the total absence or nonexistence of God" (Altizer 160). Sartre designated contingency as a philosophical category, de trop, or "too much" (Altizer 161). He presents an encounter with this contingency – the alterity of the objective world – in his novel Nausea, in which the protagonist, Roquentin, muses on the contingency of existence (ibid.). Levinas and Sartre appear to have disagreed on aspects of the individual's relation to alterity; Levinas "always regretted that [Sartre] interpreted [the other] as

a threat and a degradation" ("Ethics of the infinite" [EI] 53). Recent criticism suggests, however, that Levinasian and Sartrean views of alterity are less antagonistic than often thought (Howells 91).[26] Auster's characters likewise experience chance, and the contingency, the "this-ness of things" (as he writes about the concern of Oppen's poetic vision ["I/Eye" 116]), as omnipresent.

Near the end of his labours, Nashe suffers a three-day illness necessitating a period of sleep which is described as a "passage from one life into another"; if not for the rest, the hours "in which he had temporarily vanished from himself, he might never have woken up into the man he had become" (MC 189). Later, Nashe realizes that he will have discharged his debt on his birthday. This is envisaged as a rebirth - "it would be possible to bring himself back to zero" (204) - although what actually happens on his birthday, the text suggests, is a fatal automobile accident (217).

In Leviathan Sachs describes his new life as violent heir of his victim, Dimaggio, in terms which indicate that he regards this new life as involving a transformation, a reconstitution (Lev 224, 228). He is misguided, and his final transformation comes in the form of physical fragmentation which shatters his vision of unity, and is the violent absence around which Leviathan circles, imagined by Peter Aaron as his "poor friend bursting into pieces...scattering in the wind" (242).

Nashe and Sachs's violent transformations are the most extreme enactments of the re-situation of subjects in Auster's work (given that Quinn disappears, the narrator has no proof of Fanshawe's end, and Blue's future is imaginatively constructed). The search for a sense of identity and self-fulfilment often entails the shedding of older, mistaken means of regarding the self, particularly in relation to others. Levinas writes that "only a being whose solitude has reached a crispation through suffering, and in relation with death, takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible" ("Time and the Other" 43). Marco regards the experiences he narrates in Moon Palace as leading to a change, to the death of his

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[26] Levinas claims that Sartre was influenced by his work (EI 52-53). Cohen points out that an early Levinas text from approximately three years before Sartre's novel Nausea was published, contains a description of an experience of pure being as nausea (54).

old self – "I had left myself behind...I was no longer the person I had once been" (306) – and consequently to a new beginning – "the beginning of my life" (1).

The notion that the old must change or die, metaphorically, invites comparison with the denial of self in ascetic or apophatic theology. Apart from references in City of Glass discussed in the first chapter of this study, Marco, in Moon Palace, resolves "to achieve a state of total selflessness", to become "a saint...who would wander through the world performing good works" (73). But because this reconstituting negativity cannot have as its end anything allied to the position which has to be reduced – any state of totalization or which expresses belief in pattern or grounded certainty – Auster's novels never finally expressly valorize such descriptions, for the goal of the Christian ascetics, the selfless saints, was to achieve in this selflessness an apprehension of God. Auster writes in "The Art of Hunger" of "death as we live it today: without God, without hope of salvation" (114, emphasis added). Auster's status as a secular Jewish writer complicates matters because of conceptions of God in Judaism as unnameable, as having withdrawn from the world to make creation possible, and therefore only metaphorically "dead", as a radical otherness rather than as not existing at all.[27]

One of the few critics to engage with Auster's concern with chance, Charles Grandjeat, suggests that deprivation and asceticism are consciously adopted by Auster's protagonists in the face of turmoil – "stratèges face à la turbulence" – in efforts to eliminate chance – "le travail d'élimination de la contingence" (157).[28] He argues that protagonists' quests are stoically religious (158), that a necessity asserts itself (161), and that characters are thereby forced into a necessary apprehension of power structures, of 'adult law' (158-59). Grandjeat sees this law

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[27] Thomas J.J. Altizer offers a complex reading in "History as Apocalypse" of the implications of aspects of Derrida's thought. For example, he claims that "[b]oth in his dialogical response to Edmond Jabès and in his extraordinarily powerful and self-revealing analysis of the thought of his own mentor, Emmanuel Levinas...Derrida has unveiled his own ground in Lurianic Kabbalism, perhaps the most deeply modern or postmodern of all forms of mystical thinking" (148). Altizer goes on to suggest that deconstruction, "as a contemporary expression of demythologizing" (147), particularly negative from the point of view of a traditional Christian conception of God (151), may nonetheless, in a complex and paradoxical way, make "possible a rediscovery of history and presence, and of history as presence, as full or total presence" (156). Joseph G. Kronick canvasses similar issues, discussing specifically Derrida's reading of Jabès. See also Stamelman ("The Graven Silence of Writing" xiii) and Jabès's The Book of Memory (173) about God's 'absence' with regard to Jabès's work.

