

**The Poetics of Place: New York and Identity in the Works of Paul Auster**

Presented in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2003

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**Abstract: *The Poetics of Place: New York and Identity in the works of Paul Auster***

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This thesis examines the role of New York City in the construction of identity in the works of Paul Auster. It traces how Auster moves from a position of urban nihilism to one of qualified optimism for forms of social life and community in the contemporary metropolis. The work of cultural geographers offers a theoretical framework appropriate to Auster's urban spatial imagination. Consequently, the chapters are organised in a continuity of spatial scales and examine the dialogue between urban theory and Auster's fiction.

Chapter 1 introduces cultural geography, and relates its key concerns to those in Auster's work. Its commentators are organised into three perspectives: the 'systemic', the 'local', and the 'global in the local'. Chapter 2 considers Auster's poetry and early prose to demonstrate how a 'systemic' experience of the metropolis forces the writer to retreat to the isolation of his room. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the central themes of alienation and the failure of language on the streets of the metropolis in *The New York Trilogy*, and consider how, at this early point in his career, Auster understands the practices of writing and their relationship to the metropolis. Chapter 5 explores how Auster presents a 'local' experience of intimate social connections in 'downtown', and how these provide a fleeting stability for his characters. Chapter 6 journeys out of the metropolis to consider Auster's representations of non-New York places, and the effects on identity of space and mobility. Chapter 7 examines spaces of the imagination through Auster's representations of dystopic and utopian places, and the role of magic and illusion. Chapter 8 demonstrates how Auster presents a community able to ground a sense of identity in the collaborative practices of story telling and film making.

**Approximately 98 000 words, 344 pages.**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank University College Northampton for the financial support to carry out this thesis. I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Professor Peter Brooker, for both his hard work and his inspiration. UCN also generously provided the funds for a research trip to New York, and The Berg Collection at The New York Public Library gave me the opportunity to access the Auster manuscripts, for which I would like to extend my thanks to the staff.

I want to acknowledge, with gratitude, the love and support of my wife Fay, without which I would have been unable to achieve what I have achieved. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my little boy, Harvey, which was simply being cute.

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, Derek Brown (1944-2003).

## CHAPTER 1

### 'BREAKING OUT OF THE LOCAL'<sup>1</sup> – Theoretical perspectives

Paul Auster has consistently taken the city of New York as a central feature in his work. The city inhabits his essays, novels and films both as a backdrop against which the plots unfold, and as an active agent in their outcomes. In 1988, Auster told Allan Reich: 'New York is the most important place for me' (n.pag.). Around the same time, in a comment subsequently edited from the published interview, he told Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory that New York is the main character of *The New York Trilogy* (1985), and that he is both attached to and hates the city (11).<sup>2</sup> In 1997 – in conversation with another confirmed New Yorker, Lou Reed – Auster said that New York is a special place, distinct from the rest of America. 'New York I don't even think of as part of America, it's not even a part of New York state', he says. 'It's a separate little city state that belongs to the world' (*The South Bank Show*).

The compelling nature of New York City, for Auster, at once encapsulates two primary themes. Contemporary literature is often concerned with representations of the complexity and scale of living in this era of late-capitalism and global culture, and so engages with the processes that allow New York to be at once isolated while belonging to the world. At the same time, Auster's literature is centrally concerned with how we, as individuals, live collectively. In his early poetry, this is as much a question about society

<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, Nature* (347).

<sup>2</sup> Draft interview, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York. After a number of revisions made by Auster, this interview was subsequently published in *Mississippi Review*, and is included in *The Art of Hunger*.

in general as it is about metropolitan living in particular. But as the work progresses to the novel form, the questions of living in the metropolis, of anonymity and alienation, come to the fore.

Jean Baudrillard, on visiting the city, recorded similar concerns in his study of *America* (1988). 'Why do people live in New York?', he asked.

There is no relationship between them. Except for an inner electricity which results from the simple fact of being crowded together. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality. This is what makes it a self-attracting universe, which there is no reason to leave. There is no reason to be here, except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together.

(15)

Auster explores these concerns in his work. Like Baudrillard, Auster also finds New York at once compelling and menacing. He tells Lou Reed that he is struck by the 'filth and the density of population', and 'the absolutely staggering range of humanity that walks by you at any given moment' (*South Bank Show*). This urban contradiction, of being at once attracted to and repelled by the metropolis, surfaces many times in Auster's work and provides a fascinating, productive tension in his art.

Auster's concern with how we live collectively in large cities – 'the monstrous sum / of particulars' or 'the life that extends beyond me', he calls it in early poems<sup>3</sup> – is in part motivated by his interest in how the individual locates her or himself in the world. His characters demonstrate how individuals need first to locate themselves in the world

<sup>3</sup> 'Disappearances' (*Ground Work* 61), 'White Spaces' (83).

through a matrix of situated and relational coordinates to achieve a stable relationship with others and a coherent sense of themselves. That is to say, for Auster, not until the metropolitan subject has established where they are through the landmarks and symbols of a knowable locale, and where that place is in relation to the rest of the physical and social world (and how they are connected to it), can they begin the work of self-hood. For Auster, this is the establishment of a stable and productive 'I'.

Auster explicitly acknowledges the importance of this theme in his work. Of the early *The New York Trilogy*, he told Joseph Malia that the book is about 'identity':

The question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process ... is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing.

*(The Art of Hunger 279)*

Throughout the Auster canon, who his characters are (or aren't) is repeatedly forged from their connections to the social world, which they establish through friendship, love and the family.

The following chapters trace the metropolitan conditions Auster presents as necessary for the founding and construction of an 'I' for his characters. These include satisfactory and supportive correspondences between characters' subjective 'inner terrain' and their physical, invariably metropolitan, outer one. As he shows, social connections and stable and coherent identity are only possible in Auster's metropolis when there is a reasonable degree of coincidence between self and physical environment. Equally, he shows where the 'outer terrain' of the physical metropolis is volatile and complex, the

opportunity for harmony between individual and environment is drastically diminished. Consequently, any stability that Auster represents for his characters remains fragile and temporary; always contingent on the flexibility of the urban subject and their capacity to adapt to a complex and constantly shifting metropolis. As Brooker points out in *New York Fictions* (1996), 'Auster's stories reflect on ... interlaced concerns of language, literature and identity, seeking moments or types of stability between the extremes of fixity and randomness' (145). The following chapters trace the stages in Auster's literary career which demonstrate three different understandings of identity in the metropolis, which themselves explore the experience of fixity and randomness. Firstly, nihilistic representations of fragmentation and breakdown. Then a locally found familiarity and stability that remains fragile and contingent because of metropolitan volatility. Finally, an urban vision able to incorporate both local knowledge and a view of the wider social world, providing stability through flexibility.

This thesis will describe the ways in which Auster attempts to make sense of New York City through his poetry, essays, novels and films, and explore the potential individual responses to the metropolis that are available to his characters. He shows how the response adopted by an individual to their environment will dictate her or his metropolitan destiny. In Auster's work, for example, some of his characters are erased from the urban and literary text, others find temporary stability with partners or lovers, and still others are able to discover that rarest of conditions in an Auster text: stability, companionship, and enduring happiness.

Repeatedly Auster demonstrates that writing can be a way of mediating metropolitan experiences, and how storytelling and language are mythical dimensions of life which have the potential to overcome or alleviate urban predicaments. As subsequent chapters show, an essential element of Auster's varied and far-ranging artistic project is to



recover New York (in particular) as a place to live. He shows how, when the metropolis is encountered as only a physical and social reality, it swiftly becomes an overwhelming and disorientating environment. However, when that physical reality is overlaid with a poetical dimension, the city is invested with symbolic and lyrical qualities able to 'disalienate' and 're-enchant' the city. For Auster, storytelling represents the illusory and mythical powers needed to achieve this in the metropolis, and characters who are able to deploy storytelling as an urban strategy come to find some sort of stability in their lives. As Auster told Mark Irwin, 'stories are the fundamental food for the soul .... It's through stories that we struggle to make sense of the world' (336). He goes on:

I believe that the world is filled with stories, that our lives are filled with stories, but it's only at certain moments that we are able to see them or to understand them. You have to be ready to understand them.

*(Hunger 329)*

Storytelling in Auster's work functions as a means by which the alienated individual can share with others, and re-connect to the social realm. The new poetical and social geography overlays the city as an insubstantial and mythical dimension. Kevin Robbins, discussing his sense of the postmodern city, sees a need to 'attempt to re-imagine urbanity [by] .... recovering a lost sense of territorial identity, urban community and public space. It is a kind of return to (mythical) origins' ('Prisoners of the City' 304). The re-enchantment of the life of cities, he writes, is able 'to revitalize tradition and community and to revalidate the kinds of particularity that have been lost' (321). In Auster's work, the assertion of community and the particularity of storytelling as a way of sharing have the capacity to re-enchant the metropolis for his urban characters. Donattella

Mazzeloleni, in her essay 'The City and the Imaginary', calls for a new relationship between 'I' and the metropolitan environment 'by positing a possibility of a new imaginary' (286), because the 'city is ... a site of an *identification*' (293, original emphasis). Auster shows, through the movement in his texts from nihilism to a qualified optimism, that by re-imagining the city, the individual can achieve a relatively stable purchase on self-hood and social being in metropolitan life. The process of re-imagining is a dialectical one incorporating both the poetical imagination and the material reality of the city. James Donald, in *Imagining the Modern Metropolis*, describes the relationship between the two in this way:

It is not just that the boundaries between reality and imagination are fuzzy and porous. In the development of cities can be discerned a traffic between the two, an economy of symbolic constructs which have material consequences that are manifested in an enduring reality.

(27)

On an individual level, Auster presents characters who negotiate between the reality of their physical environment and the metropolis of their imagination (their 'inner terrain'). The greater the correspondences between place and self, the more secure a character's social connections, and the more coherent their sense of identity.

Auster's poetry, books and films have always focused on characters moving through space, and so the 'spatial turn' of the new cultural geography offers an appropriate analytical approach to Auster's work. As Sara Blair comments in 'Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary', since the 1970s 'a constellation of texts and scholars

drawing on cultural theory, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy has ... declared ... that temporality as the organizing form of experience has been superseded by spatiality' (544). This 'new cultural geography', she insists, includes the inaugurating figures of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and David Harvey, and 'maps affective terrain along with economic and demographic flows [and] ... the ground of spatial practices .... In a very real sense, the new geography constitutes a powerful expressive form, giving voice to the effects of dislocation, disembodiment, and localization that constitutes contemporary social orders' (545). In the context of this study, and as Blair writes, cultural geography is able to provide:

new models and vocabularies for ... American literary studies .... on a ... contested border between literature and culture, the aesthetic and the social. In turn, [literary studies] offers theorists of space and place specific reading practices and canons that richly affirm the materiality and texture of spatial experience.

(545-6)

This chapter sketches how the new thinking associated with cultural geography echoes many of Auster's own concerns. It also indicates how fiction is able to imagine beyond the limits of empirical social science to encounter spaces and places of the metropolis at its extremes, and how cultural geography too is beginning to use the imaginary as a way of interrogating its own practices. Following chapters consider how Auster's art can initiate a dialogue between the empirical spaces of cultural geography and the imagined spaces of fiction and film.

The present work, as far as possible, organises the examination of Auster's central themes and their attendant concerns into a series of spaces and geographical scales for the richly textured spatial experience which Blair identifies. Consequently, my argument moves out of the writer's room onto the eerily uninhabited streets of New York City, then to the social spaces (bars, restaurants, galleries, and so on) of 'downtown' Manhattan. It then travels out of the metropolis and measures the way in which Auster represents cities and spaces beyond New York in relation to his home city. Chapter 7 more fully enters the realm of the imagination and considers the spaces of dystopia and utopia, and the power of the symbolic in spatial constructions and the creation of place. Finally, the thesis returns to the metropolis to explore how Auster's geographical imagination is able to create a particular sense of place in Brooklyn, while at the same time exploring how it relates to the global processes in which New York is embedded. Ultimately, for Auster, this is found in the particularities of place, specifically in Brooklyn, and the community of artists, storytellers and baseball fans who inhabit it.

Auster's characters encounter the rich and varied spaces of New York on foot. His central figures are walkers, who mediate their experiences through writing. The work of Walter Benjamin identified the figure of the *flâneur* as the prime urban walker and recorder in literature. Benjamin takes as his example the literature of the nineteenth century, and representations of European cities such as Poe's London and Baudelaire's Paris. But we can easily identify the *flâneur* as the model for Auster's walkers in twentieth century New York.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Walter Benjamin's work and his concern with the metropolis, see also Graham Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis Walter Benjamin and the City*; Susan Buck-Morse, *The Dialectics of Seeing*; James Donald, *Imagining the Modern Metropolis* (11).

Benjamin's essays collected in *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1997) trace the emergence of modernity through its cultural and social manifestations in Baudelaire's Paris. Benjamin describes Paris as the prime site that typifies its epoch; in the title of an essay he calls it 'The Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (155). Elsewhere, he identifies two important metropolitan phenomena in Baudelaire's work which will illuminate the exploration of Auster's New York City in the chapters that follow. Firstly, Benjamin is the premier chronicler of the *flâneur* (along with other marginal figures), who has, in some form, inhabited the American city in literature since Edgar Allan Poe. Secondly, Benjamin describes a 'phantasmagoria' (39) of the city which overlays the material fact of the modern metropolis with mythologies and urban stories. Benjamin relates both of these practices to the urban poet, and explores Baudelaire's representations of modernity, the modern metropolis and the principal urban symbol of the crowd. The most useful understanding of modernity and the modern metropolis that can be bought to Benjamin's work is Baudelaire's own in 'The Painter of Modern Life'. As Benjamin quotes, modernity is 'the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other half being the eternal and the immutable' (*The Arcades Project* 239). The complexity of an environment emerging from these conditions requires a mode of expression equal to its volatility. Consequently, according to Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetic project was to create a prose adequate to the metropolis of his age. Towards the end of the following century, and arguably representing the 'capital of the twentieth century', Auster's New York fiction self-consciously explores the possibility of a lexicon adequate to the contemporary metropolis. Again and again, as the following chapters show, Auster's characters struggle to find the terms that will enable them to describe their individual metropolitan predicaments. And again and again the failure to do so has catastrophic results for them.

The figure of the *flâneur*, which Benjamin identifies closely with Baudelaire, also finds his echo in the works of Auster, albeit a hundred years later and in a different city. The *flâneur's* experience is formed through walking in the metropolis. His impression of the city is thus shaped at street level, through the confusion and immediacy of the sensual and local experience of urban phenomena such as the crowd.

The crowd had come to typify both the nineteenth century and Paris: 'no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers', Benjamin asserts (120). And it is the treatment of the crowd by Poe and Baudelaire that occupies Benjamin in the essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. For Poe, Baudelaire and Benjamin it is the single most important characteristic of the modern metropolitan environment. From within the crowd Benjamin identifies a number of the individual 'urban types' that populate Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). In this discussion, Benjamin traces Baudelaire's interest in figures who have been cast out and marginalised by modernity's advance, and whose appearance in the city they both see as fugitive and ephemeral. He isolates the ragpicker and the *flâneur* (along with the prostitute) as types with whom Baudelaire associates himself as a poet. The ragpicker is shown by Benjamin to be the epitome of human misery in the city, collecting rags to be used in industrial processes (19). The affinity between the ragpicker and the poet arises from a coincidence of activity – as Baudelaire also sees himself collecting social refuse from the city street and fashioning it into a precarious living (79-80), an image that Auster employs a number of times in his earlier novels. Benjamin describes how Baudelaire associates himself as a poet with this marginalised urban subject as an attempt to appoint himself a new urban hero.<sup>5</sup> However,

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<sup>5</sup> Poe's urban hero, Dupin, is also a poet who uses his poetical imagination to solve crimes, with far greater effect than the scientific rationality of the institutions of state. Baudelaire translated these tales into French and was much interested in the emergence of the detective in literature (*Baudelaire* 42-44).

he rejects Baudelaire's thesis, insisting that the urban hero in the modern era can merely 'play' at the role (97), each 'type' he identifies being undermined by their social or temporal moment. Auster borrows these figures from nineteenth century Paris and translates them to the American metropolis of the late twentieth century, where they become the confused, alienated and disconnected walkers of his New York fiction. The subsequent chapters demonstrate how a century later Auster remains unsure of who to confer the literary mantle of urban hero upon, as his characters repeatedly struggle to negotiate their environments and make sense of their metropolitan lives.

Baudelaire's *flâneur* occupies a very particular time and place, and is of a class that is able to indulge in strolling as a pastime. His arena is initially that of the boulevards, but with the advent of the arcades he finds his perfect environment. Here he can be an observer, and a peruser of the commodities in the arcades, as well as a commodity spectacle to be observed. He is a man, Benjamin observes, who goes 'botanizing on the asphalt' (36) and who is at home in the street (37). When creating his wanderer/observer characters such as Quinn, Anna Blume, Maria Turner and Benjamin Sachs, Auster clearly has the *flâneur* in mind, and is deeply conscious of the literary tradition connecting the nineteenth century *flâneur* to the twentieth century detective. The significant difference for Auster's characters is that they negotiate the intense environment of late twentieth century New York, and he consequently shows how this environment is able to overwhelm and sometimes destroy his characters' physical and mental self.

Benjamin contrasts Poe's urban tale 'The Man of the Crowd' with Baudelaire's crowd scenes. He describes how Poe characterises the crowd as unknowable, making it compelling and menacing; investing it at once with alienation, anonymity and fascination (126-8). In comparison, Baudelaire's poem 'To a Passer-by' invests the crowd with a

potential to offer exciting but fleeting metropolitan encounters. The poet describes a brief and anonymous encounter with a beautiful widow who is borne to him and away from him by the crowd. 'What this sonnet communicates is simply this:' Benjamin writes, 'far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love - not at first sight, but at last sight' (125). Thus, Benjamin is able to describe this mass as 'the agitated veil; through it Baudelaire saw Paris' (123-4). The way in which the crowd conveys this mysterious beauty to the gaze of the poet illustrates both the anonymity and the fascination of the crowd. However, Benjamin presents Baudelaire's attitude to the crowd as ambivalent. If the masses are 'a part of Baudelaire' (122), they are also the origin of a deep fear that refuses to allow him to submerge himself utterly in the crowd (128). It is Baudelaire's very status as a poet that prevents him becoming fully immersed in the city; both his class position and his professed role as dispassionate observer must separate him from the mass. The result is that 'the allegorist's gaze which falls upon the city is ... the gaze of the alienated man' (170).

Baudelaire as a poet (and hence an alienated man), seeks an urban poetics adequate to both the rational and the phantasmagorical elements of urban experience. In an echo of the two parts that constitute modernity, he wrote of his own poetry:

Who among us has not dreamt, in moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple and staccato enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and the sudden leaps of consciousness. This obsessive idea is above all a child of the experience of giant cities, of the intersecting of their myriad relations.



(quoted in *Baudelaire*, 119)

What Baudelaire seeks is a mode of representation that engages with the eternal and (seemingly) immutable physical metropolis in terms which at the same time are able to capture the ephemeral and fugitive interrelations he finds so compelling.

Benjamin, and indeed all the writers discussed in this chapter, are seeking an analytical position and a lexicon that can represent the sensations, impressions and feelings that are found in the metropolis. Auster too, as the following chapters show, is conscious of the many ways in which individuals live in and write about the metropolis. The practice of the *flâneur* and the walker, living the city life close up, represents one possible mode of engagement and a position from which to record metropolitan experience.

The figure of the *flâneur* is a very important one for any study of the metropolis – past or present. As a mode of engagement with the city, he was the first to take account of the city as a sensual arena. Benjamin shows, through the works of Baudelaire and Poe, how the effects of the metropolis on the consciousness of the individual can be both euphoric and fearful. The chapters that follow explore how Auster's pedestrian figures struggle to engage with the changed realities of their contemporary New York, while seeking a 'poetics of place' that can represent it.

The perspective that the *flâneur* brings to the metropolis can be formalised as an analytical position which encounters the city close up and which I term here the 'local'. In contrast, the city can also be viewed from a distant analytical perspective, which I term the 'systemic'. These perspectives should not suggest that we are looking at two different things, or indeed two different cities. Instead, the object of study, in this case New York,

is viewed in two different ways. One views the city from the inside, making it compelling, tactile and partial, while the other views the metropolis from the outside, as a totality that generalises upon the detail of everyday metropolitan living. These categories are not entirely separate and discrete therefore, but are instead a matter of emphasis.

The 'local' perspective views the metropolis at the micro-scale, encountering it from the same point of view as an urban walker. Because of the immediacy between the observer and the physical environment, the 'local' experience of the city assails the senses, making it tactile and knowable. When the metropolis is encountered up close, the individual experiences it as partial, but knowable in a limited way – it appears distinct and fluid, random and chaotic to the observer. Consequently, the urban individual operating in the metropolis with this orientation does so on an intuitive level and is unable to formulate coherent, totalising urban strategies. However, because of an intimate knowledge of the immediate metropolitan environment circumscribed by experience, she or he is able to establish a 'relatively' coherent knowledge and mental impression within limited geographical and social boundaries. Nonetheless, as subsequent chapters show, the knowledge gained and the contacts made in this arena remain fragile, contingent on the shifting social and spatial formations of the contemporary metropolis. Thus, Benjamin's descriptions of the *flâneur* exemplify the vantage point of the streets, and conform to the 'local' urban perspective.

In contrast, the 'systemic' perspective views the metropolis at the macro-scale, encountering it through the distant and abstract, scientific and empirical strategies of the planner and the cartographer. Consequently, when the city is experienced with a 'systemic' emphasis, it is seen as a series of static, anonymous economic and social forces which are able to shape metropolitan space, social relations and hence metropolitan

experience itself. As a result, the individual finds the metropolis to be overwhelming, confusing and disorientating.

The writings of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja emphasise the 'systemic' characteristics of the metropolis, and are, I would argue, unable to give a full account of the 'local' and immediate that figures such as the *flâneur* and the walker encounter. Meanwhile, the work of Benjamin, and that of Michel de Certeau, refer only in passing to these larger and influential processes. However, the work of a number of commentators here demonstrates strategies for investigating the relationship between 'local' and 'systemic' aspects of metropolitan experience. Recent studies have attempted to understand the relationship between these two scales of metropolitan observation and experience. These writers, who include Fredric Jameson and Doreen Massey, seek to comprehend individual spatial experience in the metropolis within the context of the wider social forces in which that experience is embedded, and which is instrumental in shaping it. Massey terms this dual emphasis and mobile perspective 'the global in the local', and it represents a significant third perspective here.

The 'systemic' perspective, then, describes the imposition of discipline on the urban subject by anonymous institutional control in the city. The 'local' perspective, by contrast, emphasises individual or subjective experience, and demonstrates the possibilities for deflecting or avoiding institutional power. As a consequence, the 'local' city is experienced as a tangible city of streets and landmarks, rather than external classifications and rational cartographies. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (first published 1974, translated into English 1988) is a prime example of this particular emphasis; identifying how individuals deploy autonomous and resistant practices and occupy interstitial spaces in the metropolis.

The relationship between the 'systemic' and 'local' perspectives can be visualised through de Certeau's description of the movement between them. From the panoptic vantage point of the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center, he describes the panorama of New York City which encompasses such geographical, institutional, and social landmarks as Wall Street, Greenwich Village, Central Park and Harlem (91). This perspective illustrates how the 'systemic' view reduces the metropolis to a 'texturology in which extremes coincide' (ibid), and it is a 'totalizing' vision of this 'most immoderate of texts' (92). This physical place lifts the viewer from the 'city's grasp' to a place where the body is no longer subject to the power of the streets, and places that viewer in the role of voyeur (92). 'The panorama-city is [thus] a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum ...', de Certeau writes in a perfect illustration of the 'systemic' perspective, 'whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices' (93).<sup>6</sup>

De Certeau's panoramic view contrasts markedly with the 'local' experience at street level, just an elevator ride away. Here, 'below the threshold of visibility', he describes walkers as the 'ordinary practitioners' of the metropolis, whose paths constitute networks of 'intersecting writings [to] compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator' (93). De Certeau's goal is to detect and record resistant urban practices inscribed in these writings; in the everyday 'practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic or visual constructions' (93). He elaborates on the idea of 'a *migrational*, or metaphorical, city ... [which] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city' (93, original emphasis). That is to say, de Certeau resists

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the debates around de Certeau's description of these analytical positions, see also Donald (13-17). He points out that even 'if he does not altogether deliver it, de Certeau suggests the need for a sociological elaboration of styles of urban spatial appropriation that are expressed at their most intense and ... poetic' in urban fictions (17). Soja also considers de Certeau's differential perspectives on the metropolis, and describes the street level explorations as 'the view from below' (*Thirdspace* 313-4).

the application of urban discourse, and identifies instead with the ordinary and everyday user. Accordingly, the object of study becomes the multiple practices and the proliferating illegitimacies that elude the everyday mechanisms of power and surveillance, rather than the discourses created to suppress autonomy. In this way, de Certeau leads us to consider 'a theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city', that seeks out resistance within urban power's own territory (96). I take the 'disquieting familiarity of the city' to be a mythical element of metropolitan life. The textual and linguistic elements of the metropolitan experience gain their familiarity from the telling of urban stories – both of which constitute an essential and lyrical part of de Certeau's theory and of Auster's art.

De Certeau takes as the focus of *The Practice of Everyday Life* the way in which individuals use culture, language, commodities and space. He understands how 'each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of ... relational determinants interact' (xi). He goes on to describe how groups and individuals compose networks of 'antidiscipline' (xv) which are able to encompass clandestine social forms deploying dispersed and make-shift tactical creativity (xiv). These groups and individuals operate against a system 'too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape it' (xx).

The essay 'Walking in the City' illustrates the spatial dimension of de Certeau's project. It is a dense and wide-ranging piece that encompasses spatial practice, the correspondence between the practices of writing and the practices of walking, and the function of stories and memory. The essay demonstrates an enunciative coincidence between spatial and speaking practices (walking and language) to give the invisible traces of pedestrian expressions form by making them textual. De Certeau is keenly aware of the different interpretive outcomes of the metropolitan experience resulting from the

adoption of a particular analytical perspective. 'Walking in the City' employs a consciously 'local' perspective, and like Benjamin, takes the individual and the street as the objects of study. However, like Auster, he examines the experience of walking through New York in the late twentieth century, and like Auster, encounters confusion and illegibility.

The 'ordinary practitioners' (walkers) at the centre of de Certeau's study seek out practices that do not conform to the discursive city's rational mechanisms and patterns. These he finds in the 'forbidden' individual practices that persist below the level of prescriptive mechanisms. Thus:

Today ... we have to acknowledge that if in discourse the city serves as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies, urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded. The ... city is left prey to contradictory movements that counter-balance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power ... Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.

(95)

David Harvey, as we shall see, emphasises the domination of space by capital and its institutions. However, unlike Harvey, de Certeau suggests that practices without a readable identity are beyond the control of money's panoptic power. Walkers then become the locus of non-conformist and resistant urban practices. Like language, de

Certeau insists, space can be subverted and structures undermined by the manner of their use in everyday practice. De Certeau accordingly describes the ways in which paths form patterns, which are themselves comparable to elements of a linguistic system. Idle footsteps generate a 'chorus', the concept of 'pedestrian speech acts' adds a sense of coherence or legibility, which finally combine to constitute 'walking rhetorics' (97-102).

'Walking rhetorics', lyrically described by de Certeau as 'the long poem of walking' (101) and 'the chorus of idle footsteps' (97), are able to manipulate spatial systems regardless of their power. They are not a seamless continuity: meaning or sense is found in 'the ellipsis of conjunctive loci' (101), rather than a continuous density of signs and symbols. That is to say, walking trajectories are plotted by reading distant and distinct symbolic markers within the spatial system, which then carry personal meanings for walkers. This practice has important implications for understanding how urban subjects negotiate the complexities of urban space, as symbolic markers provide points of coincidence between individuals' metropolitan understandings and their experience of it – a disjunction between an inner and outer terrain will inevitably lead to confusion and disorientation.

De Certeau goes on to investigate how individuals make sense of the urban realm through symbolic markers, and terms these '*forests of gestures*' (102, original emphasis). When these 'gestures' are endlessly reproduced by successive forms of social organisation, the individual struggles to 'read' the markers. The result, again, is confusion caused by a failure to connect with the now unfamiliar environment. At the same time, de Certeau identifies the way in which individuals and groups depend upon stories and myths to interpret the personal 'gestures' that are manifest in the streets. The rational (discursive) city is ill-equipped, he suggests, to deal with the irrational dimension of myths and stories. The city is, then, constituted from symbols and myths, of which

names form a fundamental part and carry 'magical powers' (104). Proper names operate in urban space by overlaying a 'poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning', and these proper names and stories can provide the metropolitan population with interstitial spaces for clandestine activities (105).

For de Certeau, then, spatial practices can be understood on two levels. There is the rational (scientific) interrogation which will result in reading the most recent urban social incarnation. Or preferably, there are mythical and enchanting urban encounters based on the 'local' experience of the streets. By living amongst the forces which name the metropolis on a local level, the individual is better able to uncover personal meanings and historical layerings. All of this is closely relevant to Auster's use of fable and illusion, and his preoccupation with the power of storytelling. Most tellingly in this respect, de Certeau states that everyday practices should be more of the order of 'an indeterminist fable' than 'the empire of the evident in functionalist technocracy' (203).

In contrast to the emphasis of the immediate and physical city of the 'local' perspective, commentators such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and David Harvey have emphasised the distant, anonymous and 'systemic' forces at work in the metropolis and in shaping metropolitan life. Many commentators on the urban realm are deeply indebted to Henri Lefebvre. In the seminal *The Production of Space* (1974, translated 1991), Lefebvre's project was to present a new conception of space that would be adequate to the creation of new social relations and a new mode of production to challenge the hegemony of monopoly capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, he first sought ways in which to understand the production of space through the existing modes of social reproduction and the resulting

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<sup>7</sup> David Harvey and Edward Soja provide thorough accounts of *The Production of Space* in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (218-9) and *Thirdspace* (25-82), respectively.



social relationships. Also, a vital new dimension added by Lefebvre to the social and the physical aspects of lived urban space has been the imaginary and symbolic. In identifying the social and imaginative realms in which city spaces are formed and altered, he was able to examine the relationships between them, and so lay the foundations for later thinkers to further explore the nexus of space, social relations, and the symbolic order. As a result, Lefebvre established a 'conceptual triad' that has formed the foundational terminology for cultural geography.

Lefebvre's project aims to 'expose the actual production of space by bringing the various kinds of space and the modalities of their genesis...within a single theory' (16). He sees space as the object of revolutionary theory and practice because it is becoming, he says, 'the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles. It has of course always been the reservoir of resources, and the medium in which strategies are applied, but it has now become something more than the theatre, the disinterested stage or setting, of action' (410). His objective is to point 'the way towards a different space, towards the space of a different (social) life and of a different mode of production,' so straddling 'the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived' (60). His project 'aspires to surmount these oppositions by exploring the dialectical relationship between "possible" and "impossible", and this both objectively and subjectively' (ibid). The introduction of a utopian, imaginary dimension therefore brings a new element to the urban debate.

Lefebvre seeks primarily to uncover the theoretical and practical implications of a dialectical relationship between social space and social relationships, thereby making it possible to visualise the flows between the production of social space and the social relationships that generate it. He builds on the hypothesis (now seemingly obvious, but then in great need of explication) that '(social) space is a (social) product' (26).

Consequently, Lefebvre is able to assert that '[s]ocial relations ... have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*' (404, original emphasis). He draws four implications from this. Briefly: natural space is replaced by social space (30); each mode of production produces its own spatial formations (31); the mode of production is dialectically instrumental in the production of social space (36-7); and finally, there is a temporal dimension as one mode of production gives way to the next (44). On the basis of these assumptions, later thinkers such as David Harvey, have been able to discern an urban palimpsest upon which a number of modes of production are inscribed, and where the interaction of these modes can generate new social relations and new spaces. Lefebvre's observations amount to a new way of thinking about space (as a social product) and a new way of encountering space (through social relations) – a mode of thinking that acknowledges the interaction of the physical, the productive and the imaginative realms.

Lefebvre's influential 'conceptual triad' constitutes three categories of social space that give rise to particular spatial experiences. These are '*spatial practice*', '*representations of space*', and '*representational spaces*', (33, original emphasis) which Lefebvre shorthands as 'the perceived, the conceived and the lived' (39). The first, *spatial practice*, refers to a material experience of space as it is produced and reproduced by the mode of production, as described above. *Representations of space* are of an institutional nature, and refer to the 'frontal' relations imposed on space by dominant ideologies, social groups and institutions. Finally, *representational spaces* are the most apparent location of the social spatial imagination and are loaded with personal and social symbolisms, capable of subverting social spaces. Art and literature are naturally clandestine constituents of representational spaces, as they harbour elements of imagination, symbolism and the potential for subversion of dominant ideologies.

Following the identification of the material, the social, and the imagined levels of social space, Lefebvre describes how these spaces can be encountered analytically. *Spatial practice* can be revealed through 'deciphering', and can be plotted empirically (38). *Representations of space* are the dominant spaces in a society or mode of production; they benefit the scientific practitioners (planners, architects etc.), and can be accessed through a 'system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs' (37-38). *Representational space* is 'directly lived' by 'inhabitants' and 'users', and is understood through a system of non-verbal sign systems as physical space is over-laid with symbolic meaning, assisted by artistic and literary representations (39).

At the heart of Lefebvre's discussion is the multitude of intersecting class interests that form dialectical social and spatial relationships, and in turn shape the metropolitan environment. In short, the modes of production adopted by societies generate social relations that find expression in spatial relations. These spatial arrangements in turn act to create new social relationships and can act upon and alter the mode of production. Lefebvre's thinking remains somewhat one-dimensional since his thesis does not embrace the possibility of competing spaces arising from temporally distinct modes of production. However, it does show how symbolic space can be incorporated into revolutionary theory and action at the point of transition between modes of production.

Lefebvre's writings stand as an example of what I term here the 'systemic' perspective. He views the city itself as a set of competing institutional relationships (as between labour and capital). Indeed, while he acknowledges that the body is the starting point or basic unit of spatial investigation, he does not significantly elaborate on the subjective experience of the city, concentrating instead on the agency of power groups that shape and order the metropolis. When the individual adopts this perspective, she or he can find the metropolis overwhelming, and become isolated and confused.

Following Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja's theory of 'The Socio-Spatial Dialectic' (1980) sets out to achieve three objectives: to describe the relationship between capitalist society and the urban spaces that it occupies; to describe spatial relationships at the regional-international scale within the context of the capitalist mode of production; and to establish a homology between the structures of spatial production at the urban scale and those at the regional scale. Soja's assertion that the 'social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent' (211) is a reformulation of Lefebvre's central hypothesis on the relationship between space and society. In *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) he goes on to map out the intellectual terrain of new urban discourses, and applies historico-geographic discursive strategies to engage with the material experiences of urban restructuring, with particular reference to Los Angeles.

Where Lefebvre had earlier asserted that capitalism survives by producing and occupying new spaces, Soja notes an 'intensification' and 'extensification' of capitalism (*Geographies* 105). The resultant changes in the experience of the metropolis are a central concern of the present work, as Auster explores the intense metropolitan experience of late twentieth century New York. In addition, *Thirdspace* (1996) introduces a concept that extends the imaginative strategies for encountering space into the social and spatial realms of the theoretical and the physical, and takes them to the divergent spaces of Los Angeles and Amsterdam to generate a critical cultural geography sensitive to social inclusion and exclusion.

Throughout, Soja's work has re-articulated and built upon Lefebvre's founding assertions of 'perceived', 'conceived', and 'lived' spaces. Consequently, the emphasis of his work once again tends towards the 'systemic' perspective. Although Soja too gestures towards local and subjective experiences in *Postmodern Geographies* and *Thirdspace*, the

capacity of the urban subject for personal agency is swiftly subsumed both within his theoretical discourse, and the identification of anonymous metropolitan forces.

Soja's 'socio-spatial dialectic' is of particular interest here because it provides an 'analytical focus' that demonstrates how social space is a reflection of the 'structure affecting the position of all agents of production (i.e. people) and shaping a simultaneously social and spatial division of labor' ('Dialectic' 224). In other words, space explicitly reflects the 'social relations of production' (ibid).

*Postmodern Geographies* explores the experience of space as a *simultaneous* element of social life, over the former experience of social life as essentially defined by modernism's *temporality* and linearity. Now, 'spatiality and its veiled instrumentality of power is the key to making practical, political, and theoretical sense of the contemporary era' (61). Since the contemporary era finds expression in its social spaces, the process of social transformation must entail a significant degree of spatial transformation (122). Soja insists that transformative spaces have remained beyond the view of critical consciousness and beyond the surveillance of the dominant order. Spaces that challenge the prevailing order are necessarily 'interstitial' spaces, and analysts are increasingly turning to these to construct theories of social change. Even so, these spaces remain indistinct to the analytical view, but they can become accessible in attempts to articulate a 'social dynamics of socialization' (122).

The final chapter of *Postmodern Geographies*, 'Taking Los Angeles Apart', extends Soja's project into a new epistemology of spatial thought. This essay takes as a case study the restructuring and redevelopment of down-town LA into a centralised and fortified 'citadel-panopticon' of powers of legislation, surveillance, incarceration, culture and commerce to explore how the contemporary metropolis is being shaped by

institutional forces (237).<sup>8</sup> Soja deploys a novel strategy for encountering and comprehending these social spaces. He inaugurates the concept of the 'Aleph' (borrowed from Jorge Luis Borges) as an imaginative tool developed from mental space, but able to encompass much more. The 'Aleph' forms a bundle of all spaces, making them simultaneously available. Soja relates this concept to LA because it is one of the truly global world cities in terms of finance capital and culture, and because of the place it holds in the imaginations of the global audience for Hollywood films - an experience of LA that often codifies the ideology of international capital within its products and is necessarily fragmentary and contingent (222).