[28] Translations with the kind assistance of Undine Weber.

figured in the wall imagery in, for example, The Music of Chance (158, 163).

The wall is, rather, a return to Ralegh's cell; it is the embodiment of the preponderance of objects posited by the 'objectivists' as requiring an engagement through perception. As Effing notes in Moon Palace, "[w]e find ourselves only by looking to what we're not" (154), not by seeking not to be, or by denying all otherness. The discovery of hierarchies of authority is secondary - although, like Oppen, Auster does not harbour much optimism for possibilities for a just social polity. This is perhaps most clear in Leviathan. The wall in The Music of Chance, and in "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh", may be for Nashe and Ralegh a form of punishment at the hands of a particular authority, or embody a relationship to the configuration of capital and power (in Nashe's case, as Woods argues); but that the wall allows, invites, or forces the protagonists to confront a representative radical alterity, is, I believe, its chief function. The wall is perhaps best interpreted as one representative of the alterity which is a crucial element in Auster's conception of the processes, and responsibilities, involved in the construction of identity.[29]

Auster's presentation of the fate of his characters in the face of chance and the inevitability of contingency suggests an affirmative relationship with what is usually perceived as negative. In Leviathan, Peter Aaron's response to Sachs's apparent disappearance from his house in Vermont, can, it is stated, be described in terms of a certain negativity in Buddhism : Peter is "a Zen acolyte, a believer in the power of nothing" (Lev 146).[30] The concept of "no-

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[29] One of Marco's favourite pieces of music is Couperin's Les Barricades Mystérieuses (MP 290). In Auster's next novel, The Music of Chance, the same piece, "The Mysterious Barricades", is one of Nashe's favourite pieces (11). Nashe also finds that it makes him think of the wall (181). In the screenplay for Smoke, one of Paul Benjamin's novels is entitled "The Mysterious Barricades" (51). The idea of the wall - present in Auster's work from the early poetry and the 1975 essay, "The Death of Sir Walter Ralegh" - is clearly connected with chance, a mysterious alterity.

[30] The possible relationship between Auster's conception of chance, and aleatorical or chance music (of which New Yorker John Cage is the foremost exponent), constitutes an avenue for further investigation; a point for which I am indebted to Grant Olwage. The philosophical basis underlying Cage's music is that of Zen Buddhism, specifically the concept of non-intentionality. The disagreement between Nashe and Pozzi in The Music of Chance, discussed earlier, draws on musical imagery for its effect. Pozzi draws on the imagery of the Harmony of the Spheres, a concept which represents a harmony or order in the universe. He accuses Nashe of having "smash[ed] all the instruments" and of having "tampered with the universe" just when "everything was turning into music" (138). Nashe's response is a rejection of this cosmology, as Cage's music constitutes a reaction against the ultra-rationality of total serialism, in which all is absolutely pre-ordered, as in the concept of the Harmony of the Spheres.

Self" in Buddhism involves the discarding of selfhood as "a concept and as an experience", representing "the idea that we give things substance or 'reality' with our minds" (Zweig 142). Anderson claims that the idea "that truth involves human construction rather than apprehension of something a priori existent made its appearance in the East with Buddhism and in the West with Heraclitus, more or less contemporaneously" (8). Echoes of pre-Socratic philosophers (for example, Heraclitus) are observed in City of Glass, and Moon Palace: "down was up, the first was the last, the end was the beginning" (MP 62).

Further evidence of Auster's engagement with ideas positing the importance of perception is found in what are tangential references to philosophers concerned with similar, although not identical, and more extreme, ideas. In Moon Palace one of Solomon Barber's three historical studies is Bishop Berkeley and the Indians (192); Marco finds Barber's connection of Berkeley's experiences "with his philosophical works on perception...very deft and original, very profound" (MP193). George Berkeley (1685-1753) "construed statements about bodies as claims about perceptions or ideas" (Winkler 50). In 1707-1708 he completed his Philosophical Commentaries proposing that "to be is to be perceived, or to perceive (or will, or act)", that those things whose "esse is percipi (whose being is being perceived) have no existence apart from the minds or spirits who perceive or act upon them" (Winkler 50). In The Music of Chance, Flower and Stone's estate is near a town named Ockham (58) in what is perhaps another philosophical reference. William Ockham (1285-1347) was an English Franciscan theologian and philosopher who condemned the "doctrine that universals are real things other than names or concepts" (Adams 633).