The idea of the 'Aleph' is further extended in *Thirdspace* to illustrate the postmodern simultaneity of contemporary space, and again adds the dimension of the imaginary to the experience of space. Here Soja seeks to describe 'a strategic awareness of [a] collectively created spatiality and its social consequences' able to make 'both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary life-worlds at all scales' (1). What he achieves is a re-conceptualisation of the third of Lefebvre's triad: *representational spaces*, placed here in combination with Foucault's concept of heterotopias and heterotopologies. Soja describes the qualities of 'Thirdspace' as:

a knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centres and peripheries, the abstract and the concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and the lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in *spatial praxis*

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Davis deals substantively with this same subject from a similar standpoint in his book *City of Quartz* (1990).

which leads to a critical project for 'the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power' (31, original emphasis).

'Thirdspace' particularly captures and extends the spaces of the real and the imagined that occupy first and secondspace (5-6). Only in 'Thirdspace' is it possible to encounter simultaneously the 'real-and-imagined' and the 'material-and-metaphorical' (12). Simultaneity is a concept vital to 'Thirdspace', representing as it does the actions of the urban palimpsest where 'intertwined temporal, social, and spatial relations are being constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again' (18), as part of the metropolitan process. The relationship an individual has to these processes of reinscription, and the pace of the consequent reproduction of spatial formations will, to a large extent, dictate the coherence and stability of their metropolitan experience. In Auster's work, where this process of reinscription is often beyond the comprehension of metropolitan inhabitants, characters can rapidly become confused and disorientated.

Drawing on contemporary writings on feminism, race and post-colonialism, Soja examines the symbolic and imaginary 'spaces of radical openness' (33). These hold out the possibility of becoming spaces of difference and inclusivity – tolerant and accepting of 'race, class, gender, erotic preference, age, nation, religion, and colonial status' (107). Soja understands that the social differences arising through class, race, or other categories, are made concrete in (social) space (86). However, micro-sites are detectable within this social space, in which 'utopias' can be enacted in real spaces that are open and susceptible to mental and imaginative impulses (157, 159-163). These 'heterotopias' (to use Foucault's term) offer the potential to both challenge the dominant capitalist order, and offer sanctuary from its 'intensifications' and 'extensifications'. Auster's early work demonstrates how the writer can withdraw to the isolation of his room to escape from the

intensity of the metropolis. But as his career develops, he shows a greater acknowledgement of heterotopic spaces and places, such as those of love, friendship and community.

Other commentators have been similarly aware of the tensions between individual metropolitan experience and urban theory encapsulated in the simultaneous but antagonistic 'local' and 'systemic' perspectives outlined here, and have sought to describe the complex relationship between them. Raymond Williams, for one, has been influential in describing the way that experiences of local communities might be extended to the larger geographical scale of a political movement, and how the obligations found at the local level are difficult to translate to the complex and 'systemic' environment of the contemporary metropolis.

Williams describes how he has 'always been aware of the complicated relationships between class and place', and has 'been enormously conscious of place, and ... get[s] an extraordinary amount of emotional confirmation from the sense of place and its people' ('The Practice of Possibility' 1987 reprinted in *Resources of Hope* 318). His essay, 'The Importance of Community' (1977 reprinted in *Resources*), is particularly concerned with the ways in which community is formed in particular places through the obligations and solidarities experienced at the local level, and whether these are appropriate and applicable in the contemporary metropolis. Williams explores these issues by contemplating the extension of locally learned social practices onto the larger geographical scales of a wider social movement (in particular that of socialism) and to the metropolis itself. David Harvey describes Williams' objective as wanting to move from a place-centred abstraction, able to detect tangible solidarities in knowable communities, to an abstraction that reaches out across space (*Spaces of Hope* [2000] 33). This is also



similar to how Fredric Jameson attempts to describe the situational representation of the individual in the increasingly complex and unrepresentable totality of the postmodern metropolis.

Williams' sense of community is constructed from 'militant particularisms' ('The Forward March of Labour Halted' [1981, reprinted in *Resources* 249) and 'structures of feeling' (*Marxism and Literature* 132, *The Country and the City* 158).<sup>9</sup> 'Militant particularisms' are a distinct form of action relevant to the material social processes of place as experienced and felt. They are central to Williams' conception of collective social action and politics, and find their first expression in local and personal actions. 'Militant particularisms' are the location of the social 'surpluses' or 'residues' that are capable of disrupting the social reproduction favoured by the dominant or hegemonic group. At the local level, 'structures of feeling' form the sense of community and 'militant particularisms' are those local, working-class organisations and actions that advance and benefit the welfare of a community and go some way to creating 'structures of feeling'. However, because these acts are fugitive and clandestine they occupy the interstitial spaces beyond the vision and command of disciplinary society. 'Militant particularisms' provide a sense of solidarity for Williams which is place-bound. As such, they inform his conception of social action, in that they present a formalised and theoretical expression of how social and political action is expressed and made manifest.

'Militant particularisms' accumulate, and in time perceptible forces resistant to and transformative of the dominant social order emerge. These accumulations are termed 'structures of feeling' by Williams. He develops the concept of 'structures of feeling'

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller discussion of Williams' theoretical and fictional works that emphasise place and community, and a fuller exploration of the relationship of 'militant particularisms' and 'structures of feeling' to community, see also Harvey (*Justice, Nature* 23-45). See also Donald (147-52).

from his work on language. Building on the way language develops and changes over time, Williams deploys 'structures of feeling' as a cultural hypothesis to identify the conditions of possibility for the shifts in language across generations. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977) he describes the 'experience' and 'feeling' of the small and barely perceptible changes in language from one generation to another (132). The strategy is developed to encompass the experience of place in *The Country and the City* (1985), and to incorporate particular conditions that give rise to distinct modes of cultural expression. Thus, Williams examines Dickens' representations of mid-nineteenth century London, and notes a 'creation of consciousness - of recognitions and relationships' (156) that is also 'a conscious way of seeing and showing. The city is shown at once to be a social fact and a human landscape. What is dramatised in it is a very complex structure of feeling' (158). Incorporated into the sense of place here is a sense of language and literary form, the means by which Dickens 'translates' the material fact and social experience of London into an articulated cultural representation. As an accumulation of 'militant particularisms', 'structures of feeling' also harbour the agency to disrupt the exact reproduction of social relations. Finally, 'structures of feeling' relate very much to lived experience, and stand as a term 'for the undeniable experience of the present ... the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, subjective' and incorporate 'the forming and formative processes of society' (128). However, 'structures of feeling' are difficult to detect because they are insubstantial, and can be thought of as 'social experiences *in solution*' rather than precipitated and evident (133-4, original emphasis).

However, Williams also sees that as social relations expand so obligations and solidarities are less easy to identify. That is to say, community and social action can be 'felt' at the 'direct local mode', but become less tangible at levels of greater abstraction as geographical scale escalates. Thus, Williams sees the processes that drive the extension

to a metropolitan mode of living as 'distant and dehumanized: the apparent opposites of community' (116). Because social life is more spread out in the metropolis, Williams insists that less direct means of forming community have to be sought. '[W]e can retreat, for security, into a deep subjectivity' in the city, Williams suggests, 'or we can look around us for social pictures, social signs, social messages, to which, characteristically, we try to relate as individuals but so as to discover, in some form, community' (*Country and City* 295). Consequently, Williams explores the negative aspects of how the extension from community would take place under the present, capitalist mode of production. His point here is that any sense of direct metropolitan relationships must be a mediated substitute for community. What he ultimately recognises is the harsh and bitter reality of 'the phase of negation, the phase of knowing that you have to go beyond the simple community, the phase of the quick identification of enemies, the phase also of very conscious and prolonged political abstraction [which] has made relations between men into relations between things or relations between concepts' ('Community' 117).

Like Williams, Auster is seeking to identify aspects of society that go beyond a simple, single focus for the ways in which we live in metropolitan societies, and how these might achieve some sense of place-bound community in societies subject to the forces of globalisation. Ultimately, Williams insists that only an indirect sense of relationships, and hence false community, is available in the metropolis. However, as Auster shows, the metropolis can offer an urban sense of community, complete with 'militant particularisms' and founded on 'structures of feeling', in the affirmative form of neighbourhood.

Fredric Jameson, too, has sought to extend the spatial understandings established at an immediate and physically accessible scale to the arena of global capital. Consequently, in

his seminal essay 'Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984),<sup>10</sup> he explores what he sees as a recent disjunction between the phenomenological experience of the individual and the new postmodern space of the multinational economy. The result is the emergence of new modes of culture, urban space and spatial practice that, he contends, we are ill-equipped to comprehend and deal with. Consequently, he proposes a new political and aesthetic strategy of 'cognitive mapping' to explore postmodernism as an economic paradigm, analyse the spatial culture that emerges from the new paradigm, and present some implications for political art.

Like Michel de Certeau, Jameson considers the trajectories of bodies through space to address spatial practice. His spatial theory borrows from narrative analysis 'to see our physical trajectories ... as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigms which we as visitors are asked to fulfil and to complete with our own bodies and movements' (42). Jameson's essay explores the 'built space' of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles because it is heavily inscribed with the signature of its own processes of production, and so illustrates how postmodern space is a product of particular contemporary financial and aesthetic processes. The essay goes on to argue that in its cleave from modernistic impulses, contemporary society has abandoned its adherence to temporality and historicity, resulting in a predominantly spatial paradigm which is disconcerting and disorienting (16). Jameson's exploration of the labyrinthine spaces of the Bonaventure exemplifies how this new depthlessness of simultaneous postmodern spaces has taken the place of 'deeper' temporal (historicist) considerations.

The practice of 'cognitive mapping' is allied to de Certeau's readings of urban rhetorics, but further addresses how the fragmentary nature of contemporary society problematises the relationship between the urban reader and the metropolitan text. It is a

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<sup>10</sup> Reproduced and revised in the book of the same name (1991) from which all subsequent references come.

new mode of perception for urban realities that builds upon its sociological and philosophical origins (in Kevin Lynch and Althusser, respectively) to 'disalienate' the city by mapping the physical and the social together (51).<sup>11</sup> As a strategy, it seeks to articulate levels of geographical abstraction as they relate to social life so as to comprehend 'our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the ... spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself' (413). 'Cognitive mapping', for Jameson, is necessary if the individual is to locate themselves in their own environment, and then by analogy project emerging understandings onto a global system. Crucially for the present argument and the events that unfold in Auster's fiction, Jameson examines the conditions under which the relationship between the individual and their environment breaks down, and how the emergence of complex contemporary spatial formations can contribute to this disjunction. In Auster's work, this disjunction repeatedly manifests itself as a disruption of identity.

Jameson refers in the same essay to postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant' (6) that relates the wider culture, like architecture in general and the Bonaventure hotel in particular, to the particular mode of production of late capitalism (406). He identifies six constitutive features of the postmodern. Of most importance here are the 'postmodernist mutations in the lived experience of built space itself', and 'some reflections on the mission of political art in the bewildering new world space of late or multinational culture' (6). The other features are concerned with aesthetic, cultural and social manifestations of postmodernism: namely the depthlessness of society, the weakening of

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<sup>11</sup> Lynch at no point employed the term 'cognitive mapping'. He was concerned with the legibility of the urban environment, and employed the term 'environmental image' which he described as a 'generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual' (*The Image of the City* 4).

historicity, the 'waning of affect' in the arts (10),<sup>12</sup> and the technologically innovative imperative of production (6).

A new global phase of capital creates the conditions of possibility, says Jameson, for 'multinational space' (49). An immediate effect of the new economic order is the increasingly inescapable regime of commodification in the expanding global market, with its 'relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty spaces' (413-4). In these occupied spaces we find the basis of Jameson's concern for political art. If a society is increasingly constituted of capital saturated space, then opportunities for critical art will inevitably diminish.<sup>13</sup> Equally, and particularly relevant to Auster's work, there is a need to locate the self within the multitude of relationships that constitute the contemporary metropolis. Indeed, Jameson describes how the 'structural coordinates [of the new multinational space] are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people' (411).

Jameson figures the confusion of these novel and unfamiliar postmodern spaces under the term schizophrenia (after Lacan).<sup>14</sup> The schizophrenic condition, he insists, is rooted in the failure of existing 'perceptual equipment' to negotiate the new 'hyperspace' of the postmodern (38). Jameson's understanding and use of schizophrenia follows a linguistic model of words and referents. In the destabilising and over-stimulating environment of the postmodern the individual becomes confused and the relationships

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<sup>12</sup> Jameson illustrates his 'waning of effect' in postmodern culture by comparing the richness of social history available in Van Gogh's 'A Pair of Boots' with the depthlessness of Warhol's 'Diamond Dust Shoes' (10-11).

<sup>13</sup> Jameson notes that 'enclaves' of pre- or non-capitalist organisation previously tolerated are eliminated (effectively occupied by capital) in the new regime.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson is careful to insist that he is using schizophrenia as an 'aesthetic model', thus it is descriptive rather than clinically diagnostic (26).

between words and things breaks down, leaving a 'rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers' (26-27). This 'signifying chain' returns us to the unsettling attempts to 'read' spatial significations in the 'miniature city' of the Bonaventure (40). For Jameson, the spatial aesthetic of the building belongs to the same order as language, and the failure of the subject to interpret the symbolic codes embedded in those spaces results in a similar rubble of disconnected linguistic and symbolic disorientation. This failure of interpretation is just as likely to be experienced at the metropolitan scale, where the sign systems are more diverse, and the syntax more complex.

But what of 'cognitive mapping' as a strategy for bringing order to the disordered relationship between the individual and contemporary metropolitan space? First it is important to understand why the new strategy is necessary. For Jameson, the built environment's mutation into hyperspace has 'finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world', resulting in alienation and disorientation (44). However, Jameson describes a 'new mode of perception' (321-2) in 'cognitive mapping' which is able to rearticulate the relationship between the subject and the built environment. He describes 'cognitive mapping' as an aesthetic of the new cultural form, (51) implying that it is more than just a strategy for negotiating the physical city, but is also a means of negotiating metropolitan living. At a local level 'cognitive mapping' provides a compelling strategy and lexicon for the exploration of economically motivated space. At the same time, Jameson insists, 'cognitive mapping' is able to extend understandings gained at this local level to the level of multinational space.

Critics of Jameson's concept of postmodern space accuse him of oversimplifying the reach of the global economy and its resultant commodified space. Mike Davis in 'Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism' (84-87), for example, charges

Jameson with analysing a 'large vivarium ... for the upper middle classes, protected by astonishingly complex security systems' that has been savagely inserted into the city fabric. Jameson, Davis insists, takes no account of 'the burgeoning city of Third World immigrants that totally surrounds and lays siege to the sumptuary towers of the speculators' (ibid). In other words, Jameson's vision does not admit the ethnic and class 'other' that is the contemporary American metropolitan reality.

The critiques of Jameson's thesis have also pointed to the contradictory assertion that 'cognitive mapping' enables the individual to comprehend the unimaginable totality of global relations. Yet Jameson calls for the individual, intimate operation of 'cognitive mapping' to 'enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole' (51). He describes how subjective experience can be projected on to the geo-political by rethinking the strategy 'in terms of the ways in which we all necessarily *also* cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national and international class realities' (52-3, original emphasis). In the concluding chapter of *Postmodernism* Jameson acknowledges the conceptual weaknesses in his earlier argument for a global strategy that seeks to transcend mapping, finding itself constrained by the abstractions of that very practice (416). However, this does not diminish the impact of 'cognitive mapping' as a description of how individual subjects encounter and comprehend a personal urban space on a 'local' level, or the necessity of articulating differentiated spatial scales of experience.

The relationships between culture, economics and space have been further addressed by David Harvey. He has moved from a position which elevates global capital to the primary force shaping the metropolis and metropolitan life in the seminal *The Condition*



of *Postmodernity* (1990), to one that acknowledges the capacity of the individual to intervene in their own experiences of the contemporary metropolis in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996). In the later *Spaces of Hope* (2000) Harvey is able to relate 'local' experiences at the street level of the metropolis to the 'systemic' forces shaping it by inserting the body into the discourses of urban theory. This shift in his work thus enacts a movement from the 'systemic' perspective to one that attempts to simultaneously incorporate the 'systemic' with the 'local' and to comprehend the relationship between them.

*The Condition of Postmodernity* traces the spatial implications of the postmodern paradigm, locating its key determinants in a major transition in the global economy in 1973 from the rigidities of full-Fordism to 'flexible accumulation'. The new economic regime is typified by the advent of new financial markets, production techniques, labour relations, and modes of consumption, resulting in the globalisation of capital and what Harvey terms 'the spatial fix' (183). One of the major consequences of this shift, so he contends, is the experience of time and space as technological innovation reduces travelling and communication times, so giving the impression of a 'smaller world'. At the same time, space becomes endlessly reproducible as capital reshapes the metropolitan environment to encourage consumption – most notably in retail spaces. Harvey sees that in this new era space has become the subject of commodification and consumption, and he evidences this by describing instances of redevelopment, rehabilitation and gentrification that inscribe new social relations onto existing urban space (77-98). Auster's characters often find themselves disconnected from these spatial re-formations, and this contributes to their feelings of dislocation and disorientation. Unlike Harvey though, Auster is able to explore the individual and subjective experiences that are a consequence of the anonymous processes at work in the metropolis through his fiction.

Harvey's inclusion as a representative of the 'systemic' perspective at this point is founded on his deep-rooted understanding of the dominance of the institutions of capital in the production of metropolitan space and culture. While he acknowledges the capacity of resistant activity in the short-term and on a local level, he insists on the ultimate dominance of capital:

much of the color and ferment of social movements, of street life and culture, as well as of artistic and other cultural practices, derives precisely from the infinitely varied texture of oppositions to the materializations of money, space, and time under conditions of capitalist hegemony ... [B]ut the movements [resistant to capital's dominance] have to confront the question of value and its expression as well as the necessary organization of space and time appropriate to their own reproduction. In so doing they necessarily open themselves to the dissolving power of money as well as the shifting definitions of space and time arrived at through the dynamics of capital circulation. Capital, in short, continues to dominate, and it does so in part through superior command over space and time

(238)

For Harvey, the cityscape which results from capital's superior command over metropolitan space is an accumulation of uses dictated primarily by financial returns (rent or commercial income), or demand (driven by immaterial forces such as fashion) from a numerous and economically powerful social group (the middle-class). As a consequence, the contemporary city is orientated to the middle-class consumer, and generates a mundane and uniform aspect of shopping malls, gated communities and pseudo-historical

gentrification (77). He insists that 'in money economies in general, and in capitalist societies in particular, the intersecting command of money, time and space forms a substantial nexus of social power' (226). This locus of anonymous powers in the production and reproduction of metropolitan space is essential to the understanding of the 'systemic' urban perspective.

The shift from full-Fordism to flexible accumulation has seen an acceleration in consumption patterns, initiating 'the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms' (156). At the same time, multi-national spatial flexibility has meant the creation of global markets, achieved through new financial instruments and communication systems, rendering capital simultaneous across the world. Harvey's understanding of the transition from one regime to another displays a significant spatial dimension. Most notably he identifies the emergence of a different experience of space and time that he terms 'time-space compression'. This arises from the innovative technologies of the new paradigm, which are able to alter our perceptions of the world and how we represent it to ourselves as a society. Capitalism, Harvey tells us, has changed the meaning of space and time through technology, and 'forced perpetual re-evaluations in representations of the world in cultural life' (283).

Importantly, the social implications of spatial awareness (initiated by the 'spatial fix') also impact on the emergence of place within space. By this I mean that Harvey notes the globalisation of social practice but at the same time identifies the emergence of a new sense of locality in that very process. The logic is this: "if I'm in a global world, what is it about here and now which is so special to me?" Surprisingly, Harvey is able to locate the dynamic of localised differentials in the processes of the regime of flexible accumulation. He notes how the fragmentation of regional/national differentials into local

ones, along with capital's complete mobility, has left it free to exploit even the most minute of local differences, to which populaces can be co-opted to secure a foothold in the new order. As a consequence, even in this age of homogenous and reproducible metropolitan space, individual places manage to display distinctive aspects that distinguish them one from the other.

However, there remains a danger that by re-making spatial formations in the image of capital the result will be a 'recursive and serial monotony' (295). The serial monotony of commodity and commodified space is an interesting return to Harvey's sense of the postmodern, and the subjective experience of space. For what Harvey identifies in the production of contemporary space under the regime of flexible accumulation is the reproducible spaces and repeatable aesthetic of the simulacra; in malls, motels, hotels, airports, historical quarters, cultural quarters – the list of urban spaces and places privatised by commodification is seemingly endless. The difference between 'authentic' earlier spaces that have persisted, and the corporately manufactured historical pastiche which is inserted into the metropolitan fabric will provide an interesting distinction in later chapters.

David Harvey's later work has been greatly influenced by Raymond Williams, and has emphasised the experience of the individual in the fluxes and flows of power and money. His insertion of the physical 'body' into accounts of systemic social process has extended the debate beyond antagonistic binary categories such as the 'systemic' city or the 'local' city into one where there is a continuity of scales. Now the debate, thanks largely to Williams' influence, and the work of Harvey and Doreen Massey (below), is able to incorporate the experience of multiple geographical scales from 'the local' to 'the global'.

Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* is, accordingly, an attempt to describe how the personal and sensory experience of the inequalities of urban living relates to the abstract and impersonal realities of contemporary global businesses.<sup>15</sup> He seeks to 'formulate global ambitions' (45), while retaining the values learnt at the level of 'militant particularisms' and 'structures of feeling'. Here Harvey interrogates Williams' terms of community and explores their relevance to the construction of community in the material social conditions of the contemporary metropolis. Thus, he examines the capacity of local militancies to generate a sense of community, and form the basis for a movement able to operate at scales beyond the local. He calls this 'breaking out of the local' (347). Harvey takes as his case study the environmental justice movement and its 'intense politics of place' (371). Through the actions of the various interest groups that constitute the movement, Harvey seeks to describe a "'socially just" social order' (335), but ultimately acknowledges that social justice in the contemporary metropolis is only able to regulate and order 'material social practices within places for a time' (330).

In *Justice, Nature* Harvey identifies how 'liberatory and emancipatory possibilities' are to be found, like Williams' 'militant particularisms', in the interstitial spaces between capitalism's uneven spatial developments and intensifying contradictions (420). He also notes that the anti-capitalist and non-conformist struggles that reside in these interstices often remain particularist, or 'local', but are still able to act against global forces. The result is an incoherent struggle which is difficult to detect and formalise, taking place on a terrain offering abundant but uneven revolutionary possibilities (430-1).

*Spaces of Hope*, meanwhile, is an attempt to integrate 'body talk' with 'globalization talk' (15). Harvey describes globalization as a hegemonic concept for

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<sup>15</sup> See also Donald (157-61) on *Justice, Nature*.

understanding the political-economy of multi-national capitalism, and its goal of imposing a single order on multiple places (13).<sup>16</sup> At the same time he describes the body as an irreducible category for the grounding of theoretical enquiry (13). Consequently, the book examines how the body (the most micro discourse) is 'embedded' in the actions of international economic and social processes (the most macro discourses) and describes how global 'forces ... swirl around...and construct' the body (15-16). When the body is caught in the endlessly innovative spatial practices of capital, the outcome for individuals and communities is a constant battle with capital to retain the spatial formations they know and understand, while capital attempts to innovate and change them.

For Harvey, the pursuit of an urban environment capable of delivering a flexible system of universal rights is consistent with utopian discourses (157). The 'imaginary' of utopian representations, he says, influences urban design and living (158). However, utopianism can take either a spatial form, or that of urban process (173). The tradition of process holds the greatest potential for Harvey, as it incorporates dialectical thought, and gives rise to many possible utopias (after Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias' and what Harvey goes on to call a 'plurality of alternatives' [197]). The utopianism of social process is a 'dialectical utopianism', able to address contemporary urban life, but also to 'transcend' the urban forms of late capitalism - to address the 'local' and the 'beyond local' (199). Through utopian thought then, the power of the imaginary and the symbolic re-emerge to invest the metropolis with a mythical dimension - as it did in the thinking of Lefebvre and de Certeau, and Soja's concept of 'the Aleph' - suggesting interesting affinities between the work of cultural geographers and novelists, which following chapters explore. Harvey also notes that the dominant form of utopian writing is the

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Harvey notes that this is not a new process. He identifies the imperialist projects of most European powers from the fifteenth century onward as seeking the same objective (54).

novel (194). These terms will be particularly useful when exploring Auster's spaces of pure imagination in Chapter 7.

Harvey's observations on the novel are also of interest because of Williams' earlier assertion that community can be knowable through fiction (a community of characters becoming known to the reader) and Harvey's own sense of the role of the imaginary in the construction of communities.

Doreen Massey, in her article 'A Global Sense of Place' (1991, reprinted 1993) and in subsequent clarifications and reassertions, also uses community as a way of apprehending the relationship between the quotidian and local experience of contemporary metropolitan living with the global processes in which those experiences are embedded. In short, she considers the 'composite nature' of the local and the global in the contemporary metropolis ('Cities in the World' [1999] 102), or more succinctly, 'the outside as part of the inside' ('A Place Called Home' [1992, reprinted 1994] 5). Along with Williams, Jameson and Harvey, Massey describes the way in which the social relations experienced by individuals extend far beyond a bounded sense of place or locality, while at the same time exploring how a specific sense of place emerges in the face of capitalism's homogenising processes. To illustrate her point, Massey describes how a walk down a suburban London street can reveal the intersection of the global in the local such that it becomes impossible to think of that place 'without bringing into play half the world and...imperialist history' (238). The experience of this street provokes 'a really global sense of place' for her (ibid). This thinking requires a new 'sense of place', she writes, which should be 'progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward looking', and is 'adequate to' both 'this era of time-space-compression' ('Global Sense' 233) and 'the current global-local times' (236-7). 'Place' and 'community' are now rarely coterminous

for Massey (232) – community often existing without place in instances of networks such as friends, religion, and political solidarities (238).

The new round of time-space-compression recognised by Harvey provokes one of two possible responses – one reactionary, the other progressive – both of which Massey considers to be misguided. She describes a nostalgic and backward looking notion of place as ‘a response to [a] desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change’ which can lead to ‘romanticized escapism’ (236). However, the alternative progressive view also has limitations. For one, it is by no means clear to Massey why a new round of time-space-compression should initiate feelings of insecurity. For another, progressive senses of place tend to deny ‘people’s need for attachment’ to a specific locale (236).

The ‘geography of social relations is ... increasingly spread out over space’, for Massey. ‘Economic, political and cultural social relations ... [are] stretched out over the planet at every different level, from the household to the local area to the international’, she insists (239). Under these conditions it is again reasonable to expect ‘place’ to be subsumed by the homogenising processes of international capital. However, like Harvey, Massey describes how differentiated senses of place endure. But for her, this is in part a consequence of the social relations that develop beyond the compass of money relations (238). As well as the social relations shaped by the mode of production, and in a significant addition to the previous debate, Massey recognises gender as an example of the non-economic; where men make women feel ‘out of place’ in certain spaces (the street, particularly after dark, is a powerful example). For Massey then, ‘there is a lot more determining how we experience space than what “capital” gets up to’ (233). To illustrate this point, she describes a ‘power-geometry’ (234) which is able to plot metropolitan inhabitants differential positions in relation to the flows of power (Harvey



calls this 'situatedness' or 'positionality' [*Spaces* 236]). It is our relative 'power-geometry', Massey insists, that 'determines our degrees of mobility, that influences the sense we have of space and place' (233). The concept of 'power-geometry' is instructive in considering how much control individuals have over their immediate environment, and how they comprehend and respond to rapid shifts in social and spatial formations (235).

To understand the extended context in which these experiences are embedded, Massey calls for 'a geographical imagination which can look both within and beyond the city and hold the two things in tension' ('On Space and the City' 161). The reader is asked to imagine all the invisible communications, and 'all the social relations, all the links between people' as though viewed from a satellite orbiting the earth ('Global Sense' 239). We are then instructed to picture a particular location on the globe, such as her suburban London street, while at the same time 'holding all those networks of social relations and movements and communications in one's head' (239). Through this mobile perspective the observer is then able to imagine 'place' as a particular set of unique intersections. As a consequence, she insists that:

Local, regional and national are increasingly drawn into, and constituted by, a logic which exists at international level, the different geographical scales become less easy to separate - rather they constitute each other: the global the local, and vice versa.

('Home' 161)

The specificity that produces a 'sense of place', then, can be imagined as a locus of 'articulated movements in networks of social relations and understandings' ('Global Sense' 239). But the reach of these networks extends far beyond the geographical

experience of any individual caught in them. As a result, Massey is able to argue that 'those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than that we happen to define ... as the place itself, whether that be a street, a region or even a continent' (ibid). A contemporary sense of community, it then follows, is less a population in a defined place, than a connection between individuals whose social interconnections coincide across space and between places. Thus Massey is able to identify the material conditions which give rise to 'the uniqueness of place' in the face of homogenising international capital, resulting from 'the accumulated history of a place' and its location at the intersection of a particular set of wider social relations (240).

Having established the manner in which we can think progressively about a place-bound urban existence, Massey goes on to consider the development of a politically transformative sense of place. This is able to incorporate material social conditions, and differentiate places one from the other through the slight nuances in historical and geographical constructions. Massey's progressive 'sense of place' is seen here as a matrix of material and immaterial social conditions, of the physical fabric and the history of that location. Thus, Massey is able to describe 'a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local' (239). Clearly Massey encourages us to think 'a global sense of the local, a global sense of place', (240) which will be an invaluable strategy in the consideration of the forces at work in the construction of literary city-scapes and fictional communities in the chapters which follow.

Finally, exemplifying the emerging correspondences between theories of the metropolis and metropolitan fiction, Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* is embellished with an appendix which (unwittingly?) uncovers some of the contradictions between utopian discourse and

utopian practice (257-281). Harvey describes a possible vision of future social relations constructed from the ashes of our present society (the concrete realities of material social practice). Through the frame of a dream, he describes an anarcho-syndicalist world able to use technology and industry in the pursuit of an egalitarian society and universal human rights. The dream format indicates the problematics of representations of utopias that remain exclusively vested in the imaginary. It also demonstrates the way in which the empirical social sciences (such as cultural geography) are beginning to incorporate imaginary and mythical elements of metropolitan life into their rational discourses. Thus, there emerges a compelling dialogue between the discourses of art and science that is helping to shape a debate on contemporary forms of metropolitan living. As the following chapters demonstrate, Auster's writing begins with the debilitating effects of the 'systemic' metropolitan order. He moves on, as cultural geography has done, to represent a limited and 'localised' knowledge that provides a fragile and temporary stability. His work develops, again in a reflection of the work of cultural geographers, to encompass both the 'local' and 'global' in the form of a wider social world. This last position gives the individual a degree of flexibility which allows them to locate themselves in the metropolitan world (in a situated and relational way) while adapting to the transformations in physical and social formations. The subsequent chapters trace the correspondences between the perspectives of cultural geography, the phases of identity in Auster's work, and his 'ways of telling' – from poetry, through fiction, to film. As we shall see, Auster comes to argue persuasively for the power of fable, magic, imagination and storytelling as one way of locating the self and creating a coherent and stable sense of identity in the complex contemporary metropolis. Thus he proposes a compelling corrective to the rational theories of space, that is a 'poetics of place', a poetics of New York.

## CHAPTER 2

### LONELY ROOMS

Chapter One described the three ways in which the individual observes and experiences the metropolis. The adoption of any one of these 'perspectives' will promote a particular experience of the metropolis according to the critical distance between the observer and the processes shaping the metropolitan environment. As was argued, the adoption of the 'systemic' perspective presents metropolitan forces as large, complex and abstract. 'Systemic' forces, such as the money relations of contemporary capitalism described by Harvey, operate at a level that is unsympathetic to the human scale. As a consequence these processes are experienced as anonymous and abstract, and the individual feels increasingly disconnected from them. In contrast, the 'local' perspective adopts an analytical position much closer to the quotidian phenomena of metropolitan life. Consequently it is insensitive to the larger processes of the metropolitan environment, registering instead the small-scale and particular elements of metropolitan living that constitute the everyday lives of individuals, such as walking, talking and watching. De Certeau identifies the actions of 'ordinary practitioners' (walkers) as a locus of non-conformist and resistant metropolitan practices that operate below the threshold of the discursive and rational surveillance apparatus of the state and capital. These 'anti-disciplinary' activities contradict the prevailing order, and so have the potential to form a metropolitan 'counter-politics'. By adopting the 'global in the local' perspective that Doreen Massey describes, the individual attempts to hold in tension and balance the

experience of particular aspects of their everyday lives, while acknowledging and engaging with the larger processes that shape the metropolitan experience (such as the geo-politics of production). In doing so the individual becomes more aware of the relationship between 'systemic' forces and 'local' and personal experiences.

Chapters 3 and 4 below deal with *The New York Trilogy* and consider in detail the relationship between the metropolitan experiences of characters in Auster's New York and the abstract and alienating forces that the 'systemic' perspective brings into focus, such as the totality of urban space and the aggregation of social relationships that constitute the metropolitan social world. The present chapter examines Auster's thoughts on a large and ubiquitous social structure at work in all spheres of experience, but of particular importance to the poet: language. The chapter proposes and explores correspondences in Auster's poetry and early prose works between the experience of language and the experience of metropolitan living. In Auster's early works he represents an experience of both the metropolis and language for the individual in which there is a degree of autonomy that is nonetheless bounded by formal structures moderating and determining use and outcomes. That is to say, Auster's characters are shown to deploy a particularly 'structuralist' position in relation to language. In the case of New York these deterministic structures are graphically expressed in the form of the grid of streets and buildings. Language here too has a deterministic system of abstract rules and structures ('langue') that govern its use. However, within the structures of the metropolis individuals can fashion an infinite combination of footsteps or combine multiple sequences of experiences into *their* metropolitan experience. In language too there is an infinite combination of words, phrases, sentences and stories ('parole') that

constitute the individual's experience of language 'in use'. When Auster presents language and the metropolis in these terms they take on a more post-structuralist emphasis. In the terms of the conceptual framework of the present work, deterministic systems of rules and structures are apparent when viewed from a critical distance, and fall into the category of 'systemic' forces at work on both the individual and the environment. The inter-relating and infinitely inter-playing 'elements' that operate within those structures are visible close up, and hence fall into the category of 'local' experiences that influence the everyday lives of individuals. New York's street grid and the rules of language can therefore be viewed as 'systemic'; whereas the metropolitan wanderings of individuals and the play of words can be viewed as 'local' and personal. In his later works Auster demonstrates how the interactions of the 'local' aspects of the metropolis and language can be subject to the actions of chance, contingency and coincidence. When characters experience the metropolis and language in this way, they are more likely, in his fiction, to achieve a stable relationship with them. Consequently, many of Auster's characters' metropolitan adventures, disasters and redemptions are the result of chance happenings or happy coincidences, which nonetheless offer an important insight into the random nature of the metropolitan condition. Equally, the interplay of language in use (parole) can elicit, under certain conditions, insight and enlightenment. Later chapters explore what the consequences of a more secure relationship with language can be. In *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Auster acknowledges the importance of chance in a multitude of anecdotal fragments, although it is not until later novels (such as *The Music of Chance* [1990]) that chance and contingency become recognisable as an aesthetic principle in his work.

The relationship the individual forms with language is governed by the conditions under which she or he experiences it. Under certain extreme environmental and emotional conditions the individual comes exclusively to view language as a large, complex and remote system which manipulates them and to which they cannot effectively relate. As a result the individual suffers a breakdown of her or his language function, experiencing, at its most critical stage, the form of psychosis known as 'aphasia'.<sup>1</sup> Effectively, and for present purposes, aphasia is understood as causing a neurotic disjunction in the mind of the sufferer between the environment they experience and their ability to deploy language to describe it. In short, words and things no longer correspond. Fredric Jameson has described the linguistic confusion arising from such a psychosis as a 'rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers'. In Paul Auster's work characters suffer from aphasic episodes under conditions of severe isolation and loneliness, causing them to become disconnected from their physical and social worlds. As an aphasic disjunction between the word and the world develops, so characters struggle with many aspects of the contemporary metropolitan condition. Consequently, a coherent relationship with language emerges as an essential component in stabilising the lives of Auster's central characters. To them, New York presents a large, complex and unpredictable environment, and the conditions under which they experience it make it difficult to compose the world and language into any sort of unity. Chapters 3 and 4 below will examine the catastrophic consequences of such aphasic episodes.

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<sup>1</sup> In his influential study, *On Aphasia*, Sigmund Freud described the condition as brain damage causing a 'complete loss or severe reduction of articulate speech whereas ... the intellect remained unimpaired' and an 'inability to understand language, i.e., sensory aphasia, word deafness' (2-3).

As an urban poet, then, Auster is confronted with a thankless task – to represent the city through a medium that seems at times to be inadequate for its subject. To inaugurate a language sensitive to the complexities and contradictions of the metropolis has been a concern of poets since the emergence of the modern metropolis. Baudelaire, for example, dreamed of his ‘poetic prose’, flexible ‘enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and the sudden leaps of consciousness’ that for him typified ‘the experience of giant cities’ and ‘the intersecting of their myriad relations’. Baudelaire identifies nineteenth century European urban phenomena that are in conflict both with each other and with the structures of language. In the contemporary American metropolis, where these tensions are multiplied by the ‘intensifications’ and ‘extensifications’ of the urban process of the kind identified by Soja (Chapter 1), the correspondence of language with the physical metropolitan environment is yet more problematical. Poets have continued to respond to the contemporary metropolis by seeking out new vocabularies and lexicons that are adequate to the deepening complexities of their metropolitan moment. The ‘Objectivist’ poets, for example, sought a poetics of ‘clarity’, of ‘seeing and of saying’ that strongly influenced Auster (*The Art of Hunger* [1997] 36). That is to say, they attempted to apprehend the material world, and translate the image into words, and so give the world form through language where it can be re-represented. Amongst the ‘Objectivists’, Auster cites the New York poet Charles Reznikoff as a particular influence and, like him, explicitly pursues the object of a language appropriate to the ‘strange and transitory beauty of the urban landscape’ (40).