The view that truth is made and not found does not imply that there is no physical reality, or that there cannot be true and ascertainable facts about physical existence, but rather emphasizes the role of the human mind in perceiving and constituting an interpretation of reality, and an accommodation with the demands of everything which one is not.[31] Time and again Auster's protagonists have to learn how to engage in these processes. The concern with

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[31] With regard to "[t]he pernicious consequence and internal contradictions of 'postmodernist' relativism" it is interesting to consider the controversy around what has become known as the Sokal hoax (Boghossian 14-15; also Palladino 15).

perception in Moon Palace, and Leviathan, in which the influence of 'objectivist' and Surrealist poetics is clear, emphasizes the need to teach a new way to perceive reality.

Alchemy's search for qualitative transformations – from base metal to gold, from male or female to androgyne – provided a metaphor for the Dada and Surrealist project of transforming consciousness and initiating a new means of perception (Hedges 8, 9, 33, 118), just as Effing seeks to initiate Marco into "mysterious and arcane knowledge"in Moon Palace (108). Further evidence of this possible influence may be discerned in, for example, the adolescent Sol Barber's novel, Kepler's Blood, which features in its wildly improbable cast of characters several who undergo physical transformations: a hermit, Silent Thought, initiates Jocamin into the mysteries of his art, the "magical powers of the Twelve Transformations" (MP 260) which culminates in a final change, into a woman. There are thirty-three steps in Master Yehudi's transformation of the urchin Walt into the flying wonder boy in Mr Vertigo. Walt conceives of Ralegh as "the most perfect man who ever lived" (MrV 44), the exemplar whose mettle Walt's acquisition of flight allows him to approach.

The magico-religious tone of much of the Dada endeavour (Hedges xiii), and its negativity, which in Surrealist work becomes the first step in the initiation of positive discoveries (Matthews 267), may well inform the suffering – and in the case of Nashe and Sachs, death – of Auster's protagonists. For Bataille, death, the violation of the self's limits, allows for the only real understanding of the self (Boldt-Irons 92): "for man ultimately to reveal himself to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – by watching himself cease to be" (quoted in Boldt-Irons 96).[32] This is perhaps why Auster is very 'hard' on his characters. They must learn to see anew, they must see old ways of seeing die, and, as characters, may have to die for the reader to witness this death in more concrete a fashion. Breton asserted that the eye – for Bataille, a symbol of the self – "is not open so long as it limits itself to the passive role of a mirror" (quoted in Hedges 115). The same general principle is true

[32] See also the epigraph to Jacques Dupin's Une Apparence de Soupirail, translated by Auster, and quoted earlier. The epigraph is from Rousseau, and reads: "I can truly say that I did not begin to live until I saw myself as a deadman" (Dupin 163). It is significant that Fanshawe looks after the Dedmons' country house in France (LR 276, 288).

for the 'objectivists'. Auster writes the following about Reznikoff:

> it is as if each act of seeing were an attempt to establish a link between the one who sees and the thing that is seen. As if the eye were the means by which the stranger could find his place in the world he has been exiled to. For the building of a world is above all the building and recognition of relations....The world is not merely an accumulation, it is a process – and each time the eye enters this world, it partakes in the life of all the disparate things that pass before it. ("The Decisive Moment" 214-15)

Auster's work makes no use of the Surrealists' radical, aleatorical 'compositional' techniques; what mattered for the Surrealists seems to have been less the product than the process of their explorations of consciousness. It has been claimed that Auster's The Music of Chance posits the existence of truth in abandonment to spontaneity (Irwin 80), to a cosmic current potentially discoverable by human beings (Bray 83). Marco believes initially that a "secret harmony...some form or pattern" in the world will be revealed to him (MP 80). These formulations echo Surrealist poetics, but ignore the fact that existence remains mysterious and unfathomable for Nashe, and offers no guarantee of immediate success or understanding for Marco, or any of the protagonists in Auster's novels.

No beneficent, necessary, "secret harmony" (MP 80) is finally revealed, as it is via Surrealism's hasard objectif.[33] No certainty exists in Auster's oeuvre about the ground which the existence of a pattern would suggest. Chance does not reveal to Auster's protagonists that their lives are predetermined, nor reveal a necessity which might provide them with a comforting model by which to pattern their lives. Auster's figuration of chance seems rather to offer his protagonists the opportunity – or necessity, but of a different kind to that sought – to acknowledge, engage with, and creatively assimilate the contingent as a necessary part of negotiating their identities,[34] as another engagement with what is other than the self, with what

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[33] It is interesting to note that one of the nineteenth-century American writers whose work has provided Auster with several points of reference, Herman Melville, shares a sense of the mystery and strangeness of the world. F.O.Matthiesson comments that when Melville started to contemplate the mystery of the unseen, he diverged from the transcendentalist belief that its effects on man were necessarily beneficent (405-408). Auster is clearly fond of Melville's work. In an interview, "The Making of Smoke", he states that he specified that there should be a "postcard of Herman Melville" over Paul Benjamin's desk on the film set for Smoke (10). In the screenplay (much of this scene does not appear in the film itself), April, the bookstore attendant who spends an evening with Paul and 'Rashid', is writing the last chapter of a dissertation entitled "Visions of Utopia in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction", on Melville's Pierre, or the Ambiguities (Smoke 98).