The image of the poet in the metropolis, from Poe and Baudelaire onwards, has been that of the isolated and lonely figure moving along the streets, at once a part of the



crowd and at the same time separate from it. Auster has inherited the concern of the poet in the city, and has contemplated it since his formative years in Jersey City and Newark, through his Columbia years in New York, to travels in Europe, and then his writing career living in Manhattan and Brooklyn. In Newark, where his father was a ghetto landlord, Auster helped to collect rents and do repairs, and characters impressed themselves upon his imagination (*Solitude* 56-9). Between high school and Columbia Auster visited Europe. In Paris he had 'extraordinary encounters' and worked on a (now lost) novel, the story of which he lived in parallel with his 'real' adventures in the capitals of Europe (*Hand to Mouth* 19). On this trip Auster visited Dublin to experience something of Joyce's *Ulysses* (19-20). Here, after drifting 'like a ghost among strangers' as he wandered the city, 'the streets were transformed into something wholly personal' such that they began to correspond to his interior sense of self, and so became a map of his 'inner terrain' (22). Because he was geographically disconnected from his own social world across the Atlantic, Dublin became analogous to his own loneliness. In 'the loneliness of those days', he says, 'I had looked into the darkness and seen myself for the first time' (23). The eighteen year old poet clearly finds a connection between his experience of Dublin (measured in the painful steps caused by an in-growing toe-nail), his interior self, and the world of literature, both in terms of Joyce's legacy and his own emerging work and talent. Paris too has had a profound effect on Auster, not least because he is fluent in French and scratched an early living from doing translations. Paris plays a central role in *The New York Trilogy*, and exemplifies a city of the old, European order. As well as the trip before Columbia, Auster also visited the city on the college exchange program in 1967 (29) and again from February 1971 until July 1974 (61, 68)

when he did translations of Sartre and Foucault, and even translated the constitution of the communist North Vietnamese government (61-86). On this third stay in Paris he edited and published a small journal of French poetry in translation called *Living Hand*.<sup>2</sup> This was sponsored by an unnamed wealthy benefactor, and ran for only a few issues. Despite Auster's tendency to record his life in detail in autobiographical accounts and references in his fiction, mysteriously this episode receives no coverage in the published works.

Taken together, Auster's urban experiences at home and in Europe, and his engagement with that experience as a poet and as a writer, combine to foreground a concern with language's capacity to capture and communicate the metropolitan experience. In the earlier work, the problematic relationship between the word and the metropolitan world is emphasised along with his concern with how the poet is to connect with the intersection of the myriad relations of the metropolis. What emerges most strongly is the image of the poet isolated in his lonely room. This image resonates with that of the poet in the crowd, and is part of a long literary tradition which Auster invokes to represent the artist's struggle. The poet struggles with language to describe his place within the social world, and as he feels progressively disconnected from the world the site of that struggle becomes his room.

If for the urban poet (such as Poe, Baudelaire, Reznikoff and Auster) the city is the object of study, then the room comes to represent a place to write it from. However, a contrast between the poetic method of these earlier poets and that adopted by Auster

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<sup>2</sup> References and materials in the Berg Collection. Materials include artwork for covers and proof copies of content.

emerges. Poe, Baudelaire and Reznikoff employ the methods of the *flâneur* – wandering the streets and recording the sights and sensations of the metropolis. Auster, through his autobiographical character A. in *Solitude*, describes how he employs the example of Hölderlin's earlier literary practice of confining himself to his room to write the metropolis. In doing so he does not engage with New York as a material present fact, but chooses instead to re-represent the city from the raw material of memory. By calling upon and adapting an earlier tradition Auster is expressing a contemporary response to the complexities of the metropolitan environment. A. is unable to experience and record his New York in the same way as the *flâneur*'s itinerant method because of the scale, complexity and intensity of the contemporary metropolis. Instead the city must be committed to memory and recorded through the mediating abstractions of language in poems such as 'Lapsarian', 'Scribe', 'Disappearances' and 'White Spaces', collected in *Ground Work* (1990). The experiences of other isolated poets also inform A.'s understanding of his own solitude as he attempts to contain a deepening sense of panic resulting from the reduction of his metropolitan world to his bare and lonely room. The isolation of the poet from the world that he seeks to represent is expressed in Auster's poetry as an equation between the singularity of an individual's life, and the world of the social pluralities (the unimaginable totality of social relationships, as Jameson would have it) in which it takes place. *The Invention of Solitude* explores the nature, quality and conditions of this solitude. This chapter will examine how Auster negotiates the complex relationship between language as a system of representation, and the metropolitan world as a subject for poetry.

## Poetry – ‘an art of loneliness’

Auster’s concern with language can be traced back to his earliest unpublished writings (in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library) and through the poetry that he produced in the 1970s. His interests here are twofold. Firstly he attempts to understand the ‘distance’ between the material world and the words that are meant to represent it. Secondly he is concerned with the ability of the poet to position himself between the monolithic structures of the material world and language in such a way that the words he uses to represent his experience are adequate to that experience. While still an undergraduate at Columbia in April 1967, Auster recorded some thoughts on the relationship between language and art ‘in haste’ (n.pag.).<sup>3</sup> These thoughts have the quality of a ‘manifesto’ which Auster describes as ‘the dis-jointed skeleton of something less than an argument’ (n.pag.). Amongst the statements that comprise the ‘argument’ are these:

### Part IV

#### Item 15

...not only is man’s perceptual capability limited – his language (the chief means of his expression) is also limited, that is, fails to represent the feelings, thoughts that wish to be expressed.

#### Item 16

Language is not experience. It is a means of organizing experience.

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<sup>3</sup> TS, Auster Papers, Berg Collection, dated April 1974.

## Part V

## Item 17

The fall of man was not the result of moral turpitude; rather [of] epistemological blindness – the fall of the world into the word, the fall of vision from the eye to the mouth.

About four inches.

(n.pag.)

Time and again Auster's poetry and fiction refer back to these concerns; the capacity of language to represent, language as a way of being in the world, and the failure of language symbolised as the fall of man. The concept of the image falling from the eye to the mouth as the word recurs explicitly in Auster's third novel, *Moon Palace* (1989).

Two issues are at stake for Auster in the relationship between the word and the world. Firstly, how the user of language (the poet, in this case) sees the world. Secondly, how closely language relates to the object being described. Three American writers who have particularly influenced Auster's work and who he made the subjects of critical essays are the 'Objectivists' Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, and George Oppen.<sup>4</sup> Their

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Zukofsky was also included in an original essay entitled 'The Poem as Object' (TS, Auster Papers, Berg Collection, undated, but no later than 1974). However it was published as three separate essays on each of the other central figures. Further references in the text are indicated as 'Object' with the TS page number. Reznikoff was discussed at length in 'The Decisive Moment', while Rakosi and Oppen were handled with more brevity in 'Resurrection' and 'Private I, Public Eye' respectively, and brought together in the collection of essays *The Art of Hunger*. References to these essays are given in the text with the page numbers from this edition. The name and the personnel of the group come from a 1931 'Objectivist' issue

concerns, according to Auster, included the 'clarity of vision and utterance', and the objectification of the poem so that it is properly formed and so is most readily able to represent the world ('The Poem as Object' 3).

In his notes for the Reznikoff section of 'The Poem as Object' Auster identifies four main themes running through Reznikoff's poetry. These are 'Seeing', 'The City', 'Language', and 'Stories' (n.pag.). Seeing refers to the eye, the city is the object, language is the inadequate medium of translation between the two, and stories are how the poet attempts to make sense of his metropolitan world, forming the narratives that weave through both his experience and his imagination. Auster proposes the poet, and particularly Reznikoff, as Adam (*Hunger* 35), the man charged by God with giving names to everything in the Garden of Eden. But the poet is at the same time 'the mute heir of the builders of Babel', which reduces him to a futile searcher for words appropriate to the world they are supposed to represent. The 'act of writing' then becomes 'a process by which one places oneself between things and the names of things, a way of standing watch in this interval of silence and allowing things to be seen – as if for the first time – and henceforth to be given their names' (35). 'Objectivist' poetry attempts to occupy this very space and locate the poet between the material world and the verbal world. The 'Objectivists' did so by approaching the poem as a way of seeing the material world and a means to precise expression, which Auster describes as 'a poetics of approach rather than method – a way of placing oneself in the world' ('Object' 3). Again

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of *Poetry* edited by Louis Zukofsky (*Hunger* 129). Auster names the 'Objectivists' as influential in an interview with Joseph Mallia (*Hunger* 275).

and again Auster returns to the idea of 'locating oneself' so that he (the writer) is able to see and write about the world at the same time.

Auster's concern with language's proximity to and distance from the world is foreshadowed by the 'Objectivists', but it is Rakosi who states his case most directly. In his essay on Rakosi, Auster describes his early poems as 'compact, incisive, vividly sensual in their grasp of physical things', and quotes this poem:

This is the raw data.

A mystery translates it

into feeling and perception;

then imagination;

finally the hard

inevitable quartz,

figure of will

and language.

*(Hunger 129)*

For Rakosi, as for Auster, experience of the material world is the raw data that language translates, by a 'mystery', into a way of communicating with the self and the wider social world. Also, when the poet stands between things and words he needs to be in possession of a vision of absolute clarity to convey the world's complexity. Because of the poet's need to see, Auster calls Reznikoff 'a poet of the eye' who is able to transcribe 'the visible into the brute, undeciphered code of being' (35). By seeing the object with

optimum clarity, the poet is able to bring language much closer to it and, as Rakosi suggests, invest descriptions with feeling, perception and imagination. In turn, Auster describes the way that George Oppen sees the world as originating in the 'perception of objects, in the primal act of seeing' (116). This mode of seeing, however, does not privilege the poet with any special knowledge of the world. Auster quotes from 'The Last Day' to demonstrate that Oppen, although closer to the material world, is still conscious of its mysteries:

Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen

And because it is irrevocable

It cannot be understood and I believe that fact is lethal

(116)

Language, ultimately, for the 'Objectivists' and for Auster, is a way of accessing an unformed world and an attempt to 'take possession of our surroundings' (35-6). The poem then becomes 'an effort to perceive, ... a moving *outward* ... less a mode of expressing the world than it is a way of being in the world' (37, original emphasis). For Auster, art – poetry, fiction, dance, music and painting – is a way that the individual may place themselves in relation to their environment: 'a way of being in the world'.

To this end Auster's poetry has particularly developed the themes of the relationship between the eye and the word along with the capacity of language to represent the world. In his poetic output he has sought, he says, 'a uni-vocal expression



... concerned with essences, with bedrock beliefs, and ... a purity and consistency of language' (304). In this way Auster's poetry encompasses in equal measure the concerns of this chapter (language, writing, a place to write from, the city as object), which his prose work then goes on to develop. Poems such as 'Lapsarian' chart the violence that language's failure to represent can inflict on the individual consciousness. 'Scribe' relates the poet's room to the rooms of the Tower of Babel and so connects to the theme of the lonely room as the site of the struggle with language, a theme returned to in the prose piece 'White Spaces'. 'Disappearances' takes Auster a step beyond the poet's room and considers, as Baudelaire had done, how the poet as an individual might respond to the multitudes of the metropolis.

'Lapsarian' grapples with the problematic idea that man both forms and is formed by language. Auster returns, like Reznikoff, to the natural world of Eden and Adam to trace man's relationship to the word. His conclusions are bleak:

I speak to you of speech

...

A man

walks out from the voice

that became me.

He has vanished.

He has eaten

the ripening word

that killed you and  
killed you.

He has found himself,  
standing in the place  
where the eye most terribly holds  
its ground.

*(Ground Work 53-4)*

Auster's belief in the potentially 'lethal' violence of the word is apparent here, as it is for Oppen. The Fall of Adam and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden are related to language through the eating of 'the ripening word'. Auster also suggests that the 'me' of self derives from the collective 'voice' and words of others, and that when those words fail they have the power to kill. The social nature of language, its reliance on shared conventions between speakers, and how this connection can be problematised by a breakdown of understanding, is apparent in the poem 'Scribe':

The name  
never left his lips: he talked himself  
into another body: he found his room again  
in Babel

It was written.

A flower

falls from his eye

and blooms in a stranger's mouth.

(33)

In this first stanza, Auster appeals to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, to explore ideas of language. The story engages with themes of language, rooms and the city through man's attempt to build a tower to challenge God's power. God strikes down the tower and condemns the peoples of the world to speak in different tongues as a punishment. From the stones of the tower man builds the first city: Babylon. The themes of the Tower, the Fall of Man, and the failure of language introduced here, are to recur, to one degree or another, in 'White Spaces', *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan* (1992).

In the second stanza of 'Scribe', Auster presents an image that will also inhabit much of his work – the distance between the eye and the word, between seeing and saying which, as he says in the above early 'manifesto', is about four inches. However, for the poet to be able to present the material world – here symbolised by a flower – to the reader, it must be 'speak-able' from another's mouth. Auster extends the concept of translation between the eye and the mouth to the way in which language is a collective habit of practice and convention in which the word is a socially negotiable quantity. Without the social habit of language, the object becomes unavailable beyond the original material and tactile experience. That is to say, the flower is available as a material

experience to the poet, but can only be available as an image to the reader through the shared experience of language. When the object of the poetic representation moves into the complex realms of the metropolis, then the capacity of language to adequately represent the 'objective' world becomes a central concern.

The poem 'Disappearances' takes up the theme of the city as the object of the poetic gaze and the subject of the poem. It explores at length how the solitary poet experiences the multitudinous city, how the eye attempts to decipher the city, and how language attempts to engage with the complexities of the metropolitan environment. In the first part, Auster deals with how the poet's eye can relate to the city, and how both language and the city are an accumulation of elements – one of words, the other of people, symbolised here as stones in a wall:

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: a city

of the undeciphered

event,

and therefore a language of stones,

since he knows that for the whole of life

a stone

will give way to another stone

to make a wall

and that all these stones

will form the monstrous sum

of particulars.

(61)

In the sixth part Auster deals with the how 'the blinding / enumeration of stones' (66) and words obscure the city from the eye of the viewer. The seventh and final part of the poem expresses the solitude of existence in the crowded multiplicity of the metropolis as '[p]lural death / born / in the jaws of the singular' (67). The city, like language, inflicts damage on the individual's sense of self. 'For the city is monstrous, / and its mouth suffers / no issue / that does not devour the word / of oneself' (67). These lines are vital to the understanding of Auster's attitude to the city in these poems. The city and language are intrinsically linked here, and so is the sense of the self, given form through language. However, the city devours that self by having a destructive effect on language. Also, the double sense of 'issue' prompts the reader to think both of language as a medium, and as a way of problematising understanding. In the sense of topic or matter at

hand, these lines suggest that the issue of forming a sense of identity through language is devoured by the mouth of the monstrous city. When 'issue' is considered in the sense of originating (as in the issue or broadcast of seed), then these lines also turn the reader towards Genesis and the story of the Tower of Babel and the use of its stones to build the first city. 'Disappearances' again and again represents the city and language as indecipherable and overwhelming domains. There is nothing here of the playful interaction of words or lives that constitute language or the metropolis when they are apprehended from a more 'local' or personal perspective.

Charles Reznikoff's poetry has a similarly strong urban dimension. Like Auster he lived in New York and walked its streets every day. The problem for the urban poet, from Baudelaire onwards, is the simultaneous ability to write the city and be a part of it. Accordingly, Auster describes the poetic paradox of having to posit 'the reality of this world, and then to cross into it, even as you find yourself barred at all its gates' (42). The result is the 'poet as solitary wanderer, as man in the crowd, as faceless scribe', and so poetry becomes 'an art of loneliness' (42).

Finally, the poem 'In Memory of Myself' asks if 'the beating / drum of words' should really be able to represent the material world '[a]s if this were the world' (97). If words did have this harmonious relationship with the world then the poet's task of representing the world would be less problematic. Because such a relationship becomes a more distant proposition with the increasing complexity and intensity of the metropolitan environment Auster's treatment in poetry of the themes of language, representation and the metropolis has a predominantly nihilistic tone. The poet is condemned to search for words that are inadequate to the task of representing his feelings and emotions, and the

multitudinous metropolis condemns him to the 'monstrous sum / of particulars' where 'these many lives / shaped into the stones / of a wall' are piled on top of each other (67). These concerns in Auster's poetry prompt Norman Finkelstein to describe how 'Auster seeks to renew the balance between the writing subject and the world outside' and to name him as heir to the 'Objectivists' (47)

### Prose – journeys across white spaces

At the time he was writing the later poems in the late 1970s Auster was experimenting with prose pieces. He describes the movement from short, austere and uni-vocal poems 'that resembled a clenched fist' (*Hunger* 301), to an opening out of form and tone. He wrote four one-act plays, one of which was performed (301). But 'the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose' (302) was 'White Spaces'.<sup>5</sup> This prose piece was inspired by a dance rehearsal (302) and reflects on poetic composition in terms of the relationships between movement and writing, thinking and language, and again on the nature of metropolitan life. Auster's original intention in writing 'White Spaces' was 'to speak of arms and legs, of jumping up and down, of bodies tumbling and spinning' which would lead on to 'enormous journeys through space, of cities, of deserts, of mountain

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<sup>5</sup> 'White Spaces' is suggestive of the metaphorical journeys taken by the artist through language, traversing empty spaces that are given meaning and shape through the artist's imagination and words in the same way that a dancer 'actualises' the performance space with movement. This supposition is supported by the names that earlier revisions and published versions carried. One such title was 'Happiness – Or a Journey through Space' which was described in the sub-title as a 'text for reading aloud while someone dances' (TS, Berg Collection, dated 'turn of the year 1978 – 1979, n.pag.).

ranges' (*Ground Work* 86). But the words impose themselves and Auster is forced instead into a small and empty space – his room. He describes how the process of composition takes place, thus:

I remain in the room in which I am writing this. I put one foot in front of the other. I put one word in front of the other, and for each step I take I add another word, as if for each word to be spoken there were another space to be crossed, a distance to be filled by my body as it moves through space, even if I get nowhere, even if I end up in the same place I started. It is a journey through space, as if into many cities and out of them, as if across deserts, as if to the edge of some imaginary ocean, where each thought drowns in the relentless waves of the real.

(85)

Once again, the poet finds himself in the lonely room, like the one in the Tower of Babel, where the simultaneous impulse to place one thought after the other, and one word after another, and one foot in front of the other finds its expression. Although the poet remains in his room he can, in a sense, go anywhere he wants, and so here he describes his connection to the world. This freedom prompts Auster to predict some wonderful insight resulting from his wandering reverie: the 'light, streaming through the windows, never casts the same shadow twice, and at any given moment I feel myself on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth' (85). However, there is a pessimistic undercurrent to the thought of what terrible truth might be discovered outside the room.



The fear that Auster expresses is that in understanding how he exists in the world, he may discover a whole world of horror connected to it. 'To begin with this landscape ...', he writes, '[o]r even to note the things that are most near, as if in the tiny world before my eyes I might find an image of the life that exists beyond me, as if in a way I do not fully understand each thing in my life were connected to every other thing, which in turn connected me to the world at large, the endless world that looms up in the mind, as lethal and unknowable as desire itself' (83).

The poet tries thus to locate himself in an unknowable world. Like Reznikoff and Oppen before him, Auster is searching for a location and like Oppen, in particular, he fears that the mysteries of the world are impenetrable and potentially lethal. The poet's room, then, represents a place from which to view the metropolis while sheltering from the overwhelming 'systemic' forces and processes which constitute and shape it. Language here represents a way of writing about the metropolis, but for Auster it is a medium fraught with problems, not least of relating the arbitrary word to its material object. He relates the impossible task of language and writing when he says: 'I dedicate these words to the impossibility of finding a word equal to the silence inside me' (86). What emerges in 'White Spaces' is a representation of an environment unsympathetic to the scale of individual endeavour through a medium that is inadequate to the description of human responses. While Auster contemplates 'the monstrous sum / of particulars' that constitute the metropolis, Oppen confronted a similar 'shipwreck of the singular' and sought 'the meaning / of being numerous', which Auster identifies as emerging 'more from a feeling of isolation and loss than from a naïve hope in the future' (*Hunger* 117-8). For Auster, then, his solitude as a poet has been a paradoxical attempt to enter the world

of men (118) while he remains in his room. In his subsequent prose fiction, Auster has remained committed to the 'Objectivist' poetic principles in the presentation of the world as he apprehends it. Language can represent the world, but the writer must be bound to the idea of the eye dominating the word, and be wary of the four inches between the vision and the voice. However, to attempt to express something of the complexity of this world by overcoming this obstacle is the worthy pursuit of the writer. 'To invoke things that have never happened is noble', he says of the storyteller's art, 'but how much sweeter to remain in the realm of the naked eye' (87).

*The Invention of Solitude* takes up the themes of the solitude of living and the solitude of writing and explores them in the first published prose book of Auster's career. In a 1989 interview with Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory, Auster said that for him solitude is not just about isolation, but is a part of the human condition (*Hunger* 313). 'Our sense of self', he told them, 'is formed by ... the endless monologue, the life-long conversation we have with ourselves. And this takes place in absolute solitude' (314). *The Invention of Solitude* recounts the sudden and premature death of Auster's father, Sam, at the age of sixty-seven. But Auster goes beyond the mere description of bereavement to explore the difficulty of writing *about* the loss of his father. In doing so he again probes the problematic relationship between the writer and writing, and the writer and language. The connection between these themes is the solitary nature of Sam Auster's life, and the solitary nature of the writer's craft.

The first part of the book, 'Portrait of an Invisible Man', deals with Auster's difficulty of knowing the man who was his father, and writing about him. The second

part, 'The Book of Memory', explores the nature of the writer's task in writing about a world that he does not always understand, and having to do so from a vantage point that seems external to the world that is being written. For Auster, this disconnection from the world is the paradox that alienates the writer from his environment and condemns him to remain in his room. Baudelaire and Reznikoff both experienced this 'poetic paradox' – Baudelaire standing outside the crowd to record it even as he attempted to participate in and experience it, and Reznikoff endeavouring to absent himself from his own poetic record of the New York cityscape. Auster takes up his own position in his room, and attempts to reconcile the contradictions of observation, experience and transcription from there. Thus Auster connects memory, language, and the solitude of the lonely room through a thorough exploration of his father's relationship to the world, his relationship with his father, and the capacity of his literary art to represent these complex matters.

For Auster, the problem of writing about his recently dead father is closely allied to the problems he grapples with in his poetry. The poetry was about locating the self in relation to the material world, and finding that place (the room) from which to write about it. 'Portrait of an Invisible Man' attempts to locate the writer in relation to the subject of his father, and his father in relation to the world. However, Sam Auster's relationship with the world is problematised by his refusal to be known to the world. Consequently, Auster has trouble locating his father because:

[w]hat people saw when he appeared before them ... was not really him,  
but a person he invented, an artificial creature he could manipulate ... .

He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain.

(16)

Sam Auster was '[s]olitary in the sense of retreat. In the sense of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else' (16-17). For Auster, because his father is all surface (15), his subject matter becomes elusive, constantly slipping from his grasp and eluding description. However, Auster begins to piece together parts of his father's life from the fragments left behind. The most compelling of these is a family photograph taken when his father was a baby, from which his grandfather has been cut-out and the picture clumsily recreated. Auster's grandfather has been expunged from the family record physically and from the legacy of memory, through silence. What this evasion hides is the murder of Auster's grandfather by his wife in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1919 (33-48). The result of the grandfather's erasure from the record and from memory is that he has been 'exiled to another dimension' (34).

Sam Auster was a man with many hidden places, who hid behind a 'curtain' of solitude that created layers of artifice and mystery. Auster describes the process of writing about such a complex man in this way:

Again and again I have watched my thoughts trail off from the thing in front of me. No sooner have I thought one thing than it evokes another thing, and then another thing, until there is an accumulation of details so dense that I feel I am going to suffocate. Never before have I been so

aware of the rift between thinking and writing. ... I have begun to feel that the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important, and when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it.

(32)

The capacity of the writer to represent other people, thoughts, feelings and emotions through language is problematised for Auster by the scale of the task he has set himself. As in 'White Spaces', some terrible truth that is 'incompatible with language' is lurking between the world and the word.

'The Book of Memory' is predominantly concerned with how to write and the conditions for writing. For Auster, writing begins with memory and is a solitary pursuit. He explores his own solitude, the reasons for it and how this affects his writing. This section of the book is narrated in the third person, with the central character named only as A. 'He decides to refer to himself as A' Auster tells us early on (75). When asked for the reason behind this by Joseph Mallia in 1987, Auster explained that *The Invention of Solitude* is not merely autobiographical, but is also 'a meditation about certain questions' in which he uses himself as the central character (*Hunger* 276). But, to write about himself he had to treat himself as someone else (277).

A.'s solitary condition is brought about by the break up of his marriage and estrangement from his wife and young son, Daniel (*Solitude* 101). The result for A. is disconnection from the familiar family and social relationships. On leaving the family home in Dutchess County he moves into a room in an old office building on Varrick Street in Manhattan. Here he contemplates other writerly exiles in other lonely rooms. A. thinks about Hölderlin who shuts himself away in a room and goes mad (98-9), and Van Gogh, whose painting of his room is described as 'the substance of solitude' (143). But most profoundly he describes visiting the room in Amsterdam in which Anne Frank wrote her diary. This is the place that Auster feels that he first conceived of the 'Book of Memory', because here it is possible to 'imagine a solitude so crushing, so inconsolable, that one stops breathing for hundreds of years' (82-3).

Auster describes A.'s room in Varrick Street on Christmas Eve, 1979. It is a room formerly occupied by an electrician whose name is still stencilled on the frosted glass of the door, and the room depressingly carries the remnants of its former industrial purpose. Auster describes the bleakness of A.'s room in this way;

He cannot call it home, but for the past nine months it is all he has had. A few dozen books, a mattress on the floor, a table, three chairs, a hot plate, and corroded cold water sink. The toilet is down the hall, but he uses it only to shit. Pissing he does in the sink. For the past three days the elevator has been out of service, and since this is the top floor, it has made him reluctant to go out. It is not so much that he dreads climbing the ten flights of stairs when he gets back, but that he finds it disheartening to

exhaust himself so thoroughly only to return to such bleakness. By staying in this room for long stretches at a time, he can usually manage to fill it with his thoughts, and this in turn seems to dispel the dreariness, or at least makes him unaware of it. Each time he goes out, he takes his thoughts with him, and during his absence the room gradually empties of his efforts to inhabit it. When he returns, he has to begin the process all over again, and that takes work, real spiritual work. ... In the interim, in the void between the moment he opens the door and the moment he begins to reconquer the emptiness, his mind flails in a wordless panic. It is as if he were being forced to watch his own disappearance, as if, by crossing the threshold of this room, he were entering another dimension, taking up residence inside a black hole.

(76-7)

The degree of A.'s social alienation is summed up by his exile, not just to the top of a disused office building, but like his grandfather's memory, to another dimension. The result of such alienation is the need to conquer space and overcome the 'wordless panic' that inhabits emptiness.

Hölderlin, Van Gogh, Anne Frank and A. all struggle with the dangers that lurk inside their rooms (98). Dominant amongst these dangers is the recall of past events, and a descent into despair. A. remembers his family and his life before he lived on Varrick Street. Auster describes how thinkers such as Cicero have related memory to a room, and how it can be explored, as if it was space. 'Memory as a place, as a building, as a

sequence of columns, cornices, porticoes. The body inside the mind, as if we were moving around in there, going from one place to the next, and the sound of our footsteps as we walk, moving from one place to the next' (82). Memory is 'the place in which things happen for the second time' (83), and when those memories are written down, becoming a record through language, they can be repeated infinitely. If they are painful memories then they can inflict violence upon the consciousness of the recorder and the reader. A. experiences such violence when he studies the photograph that expels his grandfather from the family history (34). For Hölderlin the result of constant recall through memory is delusion, mental breakdown and a thirty six-year exile in his room precipitated by the death of his wife (98-9).

The relationship between writing and memory is crucial in 'The Book of Memory', as is the relationship of the writer to language. In this 'The Book of Memory' emerges from Auster's poetic concerns, and, in part, from Reznikoff's influence. Auster says of Reznikoff's view of the world and the poetry that results from it: as 'soon as there is more than one thing, there is memory, and because of memory there is language' (390). For A. 'the act of writing' poetry is 'an act of memory' (142) that makes the recall of that which is memorialised possible – in this case the paintings of Van Gogh in Amsterdam (and so the chain of associations grows from Van Gogh's room, to Anne Frank, and to Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam). As memory is an important way of relating to the world, language becomes central to its expression, and so the writer seeks a stable relationship with the word. To explain the importance of language in relating to the world Auster describes the different ways that adults (possessors of the word) and children (preliterate possessors of the image) access memory. For adults '[w]ritten



language absolves one of the need to remember much of the world, for the memories are stored in the words', while for the child it is the image that is wed to the place (165).

It is clear then that the capacity of the individual to remember will influence the capacity of language to represent. Throughout Auster's work, and here for A., language is always a random collection of symbols with an arbitrary relationship to the world it is meant to represent. For language to carry meaning, a degree of stability must be achieved in the relationship between the individual, his environment and language. Socially shared meanings are only possible if individuals relate to their environment in similar ways, and mediate it with the same words.

Two aspects of this thinking on language illuminate the way that language works for Auster at this early stage of his writing career. Firstly, he identifies the relational nature of language, with each word deriving meaning more from its relationship to other words than to the object to which it corresponds, such that 'each word is defined by other words, which means that to enter any part of language is to enter the whole of it' (160). Secondly, and at the very centre of Auster's understanding of language and art, '[l]anguage is not truth. It is the way we exist in the world' (161). Where the individual has a problematic relationship to the world, such as in the case of Hölderlin and A., then they have a problematic relationship with language. And, of course, the reverse holds true as well. A. rapidly becomes alienated from society. He is unbalanced in his room by the lack of comfort, the loneliness, and the disconnection from the things that give his life meaning – like his family. The room holds 'only the signs of his own disquiet, and in order to find some measure of peace in these surroundings he must dig more and more deeply into himself' until he runs the risk of using himself up (78-9). In the moments of

this disquiet the dangers of the room emerge in the contemplation of the 'space between utterance and act' until 'a chasm begins to open and for one to contemplate such emptiness for any length of time is to grow dizzy, to feel oneself falling into the abyss' (127). The implications of a breakdown of this magnitude for the writer, A., are clear from the opening passage of 'The Book of Memory':

He finds a fresh sheet of paper and lays it out on the table before him. He writes until he has covered the entire page with words. Later, when he reads over what he has written, he has trouble deciphering the words. Those he does manage to understand do not seem to say what he thought he was saying.

(75)

A.'s aphasic episode here is figured as a slippage between his use of a word and what he meant it to mean. The result is a fall (like Adam's) into a dizzying chasm of the same order A. has experienced in the 'wordless panic' on entering his empty and lonely room.

Elsewhere in 'The Book of Memory' Auster relates A.'s struggle with the word on the page as he is 'hunched over a small rectangle of wood, concentrating on an even smaller rectangle of paper' to his walks through foreign cities (98). The relationship between the two becomes clearer in the following passage, and in particular in the way Auster relates steps to thoughts to words in 'White Spaces':

Sometimes it feels as though we are wandering through a city without purpose. ... Sometimes it seems as though we are not going anywhere as we walk through the city, that we are only looking for a way to pass the time, and that it is only our fatigue that tells us where and when we should stop. But just as one step will inevitably lead to the next step, so it is that one thought inevitably follows from the previous thought, and in the event that a thought should engender more than a single thought ... it will be necessary not only to follow the first thought to its conclusion, but also to backtrack to the original position of that thought in order to follow the second thought to its conclusion, and then the third thought, and so on in this way, if we were to try to make an image of this process in our minds, a network of paths begins to be drawn, ... as in the image of a map (of city streets, for example, preferably a large city ... ), so that what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, 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, and even if we do not leave our room, it has been a journey, and we might safely say that we have been somewhere, even if we don't know where it is.

(121-2)

Here then is an expression of how the chance intersection of certain 'locally' experienced elements combine to offer some degree of meaning from metropolitan explorations. Under certain conditions these chains of steps and thoughts can cohere into a meaningful

and enlightening pattern. Later chapters explore episodes of lesser or greater success that Auster's characters have in deciphering the metropolis under certain environmental and emotional conditions. In the above passage Auster draws together the themes of rooms, the metropolis, memory, language and writing into a single account that reveals not only his process of artistic production, but also the way that he, in the room, in the city, can connect to his wider environment. The metropolis is presented as a space of limitless combinations and series of footsteps. Here footsteps are related to thoughts; in 'White Spaces' they relate to words, and in Dublin they related to the trace of a youthful and tumultuous 'inner terrain'. So each sequence of steps forms sentences, and then a 'network' of thoughts. Thus the urban-wanderer-writer begins to trace out a map of ideas generated in metropolitan space and constrained by the limits and patterns of that space (the street grid, for example). It is these patterns that emerge in part as the urban literary text and gives the text its particularly metropolitan qualities. However, the limitations of this position become apparent, as we shall see (Chapter 3, below), with the onset of instability in any part of the network of relationships between these elements.

On the face of it there appears to be a tension between two of the central positions in the texts explored in this chapter. On the one hand Auster is proposing that language is a way of forming a relationship with the metropolitan world. The individual – here the poet, but elsewhere in Auster's work, writers and artists of many kinds – attempts to name the objects around him, and so bring the word and the world into a closer relationship. By doing so the individual explores her or his relationship to the environment, and so begins the process of 'placing oneself in the world'. Auster

describes the way that the 'Objectivist' poet Charles Reznikoff sought to do this by 'standing at the interval of silence' between the metropolis and the words of a metropolitan language in his 'spare city lyrics', which by their linguistic proximity to their subject become 'transcriptions of immediate sensual data' (*Hunger* 45). On the other hand Auster seems to be proposing that the artist's place is in solitude, isolated from the world in his room like Hölderlin, Van Gogh or Anne Frank. Hölderlin and Van Gogh went mad, and Frank's isolation weighs so heavily on the consciousness of the reader that her solitude becomes suffocating. If, like A., the poet were to leave his room, he invites the possibility of a 'wordless panic' that has the horrors and dimensions of a black hole. To fall into this abyss would be catastrophic for the poet, as it would disconnect him from both his medium and his environment at once.

Auster begins to renegotiate the central terms of this dilemma by exploring the complex relationship between memory, language and writing in his poetry and in *The Invention of Solitude*. He reconsiders these practical and aesthetic phenomena under the condition of solitude. Paradoxically he finds that solitude promotes connections between the writer and the world. Auster makes the extension from the isolation of the room to the connection of the 'everything else of the world' through the writing process, and its comparison with the freedom of urban wandering. As emerged in the passage above, the steps of a wander through a city are comparable to the chain of thoughts that constitute a story, such that the process of writing is experienced as a journey. Auster told Mark Irwin that his writing practice is like the immense wanderings of an explorer. Writing is like a 'journey into the unknown, and yet the whole time I'm just sitting there in my room. The door is locked, I never budge, and yet that confinement offers me absolute

freedom – to be whoever I want to be, to go wherever my thoughts take me' (*Hunger* 328). Because of the freedom that writing offers to Auster, solitude is not a negative condition for him, but a necessary part of being human (313).

Auster describes a connection between the individual and the world that begins with memory. The 'moment we step into the space of memory,' he says in *Solitude*, 'we walk into the world' (166). The steps between memory and the world, though, navigate first through language and writing. 'In the darkness of solitude ... the work of memory begins', Auster insists (*Solitude* 164). For in solitude the writer can reflect on the impressions of experience, and conjure images by which to solidify those impressions. It is through language that the work of memory is translated and transcribed; through the same mysterious process (echoing Rakosi, above) that translates the flower in one man's eye to a bloom in the mouth of another in Auster's poem 'Scribe', deciphering the word of language from the image of memory. Language, for Auster, is a way of being in the world because by speaking the language of men the poet takes his 'stand among other men' (*Hunger* 118-9). As such, language is the negotiation between the singular self and plural multitudes of the metropolis. Language becomes an essential part of the equation that relates the individual who in Oppen's words is 'bewildered / By the shipwreck / Of the singular' to, as Auster writes, 'the blinding / enumeration of stones' that constitutes the metropolitan populace.

Finally in Auster's thinking, language emerges as a way of ordering, classifying and harmonising memory. 'As soon as there is more than one thing,' he insists, 'there is memory, and because of memory there is language' (*Hunger* 39). For Auster, the act of writing is an act of memorialisation, because 'the act of writing' is 'an act of memory'.

While Auster proposes this in respect of poems written about the paintings of Van Gogh, it is the act of 'writing' his father that both memorialises him and demonstrates the inadequacies of language.

The following long meditation on the nature of writing explains how the writer draws on memory and language to 'write' the world, and connect with it:

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, as he sat alone in his room on Varrick 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, which is to say: history – which one both participates in and is a witness to, is a part of and is apart from. Everything is present in [A.'s] 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. If there is any reason for him to be in this room now, it is because there is something inside him hungering to see it all at once, to savor the chaos of it in all its raw and urgent simultaneity. And yet, the telling of it is necessarily slow, a delicate business of trying to remember what has already been remembered. The pen will never be able to move

fast enough to write down every word discovered in the space of memory. Some things have been lost forever, other things will perhaps be remembered again, and still other things have been lost and found and lost again. There is no way to be sure of any of this.

*(Solitude 139)*

Elsewhere, Auster has encapsulated this experience as; 'I felt as though I were looking down to the bottom of myself, and what I found there was more than just myself – I found the world' (*Hunger* 315-6). In the moment of his most extreme solitude A. realises that by attempting to write the world he also moves out into it and discovers that he is more than just himself; in the act of making the record and speaking of his solitude he is also making a connection to others, and by connecting he is no longer alone. Memory contributes to A. finding the world in himself by demonstrating how he is immersed in the histories of others, as well as the recollections of his own life. For A. the room represents a place where he can see the whole world in a chaotic and confusing simultaneity, yet it is also a place where the inadequate and partial nature of language and writing is exposed.

Auster explained to Larry McCaffrey how the connection between the isolated individual and the world might be made in this way:

you don't begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone. And the more intensely you are alone, the more deeply you plunge into a state of solitude, the more you feel that connection. It isn't possible



for a person to isolate himself from other people. No matter how apart you might find yourself in a physical sense ... you discover that you are inhabited by others. Your language, your memories, even your sense of isolation – every thought in your head has been born from your connection with others.