[34] I am indebted to Gareth Cornwell for helping me to formulate this idea.

threatens the self's supposed sovereignty. Arthur Saltzman comments that "[c]ontemporary fiction...laments the irreducible alienness of whatever lurks 'out there'" (Designs of Darkness 54). Auster offers a powerful exploration of the implications of the ethical imperative of encountering this alienness.

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That which intrudes on the worlds of Quinn and Blue, an alterity figured as a disruptive nothingness which denies their search for interpretive closure, is representative of the alienness of which Saltzman writes, of the operation of the contingent in our lives. These suffering detectives' loss of certainty, the frustration of any glance on the world which seeks totalization, and which demands access to certainty about the world and the self, illustrates the necessity of a particular kind of engagement with, and creation of, a world made up of objects, people and circumstances other than the self.

In the screenplay for Smoke, 'Rashid' refuses Paul Benjamin's offer of assistance, denying that he is in need of material comforts, by claiming: "[t]he world is in my head" (35). Paul Benjamin responds: "[b]ut your body is in the world, isn't it?" (ibid.). "Word Box", a 'photographic essay' included in Auster's Why Write?, consists of a series of twelve photographs of a sculpture by Jon Kessler. This sculpture is made up of a series of boxes with words stencilled on their sides. The photographs, each of a separate 'word box', form a text which reads: "THE WORLD IS IN MY HEAD MY BODY IS IN THE WORLD" (39-50).

Auster's employment of this statement demonstrates the interdependence of different, but not mutually exclusive conceptions of the nature of identity, which he seeks to balance in his work. On the one hand is the claim that one's idea of the world must involve an acceptance of the role played by multiple systems of signification, by cultural, social, and historical conditions. The world, in a sense, exists because it is constructed by signifying practices in my head. On the other hand, there is the undeniable experience of physical presence, and the need to defend that space within which the subject can exist with dignity as a discrete individual. Auster's affinity with 'objectivist' poetics emphasizes the fundamental importance of interaction, through perception, with the world. The world may be in my head, but my head is in the world, and it is

here, as Oppen states, that I want to be.

What emerges from a consideration of Auster's Jewishness – the manner in which his concerns and techniques have been influenced by the tradition of commentary, the notions of exile and diaspora, and the experiences of fragmentation, solitude and nostalgia – is an apprehension of Auster's discovery of a voice in the voices of others. And this discovery seems emblematic of his more general recognition of the importance of others and otherness in the constitution of the self: the narrator of The Locked Room, Anna, Marco, Nashe, Aaron, and other characters, experience the danger implicit in, or suffer the consequences of ignoring, or misinterpreting, this imperative. Auster seeks to affirm the concept of menschlikeit generally, as he attempted to do specifically in respect of his father when he wrote The Invention of Solitude, and this requires from his protagonists, and from his readers, an acceptance of the responsibilities attendant on their recognition of the fact that their heads are in the world. The seemingly punitive severity of the fates of some of Auster's protagonists belies the redemptive possibilities glimpsed in his work, which offers, finally, a profoundly ethical conception of the possibilities and responsibilities of selfhood.

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[1] Note on entries for Auster's work: Where an essay, review or preface has been reprinted in one of the collections of prose from which I cite under a title different from that under which the text was originally published, I include as the first entry for that item the title (in brackets) of the reprint from which I quote, to facilitate the alphabetical referencing of material cited in the body of my thesis. Ground Work and The Red Notebook reprint some, but not all of the prose pieces collected in The Art of Hunger, which was published in the United States. Ground Work, in addition, reprints the selection of Auster's poetry which was published in the United States as Disappearances: Selected Poems. Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1988. Poems cited are from Ground Work. Individual poems are not referenced separately in the bibliography. I have quoted from Ground Work and The Red Notebook in preference to The Art of Hunger, except where the text only appears in the latter (except in the case of Auster's interview with Jabès) in the interests of consistency, given that I quote from British editions of Auster's novels throughout. Dates after titles of essays refer to the date of composition given by Auster. The Faber and Faber editions of Auster's novels, which I have used, are the most readily available in South Africa.

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