(315)

Finding the world within the self at the same time that the self is in the world, is reflected in a quote from Rimbaud: 'Je est un autre' (I am an other) which Auster invokes to describe his relationship as an author to the world. The aesthetic – as well as social – truth of this is demonstrated by the literary influences that Auster draws on and acknowledges as inhabiting both his own sense of identity as a writer, and the text of *Solitude*. In interview Auster has said that *The Invention of Solitude* (although it is equally true of many of his books) is a book that is about both being alone, and about community (*Hunger* 316). It is about community because the 'book has dozens of authors', through a proliferation of 'references and quotations' in the text these other writers speak through Auster from across time (316).

Ultimately, therefore, the poet's retreat to his room is a way of engaging with the metropolis while protecting the artistic self from the bewildering and overwhelming complexities of contemporary metropolitan life as it is experienced in Auster's New York City. At this point in the development of his sense of the metropolis Auster suggests that for the artist to protect himself from the abyss he must confine himself to his room. By shielding himself in this way Auster's autobiographical character-self, A., hopes to retain

a coherent hold on the relationship between the world and language, even though that world has atrophied to the small space between the four walls of a room. But in doing so he manages to maintain enough of a grasp on language to avoid the psychosis that causes language to disintegrate into, in Jameson's phrase, 'a rubble of signifiers'. The 'raw and urgent simultaneity' in which the whole world is present to A. when he is in his room is also reminiscent of Soja's concept of 'Thirdspace' developed from the 'Aleph'. As Chapter 1 showed and Chapters 3 and 4 will go on to develop, this 'systemic' perspective reinforces the experience of metropolitan processes as distant and abstract and even the metropolis itself as an abstraction, where the forces shaping the city and metropolitan lives are seen in relief, but are lacking in the detail of close analysis. As later chapters will demonstrate, in subsequent works Auster is able to step outside the room and its suffocating solitude to find new and more fulfilling connections to the world for his characters to construct their sense of self upon.

## CHAPTER 3

### EMPTY STREETS – *The New York Trilogy*

In 1903 Georg Simmel said of metropolitan life that it is an unequal contest between 'the individual and the super-individual contents of life' in which the 'personality accommodates itself ... to external forces' (409). By placing in opposition 'individual' and greater-than-the-individual processes at work in the metropolis, he explores how the individual contends with many complex processes of which they are a part, but over which their influence is so insignificant as to be non-existent. The imbalance in the equation between the inconsequential individual and the social powers that form his or her metropolitan environment results in problems in modern life that 'derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces' (409). As a result of being denied agency in her or his own destiny by complex and incomprehensible social powers, the individual feels anonymous and alienated by the intense and stimulating metropolis. 'The individual is reduced to a negligible quantity ...', Simmel said, 'a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life' (422). The sites of the 'super-individual' 'things and powers' that Simmel identifies in the formation of this alienated consciousness are 'buildings', 'educational institutions', 'space conquering technologies' and 'the visible institutions of the state' (409).

Simmel felt that the phenomena he observed at the beginning of the twentieth century resulted from the '*intensification of nervous stimulation*' (410, original emphasis) resulting from industrial modernity and urbanisation. Since his 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' – in many ways specific to the European example of early century Berlin – the twentieth century metropolis has undergone a number of transformations in its economic, political and geo-political organisation, including the experience of new modes of production and a new regime of capital accumulation, along with the globalisation of communications and its attendant flows of people, goods and investments. The global cities of contemporary Western capital are the site of the intersection of the abstract forces of social power and the place where they are encoded in the spatial formations of streets, buildings and state institutions. New York has long since replaced Simmel's Berlin as the prime example of the modern city, and is central to any discussion of the contemporary metropolis and metropolitan life and culture.

With each paradigmatic shift, commentators have described a greater intensification in the experience of the processes of metropolitan life. Today, commentators perceive alienation, as Simmel did, to be a function of the subjective individual consciousness in relation to the abstractions of the modern metropolis such as capital, spatial formations and the aggregation of social relationships ('super-individual' entities). Consequently, as these metropolitan discourses become more abstract and the relationships between them more complex, the alienation felt by the individual becomes more intense.

It is the advancing experience of the city as a series of abstractions that promotes alienation, and it is the 'systemic' and totalising perspective that seeks to apprehend and

conceptualise abstract and remote metropolitan processes. A succession of commentators in this tradition has sought to build on Simmel's founding insights to explore the nature of 'super-individual' forces, and the characteristics of the equation between them and the individual. Henri Lefebvre's influential *The Production of Space* is primarily concerned with the influence of the abstractions of a (Fordist) mode of production on metropolitan social relationships and their expression through particular spatial formations. For Lefebvre, these abstractions express themselves, and are materially 'felt', because '(social) space is a (social) product' (26). The abstractions of production, society and space combine in his theory to describe an urban process in which the individual's connection to the urban environment is always mediated by the symbolic order.

Simmel's idea of greater-than-the-individual processes at work on the individual, is encapsulated by Edward W. Soja's description of the 'veiled instrumentality' of urban space (*Geographies* 61). He coined the term 'socio-spatial dialectic' to extend the exploration of the metropolitan level abstractions (the political-economy of urbanisation) that Lefebvre describes, to the larger spatial and economic abstractions of the regional-international scale (geographically uneven development and the geo-politics that result). The 'socio-spatial dialectic' also seeks to describe a relationship operating between different geographical scales, and does so in terms of the dominant centre and subordinate peripheries. Consequently, Soja employs macro-scale terms appropriate to the discursive processes acting at the level of greatest geographical abstraction. Thus he writes of the interaction of metropolitan social power relations in spatial formations. Soja explores how the 'intensifications' and 'extensifications' experienced under the regime of late capitalism have led to even greater abstraction, and stimulated a re-articulation of

spatial relationships in pivotal global urban centres. His most compelling spatial abstraction is 'Thirdspace'. By imagining all space simultaneously, 'Thirdspace' offers to conceptualise the totality of a global system of interconnected and interrelated spaces. By addressing the metropolis through this abstract schema, Soja is compelled to apprehend the city as a series of bureaucratic institutions of state and capital. These are the contemporary abstractions that Simmel notes in his earlier consideration of the alienated urban individual. Through 'Thirdspace' Soja identifies the metropolis as a 'concentration of power for social production and reproduction' (235), and examines the combined panoptic powers of state and capital surveillance and incarceration which have been brutally inserted into the former working-class districts of Los Angeles.

The intensifications in the metropolitan experience that David Harvey has examined reflect the way that the urban experience has changed under the transition from one mode of production and regime of accumulation to another. They also typify the shift of analytical focus from the European capitals of Berlin, Paris and London to the 'global' capitals of New York and Los Angeles as the archetypes of the modern metropolis. The alienating universal abstractions and deterministic discourses of modernism remain active in the American city, but the particularities of what is seen as the postmodern or post-Fordist city are recognised now as the prime issue in debates on urban living. Harvey's writing considers the continuities and discontinuities across the modernist and postmodernist regimes at length. Of most interest for present purposes is his understanding of the concept of universal urban abstractions, such as the power of capital. Throughout *The Condition of Postmodernity* his focus is upon the social powers of time, space and money, and how the metropolitan environment (social as well as

physical) is formed through their complex interrelation. Harvey describes how the individual can be alienated by the 'dissolving power of money' over non-conformist activities in the capitalist metropolis, and how the power of money relations dominates metropolitan lives through capital's 'superior command over space and time' (238). In the face of the overwhelming and abstract forces of money relations the concerns of the individual in the global cities of contemporary capital (of which New York is a principal example) are marginalised by the social power of capital and the processes that shape lives and the environment. The physical city, formed by the intersections of the remote and abstract forces of capital and the state, can then be seen as a bounded and deterministic structure in which individuals are similarly bound but able also to display a degree of autonomy in navigating within its limits.

Fredric Jameson describes how this alienation in the face of these overwhelming urban abstractions translates in terms of the subjective urban experience. He identifies the failure of the individual to engage with the complexities of the contemporary metropolitan environment as a failure of perceptual equipment, and figures it as the illegibility of the urban and social 'text'. The failure to read the codes of urban space leads, ultimately, to breakdown and a complete disconnection from the social world and the physical metropolis.

In a hand-written and unpublished story called 'Invasions' (in the Berg Collection) Auster describes a subjective experience of New York that echoes the thinking of the commentators who contribute to the 'systemic' analytical perspective outlined above. Here the city is described in terms that emphasise the insignificance of the human form:

New York, a city of impenetrable facades ... Everywhere it eludes the grasp, sealing itself off from the mind, forbidding the secret knowledge that would allow it to be defined. The redundancy of its parallels and intersections ... . I move through it like a somnambulist. Faces might appear, large crowds might grow, but they cannot alter or penetrate the facades that surround them. The city ... reduces its inhabitants to objects. Each person, entitled to just a single perspective, creates a city which is merely a function of his imagination. Properly speaking, New York does not exist.

(7-8)

This fragment demonstrates a response to the physical and discursive realities of New York City that emphasises an extreme social and neurotic subjectivity. The facades of the buildings represent the impenetrable urban discourses, the remoteness of their 'secret knowledge' denies interpretation, and the rational logic of its street grid contains the imagination, making personal agency redundant. Here the streets themselves, the pattern they form and the buildings that flank them, represent the impenetrable 'systemic' discourses of metropolitan New York, admitting the personal and local experience of New York's real and symbolic facades merely to demonstrate their impenetrability. The result is, once more, an alienated individual, reduced to the status of an 'object' or a category in the city's vast structures.



Similarly, *The New York Trilogy* stands as a case study in which Auster presents alienation as an extreme urban condition – a point of departure for the stories to explore how the city of New York in particular can promote isolation, madness and vagrancy. The volume is a collection of three interconnected novels – *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986) - initially published separately and brought together as a single edition in 1987. The *Trilogy* responds to the idea of the alienated individual drifting in the turbulent flows of the contemporary metropolis by exploring the unstable margins of urban society and considering how they are connected to the stable centre. Auster does so by taking this basic premise and subjecting it to the most extreme metropolitan treatment. The central characters of *The New York Trilogy* experience the metropolis in terms of disconnection, anonymity and disorientation, which manifest themselves in the form of alienation from the physical and social environment.

As in the fragment from 'Invasions' above, the metropolitan experiences of the central characters of the *Trilogy* – Quinn, Blue and the Narrator, respectively – are emphatically formed by 'systemic' forces. That is to say, their urban experience is shaped by the 'systemic' abstractions of urban space (through the experience of New York's streets) and the dysfunctional experience of a metropolitan social world (through networks of social contacts people make in the metropolis). The characters occasionally attempt to connect with the metropolis through alternative strategies of urban engagement that might recover an affirmative relationship between the individual and their environment. The example of the street pattern of New York City exemplifies how the distinction between the two urban perspectives might be imagined. The grid is bounded and deterministic in as much as it confines the urban wanderer to a North-South or East-

West trajectory (this is a 'systemic' experience of the metropolis). However, within that grid the individual has the freedom to take any combination of streets he or she chooses (a personal or local experience of the metropolis). However, the extreme conditions of loneliness and disconnection experienced by Auster's central characters negate and evacuate any sense of sovereignty and self-determination that they may have possessed. Through each of the stories of *The New York Trilogy* Auster explores how the experience of 'systemic' aspects of urban life produces disconnection and loneliness, and how by denying a situated and relational place for the individual, he undermines the sense of self.

In an early interview with Allan Reich (1988), Auster has described how *The New York Trilogy* traces a causal path from disorientation, through introspection (the period of solitude, when external contact is lost), to ultimate alienation (n.pag.). Auster's characters find themselves in a New York City that is recognisably the one that Auster describes in 'Invasions'. With only incomprehensible references by which to socially and geographically locate themselves, characters attempt to find a place in the world by writing it. That is, through a linguistic and textual engagement with their metropolitan environment, the characters attempt to shape a stable and lasting sense of self able to form meaningful connections to the physical and social realms. However, as Walter Benjamin warned, in contemplating how the writer might view the metropolis, 'the allegorist's gaze which falls upon the city is ... the gaze of the alienated man' (170). In keeping with this sentiment, Auster presents a predominantly nihilistic urban vision that condemns his characters to social marginalisation, mental and physical breakdown, and constant mis-readings of their predicament leading to their erasure from the text. This and the following chapter examine this process as both a textual and subjective

experience. This chapter deals in particular with how the central characters in the *Trilogy* experience metropolitan New York, and how that experience is destructive of their personal, social and linguistic stability. As a consequence of this instability the characters' sense of identity becomes progressively decentred and incoherent as it is eroded by the complexity of their environment and their inability to bring appropriate ontological tools and strategies to bear on their metropolitan existences. Chapter 4 considers how Auster and his writer-characters apprehend and record the metropolis. Thus, through his characters Auster explores various modes of urban literary engagement. The disorientation of the characters is also reflected in the instability of the conventions of the texts.

Paul Auster says: 'I tend to think of myself more as a storyteller than a novelist. I believe that stories are the fundamental food for the soul. ... It's through stories that we struggle to make sense of the world' (*Hunger* 336). The stories in *The New York Trilogy* attempt to make sense of the urban world by exploring its most extreme effects on the individual consciousness through an intensification of urban phenomena. Where Lefebvre, Harvey and Soja rationally and empirically analyse the changing nature of the urban process, and Jameson considers the effect of this on the subjective consciousness, Auster is able to apprehend the city on an imaginative level, subjecting his characters to extreme conditions and exposing them to unlikely, but conceivable, situations. Thus, through the three stories that constitute the *Trilogy*, he revisits the modernist notion of urban alienation and examines it in contemporary New York.

The streets of contemporary New York are the site of absolute solitude for these characters. The complexity of the city overwhelms them, and they become disorientated and confused. The central characters employ aimless urban wandering to lose themselves in the labyrinth of the streets. Their urban perambulations operate to evacuate the internal narratives of self, and occupy it instead with the external narratives of the city. The result is the creation of an interior void into which the confusion and violence of the city can flow. Instead of the individual inhabiting the city, it comes to inhabit them. The city of New York then comes consequently to provide narrative stereotypes as alternatives to occupy the vacated self. For Quinn it is the stereotype of the street vagrant, vagabond, or bum. Blue's empty self is occupied by the stereotypical urban cases from detective magazines and Hollywood films. The Narrator becomes the archetype of the urban nightmare: the anonymous and violent assailant. All of these characters occupy the role of detective. In 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Walter Benjamin identified this type in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, along with, in the case of the latter, the urban stereotypes of the dandy or the clerk, the prostitute or the rag-picker. Auster identifies stereotypes relevant to his epoch: the detective, the bum and the anonymous assailant.

Ordinarily the metropolitan environment is able to provide the individual with a diverse array of social connections. But for the alienated individual, the metropolitan social world is one of fleeting and anonymous connections – arbitrary contacts in a constantly shifting social landscape. Spiralling social disconnection typifies the lives of the central characters in the stories of the *Trilogy*, demonstrating how social relations in the metropolitan environment are difficult to form and maintain, but easy to lose. Personal loss (such as bereavement), the loss of social coordinates, and mental

breakdown exemplify how the individual can be cut adrift from the social connections that may provide a safety net from isolation, solitude and madness.

For Auster, language is not truth, but a way of being in the world. In these stories he asks, "how does the individual relate to the world when language has failed him?" As earlier, the pursuit of a language adequate to the urban realm and the metropolitan experience thus emerges as a central concern. Language is presented as a monolithic social structure with which characters struggle. Yet a stable relationship with language is necessary for characters to express and define themselves. As each story progresses it becomes clear that Auster adheres to the Saussurean notion of language as a collective habit, requiring shared experience and the adoption of uniform conventions for effective communication. When Auster's characters lose this collective habit linguistic instability sets in and they experience a period of instability and confusion. These stories therefore continue the exploration of what happens to the alienated individual, when at the extremes of the metropolitan experience, the character's language function begins to breakdown, and the word and the world begin to drift apart. In New York City, the failure of language is related to the decay and degradation of the metropolitan environment itself.

Auster's perception of the complexity and alienating nature of the contemporary urban condition is influenced in many ways by Nathaniel Hawthorne's early story 'Wakefield'.<sup>1</sup> Wakefield tells his wife he is going away on business and then disguises himself and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Richard Swope. 'Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Detective Fiction: Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Other Missing Persons'. *Critique*. 39.3 (Spring 1998): 207-227.

takes lodgings nearby. He allows time to pass, and it becomes more difficult to return. He sees his wife in the street and brushes against her, but in the hectic city street she does not notice him. She eventually assumes herself to be a widow. Twenty years later Wakefield returns to the threshold of his house on a whim, and here the story ends. Hawthorne summarises Wakefield's predicament in this way:

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 forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe.

(133)

The fate of the central characters in the *Trilogy* is to become just such an 'outcast'. Among the stories, 'Ghosts' follows 'Wakefield' most faithfully and includes a brief telling of this tale. But all three stories pursue the urban concerns of the anonymous crowd, alienation, and the fragile stability of the urban social and domestic realm. However, Auster's contemporary metropolis, as we shall see, does not necessarily provide the opportunity for the same urban reunion that Hawthorne proposes for Wakefield. Through the textual and narrative references to 'Wakefield', and the intertextual allusions to works by Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau and Herman

Melville,<sup>2</sup> Auster is signalling a heritage of literary representations of the city, and particularly New York.

The archetypal urban figure who inhabits these stories, who seeks out the Wakefields of this world, and who found his earliest expressions in Poe's stories is the detective. Walter Benjamin describes the detective story as 'the most momentous among Poe's technical achievements' (43). The early detective stories focused, like 'Wakefield', on the anonymity of the individual in the overwhelming metropolis. 'The original social content of the detective story', Benjamin asserts, 'was the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd' (43). Auster turns to this basic premise of the erasure of the individual from the urban text to explore how in the most populous of environments the mystery of the 'missing person' is such a compelling one, even in the rationally controlled and bureaucratic modern metropolis.

### Urban Space

The confusion of the streets and spaces that constitute the Manhattan and Brooklyn of the stories' setting promotes the neuroses in the characters that constantly undermines their sense of identity. Urban space in its metropolitan totality is one of the essential elements of the thinking of Lefebvre, Soja, Harvey and Jameson in their descriptions of 'systemic' urban processes. When the individual encounters urban space in this way, he or she is unable to detect or admit the particular and local nuances of place that form a personal sense of the city, and so make metropolitan life endurable. Instead, on the streets of New

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<sup>2</sup> Aliko Varvogli also cites Emerson as an influential presence in the stories (33-5).

York Auster's characters experience loneliness, disconnection and psychosis. Their solitary experiences on the streets of New York become the 'raw data' (to echo Rakosi) of their writing and their urban record. Isolation is figured in the *Trilogy* as a necessary condition for the writer in the same way that A. in *Solitude* found that the motivation to remember and to write came from his own solitude.

Quinn's solitude in 'City of Glass' is amplified by the tragedy that triggers his withdrawal from social society. We do not know how his wife and infant son died five years previously. However, we do know the effect that his loss has had on him. The thought of his son's tiny coffin at the funeral defines true loneliness for him. When he remembers the funeral, he thinks to himself '[t]hat was isolation, ... [t]hat was silence' (35).<sup>3</sup> The echoes of his family life remain with him and in his apartment. It is a long time before he takes down the picture of his wife, and he can still feel how it felt to hold his three-year-old son as 'a physical sensation, an imprint of the past that had been left on his body' (5). Quinn's tragedy leads him to cast off the people who constitute his social world. His friends do not know that he writes pseudonymous detective fiction because 'the fact was that he no longer had any friends' (5). By divesting himself of one layer of social contact after another, by withdrawing from his previous life, Quinn has managed to create for himself an almost entirely solitary existence in the centre of New

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<sup>3</sup> Auster often presents loss through the death of a family member. The particularly poignant loss of a child here is likely to be influenced by Stéphane Mallarmé's, *A Tomb for Anatole*, which Auster translated (1983), and which records Mallarmé's thoughts as his son dies of child's rheumatism and an enlarged heart. Auster's preface is reprinted as 'Mallarmé's Son' in *Hunger* (238-249). Auster also recounts the story of his own two-year-old son's life-threatening pneumonia in *Solitude* (106-8).



York City. In the heart of Manhattan Quinn creates a self-imposed exile that echoes Hölderlin's described by Auster in *Solitude*.

In 'Ghosts', Blue is similarly disconnected from the social world that carries on around him, but in which he plays no part. The case confines Blue to his room in Brooklyn, watching Black across Orange Street (where Whitman lived and Beecher sermonised against slavery [135-7]). While limiting his attention to his room and to Black, Blue feels content, but when he turns his thoughts outward, to his fiancée, his position in the world becomes less stable. At these moments, when thinking of the future Mrs. Blue 'his calm turns to anguish, and he feels as though he is falling into some dark, cave-like place, with no hope of finding a way out. ... perhaps a moment of real contact would break the spell' (145). Social contact may indeed break the cycle of Blue's solitude, but he does not take the opportunities to quit the case and return to his previous life of social pluralities, choosing instead to commit himself to the simple binary – of Blue and Black – of the case.

The quality of the self-imposed urban exile that Quinn and Blue experience is invoked in 'The Locked Room' as a part of what it means to become a writer, and the conditions of possibility for writing. Fanshawe's personality, since adolescence, has marked him out as a writer. From the age of thirteen he was in a 'kind of internal exile' that pushed him towards a 'stubborn marginality' (216). In adulthood, the 'severity of his inwardness' seemed to demand that he be a writer (214). The Narrator, too, seems to have emerged from a social and familial vacuum. Between his childhood associations with Fanshawe and his subsequent relationship with Fanshawe's wife, there is no evidence of family contact or a circle of friends. The three central characters of this

novel all find themselves, through stubborn application to their task regardless of the consequences, occupying a physically and socially marginal space.

Beyond the personal space of the room, beyond the four walls that enclose 'the very substance of solitude', stand the turbulent streets of New York City. This metropolitan environment, in contrast, teems with the multitudinous potential connections that the city has to offer. The characters of the *Trilogy* seek solace in these streets, pursuing the connections that will draw them back into social society. However, the streets of the city do nothing to ameliorate their loneliness and disconnection. Instead, New York and Paris intensify their feelings of loneliness, promote feelings of alienation and anonymity, and create a disjunction between the interiority of the urban subject and the exterior metropolitan environment.<sup>4</sup> By foregrounding the alienation of the streets in particular, Auster is acknowledging how urban commentators have employed the crowd as a trope for the modern metropolitan experience. Walter Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and Poe took the crowd to be the primary symbol of the nineteenth century metropolis, and he and Simmel (418) record the alienation that can be found in its multitudes. Auster too takes the symbol of the crowded streets to evoke the metropolis. However, Auster's representation of the streets of New York does not hold the same potential of anonymous pleasures that Baudelaire's Parisian streets hold. While Poe and Baudelaire's nineteenth century European streets are at once compelling and menacing, Quinn's experience of the

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<sup>4</sup> Soja terms a disturbance between the self and the surrounding territory 'psychasthenia' (*Thirdspace* 240). This concept goes some way to describing the urban condition of many of Auster's characters, but does not encompass the social disconnection that marks their lives.

contemporary New York is of rapid change so intense that it is disorientating. When Quinn tries to deploy the contingent strategies of the *flâneur* he finds not enlightenment, but disorientation.

For Quinn, the loneliness of his existence drives him on to the streets, where he finds respite from his isolation in the crowds, and a place where paradoxically he can lose, rather than find, himself. Quinn is alienated from the structures and processes of the New York that he inhabits by their scale, complexity and intensity, and by his feelings of insignificance in the face of these abstract metropolitan forces. This, along with his lack of a social world that might take place within the crucible of neighbourhood, ensures that, in his experience, the totality of metropolitan space is a homogenous and totalising mass, in which he is unable to differentiate places one from the other. Quinn's urban wanderings are described at length to highlight the extent to which he is dislocated from the texture of the everyday life of the streets, and depict his dysfunctional relationship with some of the processes that constitute the city:

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness

within. The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long. Motion was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again.

(4-5)

To Quinn then the streets of New York are experienced as a series of homogenous spaces, where all places are equal and indiscernible. As a form of analytical engagement his aimless wandering predictably presents him with a cityscape that is a nowhere, which could equally be represented as an anywhere. Because Quinn wanders aimlessly in a city that reduces his human form to an irrelevance, he achieves a subjective sense of the city that enhances his feelings of anonymity. His New York is represented as an incomprehensible labyrinth where individual spaces are indistinguishable, that provides little in the way of coordinates for the individual to navigate by, and so provides an arena in which the individual easily becomes lost in the 'nowhereness' of everywhere. Quinn is clearly seeking this outcome from his wandering, and its result is to evacuate his sense of self. By replacing the inwardness of 'self' with the outwardness of the city Quinn establishes a distance between his physical and mental self. The 'salutary emptiness' left by the city's motion creates the conditions for the individual to become a mere reflection

of the urban process, as the void of the self is colonised by the city's multiplicities. Yet Quinn's 'excursions' do achieve an understanding of how to connect the 'inner' to the 'outer', so that:

on his best days he could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness. By 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. Wandering, therefore, was a form of mindlessness.

(61)

The city floods Quinn's consciousness and usurps the authority of his inner self. If a part of Auster's project is to locate the individual in the world, then Quinn stands as an exemplar of a failure to find one's place, and to find a way of being in the world. Fredric Jameson would read Quinn's relationship to his metropolitan environment as a failure to 'cognitively ... map [his] position in a mappable external world'. Steven E. Alford sees Quinn's wandering as an attempt to map a spatial relationship between the self and the metropolis. However, the main protagonists in the *Trilogy* all fail to create a stable connection with their metropolitan environment. Indeed, Quinn's 'desire to lose his self in the streets of Manhattan ... point[s] to a figure who suffers from a genuine misunderstanding of his place in the world, of the space that he occupies', and he, Blue and the Narrator all experience 'a lack of understanding that space and the self are

coeval' ('Spaced Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*' 631).

When Quinn's self and the space that he occupies are not coterminous, it follows that his interior self must be elsewhere. While I have shown how Auster represents Quinn evacuating his interiority in favour of the impersonal narratives of the city, Auster chooses a quotation from Baudelaire to describe Quinn's relationship to the urban environment that is able to do this to him. As Baudelaire's name is synonymous with the urban wander-observer it is appropriate that Quinn, a modern day *flâneur*, should record the words in his notebook. He writes:<sup>5</sup>

Baudelaire: Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas.

In other words: It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly: Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself. Or else, taking the bull by the horns: Anywhere out of the world.

(110)

Quinn clearly wants to escape himself, and so his sense of self and the space that his physical self occupies, are not 'coeval'. The disorientation that he experiences from this point on in the book – until his eventual erasure from it – is in part due to his failure to create a meaningful connection between his inner self and the material world, and so establish his place as a unified self within it.

<sup>5</sup> Auster originally intended this quotation as an epigraph for the novel of 'City of Glass' (Berg Collection).

### **The Metropolitan Social World**

Symptomatic of both Quinn's loneliness and his disconnection is the one form of social contact that he does have. Quinn's only regular contact with other people comes at the Heights Luncheonette diner in the Columbia Heights area of the Upper West Side, a few blocks from his apartment on Broadway. Here, he and the counterman talk about baseball, and the perennially underachieving Mets in particular:

For several years Quinn had been having the same conversation with this man, whose name he did not know. Once, when he had been in the luncheonette, they had talked about baseball, and now, each time Quinn came in, they continued to talk about it. In the winter, the talk was of trades, predictions, memories. During the season, it was always the most recent game. They were both Mets fans, and the hopelessness of that passion had created a bond between them.

(36)

There is a bond here, a social connection between Quinn and another human being, but that bond is purely contingent and anonymous. This slight social connection is the typically anonymous association that the metropolitan environment, with its multitude of interconnections, is likely to provide. Baseball and the culture that attends it provide a point of contact amongst the city's disconnected and marginal male characters. Through

discussion of its easily accessible and exchangeable currency of statistics, personnel and history, lonely and alienated men generate some, albeit anonymous and tenuous, connections. For Quinn, who has no other social contact, these fragile and temporary associations provide some distant coordinates against which to construct himself as a social being – they provide both a measure to establish his tenuous purchase in the social realm, and proof that he still exists. What Quinn fears at this point in his narrative is the fate of Wakefield and that which befalls Stillman Sr. – to disappear *into* the city. The potential anonymity that metropolitan life harbours can reduce the individual to a ‘speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in a endless wall of bricks (91), or to become one of ‘these many lives / shaped into the stones / of a wall’.

Blue, like Wakefield, removes himself a few blocks from his social world, but rapidly becomes disconnected from it. Blue meets his wife again on East 26th Street in Manhattan, but unlike Mrs. Wakefield, the ex-future Mrs. Blue is with another man, emphasising Blue’s loss and turning ‘Blue inside out’ (164-5). In ‘Ghosts’, months into the surveillance, Black tells Blue the story of Wakefield. Auster alerts the reader to the possible associations between Blue’s story and Wakefield’s early on with the story of Gray, a man who follows the premise of Hawthorne’s story, but is tracked down by Blue. This is one possible contemporary reading of ‘Wakefield’; the absconded will be pursued and apprehended by the ‘systemic’ apparatus of urban surveillance. Another contemporary reading is Auster’s, where the personnel of the surveillance apparatus are employed in the pursuit of mysteries beyond the comprehension of the investigator, and metaphysical concerns begin to emerge. Ultimately, Auster suggests, these metaphysical



concerns of the self and language are fraught with the dangers of darkness, incoherence and violence.

The Narrator's experience of disorienting and incoherent urban space occurs in Paris. Here, the relationship between his sense of self and his social world become progressively strained as his obsession with Fanshawe forces him increasingly into a personal domain where the binary pairing of only himself and Fanshawe exists. After a few weeks in Paris the Narrator suffers a delusional and psychotic breakdown (fuelled by an alcoholic and sexual frenzy), finally he loses track of himself, and he comes apart (293). On the streets of Paris the Narrator violently confronts an American, chosen arbitrarily to represent Fanshawe – a man called Peter Stillman! The power that the Narrator confers on himself to rename the world fills him with immeasurable happiness, he exults in the fantasy of his assertion, because he is 'the sublime alchemist who could change the world at will' (296). The streets of Paris, as I will show shortly, undermine the Narrator's stability so that he believes that he has the power to change the world through a linguistic alchemy. The power of the city to disrupt the language function of Auster's main protagonists is central to the way in which the *Trilogy* explores the disorientating experience of New York as a particularly metropolitan environment. Paris functions here in much the same way as New York, but the Narrator's distance from his social world amplifies his loneliness.

### Language and the 'broken' metropolis

Language is what places us in the world. It is the way in which the intangible interior self of the individual negotiates with the tangible exterior reality of the world. Language is also the way that the isolated individual forms connections and bonds in a social realm that consists of fleeting and inconsequential contact. The disorientating nature of the darkly urban world that Auster represents in *The New York Trilogy* – like his poetry – calls into question the capacity of language to provide a stable mediation of the metropolitan world for the individuals who inhabit it. Through the experiences of Quinn, Blue and the Narrator in New York's overwhelming environment, Auster explores what potential calamities can befall the individual when language begins to fail them, and the word and the world no longer correspond. The Narrator's experience on the streets of Paris is an object lesson in this exact process, and exemplifies the potential violence, explicitly here, that language can inflict on the physical and conscious self.

Auster's concern with a disjunction between the familiar word and the familiar urban world is strongly influenced by a book called *Le Schizo et les Langues* by Louis Wolfson. Auster considers this book in some detail in the essay 'New York Babel' (1974, reprinted in *Hunger*). Wolfson is an American writing about New York in French. His schizophrenic condition prevents him writing in English, which has 'become intolerably painful to him' (28). It is Wolfson's condition and his need to mediate his thoughts through unfamiliar languages that is of importance to Auster. Wolfson is 'looking out on his world through a different lens' (30), which gives him a rare insight

into the 'immediate feeling of what it is like to live in New York and to wander through the streets of the city. Wolfson's eye for detail is excruciatingly precise, and each nuance of his observations ... is rendered with attentiveness and authority' (30-31). For Auster, engaging with New York through another language is a way of re-negotiating the individual's relationship with the city.

Fredric Jameson, like Wolfson, employs a symbolic 'schizophrenia' to describe the experience of the failure of 'perceptual equipment' to connect with the complexities of the contemporary metropolitan environment. For Jameson, the metropolitan environment requires interpretation in much the same way as language, because symbolic social codes are embedded in the fabric of the city. Failure by the individual to read the codes will result in disorientation, then introspection and finally alienation. Quinn's experience of the metropolitan environment mirrors Jameson's description of urban linguistic confusion as he manifestly fails to 'organise [his] immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map [his] position in a mappable external world' (44). If Quinn were in possession of the appropriate perceptual equipment, he would be able to 'disalienate' New York by organising its codes into a more legible text.

'City of Glass' explores the capacity of language to represent the metropolitan space and the urban experience of New York through Peter Stillman's Sr.'s language experiments. Stillman's work develops from the Biblical concerns with language described in Genesis, and their potential relationship to the history of America through the Edenic visions of the early settlers. Stillman's imprisonment results from his project to recover the innocent language of Adam by isolating his young son from the influence of the fallen world. His final project, which Quinn observes and records, is to find a

language adequate to the contemporary urban experience. Stillman collects debris from the streets of New York and catalogues the objects in his notebook. Later he will tell Quinn how New York is a place in need of a new urban vocabulary, because 'New York ... is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. ... The whole city is a junk heap' (78). In Stillman's view, the brokenness of New York has sundered it from language, leaving behind Jameson's 'rubble of signifiers'. As Little notes, Stillman is directly relating 'the corrupt nature of the sign – its inability to represent properly – to a lament about the fractured, disunited state of modern existence' by pointing to an inadequacy in language, perceived by Stillman, to be able to describe the contemporary New York cityscape in the true terms of its decay, degradation, and personal isolation (157). As Stillman tells Quinn, 'our words no longer correspond to the world' because they 'have not adapted themselves to the new reality' and so a word 'hides the thing it is supposed to reveal' (77). As a consequence, he is 'inventing a new language' (76) able to describe objects that no longer fulfil their function. He uses the example of an umbrella without its waterproof covering; this he believes to be no longer an umbrella, but something requiring a new name (77). Stillman cites Humpty Dumpty from *Through the Looking Glass* as a 'philosopher of language' (81) to demonstrate his theory of language: 'When *I* use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone', quotes Stillman:

it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. The question is, said Alice, whether you *can* make words mean so many

different things. The question is, said Humpty Dumpty, which is to be master – that's all.

(81 original emphasis)

As Little notes, this makes Stillman one of the King's Men, hoping to put Humpty, and the world, together again ('Nothing to Go On: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*' 157). Stillman, like the 'Objectivists', is concerned that language as it stands is unable to represent the intensity and change of the contemporary urban condition, and is seeking a new language to redeem the broken world of the contemporary metropolis.

The origins of Stillman's work in New York, his experimentation with Stillman Jr. as a child, and his doctoral thesis upon which they build, are the biblical tales of Eden and Babel, and how they relate to American national identification with the Garden of Eden. Like the 'Objectivists', Auster invokes these stories, through Stillman's work in *The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World*, to examine the relationship between the word and the world. The first part of Stillman's book, 'The Myth of Paradise', focuses on how the American continent was perceived by its discoverers to be a new Eden (*Trilogy* 41-2). The second part of his book, 'The Myth of Babel', explores the fall of Adam through Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He describes language's prelapsarian state, when Adam's 'tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world' when naming it, and the words given had revealed the thing's 'essence' such that a 'thing and its name were interchangeable' (43) 'After the fall,' however, 'this was no longer true. Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, records not

only the fall of man, but the fall of language' (43). The Tower of Babel story in Genesis is, according to Stillman, a recapitulation of Adam's story. All of mankind learns Adam's lesson from it, and it is the last event in pre-history before the Bible moves on to chronicle the history of the Hebrews (43-5). The link between these Biblical stories and America is a pamphlet, *The New Babel*, purportedly written by a Henry Dark (who has the same initials as Humpty Dumpty) in 1690, but is a figure created by Stillman for his own literary ends. Dark insists that by recovering the innocent language of Adam, America will become an Edenic utopia (starting in 1960, when American's would start building the new Tower of Babel [28-9]).

Stillman's experiment in isolating his son was an attempt to recover the Adamic prelapsarian language of God. Stillman Jr. was locked in a darkened room and kept in absolute silence from the age of two until he was eleven (26-7). Stillman Jr. does not fully recover from his disconnection from human contact, and his speech patterns are odd, veering between first and third person, between tenses, and incorporating weird grammatical forms, infantile idioms, and made up words. Peter describes his imprisonment in this way:

There was this. Dark. Very dark. As dark as very dark. They say: that was the room. As if I could talk about it. The dark, I mean. Thank you.

Dark, dark. They say for nine years. Not even a window. Poor Peter Stillman. And the boom, boom, boom. The cacca piles. The pipi

lakes. The swoons. Excuse me. Numb and naked. Excuse me.

Anymore.

(16)

This passage is suggestive of a number of elements in the *Trilogy*. It is suggestive of Quinn's destiny at the end of the story, where he too is confined to a bare room, naked, and struggling with language. It points to an image of the dark language void that is symptomatic of linguistic and social failure. It also suggests the popular image of the poet, trapped in his room and drawing words out of himself that attempt to describe the world.<sup>6</sup> Peter is aware of this similarity, and considers himself a poet. He sits in his room to write, and makes up the words, as he did in the darkness of his confinement, and these 'poems' will be so 'beautiful the whole world will weep' (19). Stillman Jr.'s aphasic-type relationship with the world prompts Quinn to question exactly how one can engage with the material world when the collective experience of language is not available. Quinn wonders 'if these were the same trees that Peter Stillman saw when he walked out into the air and the light. He wondered if Peter saw the same things he did, or whether the world was a different place for him. And if a tree was not a tree, he wondered what it really was' (36). The relationship between the word and the world for the Stillmans Jr. and Sr. (and Wolfson) seems to have a similar quality, one where the word and its object do not always correspond, where there is a break in the 'signifying chain', and where there is a consequent failure of representation.

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<sup>6</sup> See John Zilcosky. 'The Revenge of the Author: Paul Auster's Challenge to Theory'. *Critique*. 39.3 (Spring 1998): 195-205 (201).

During his observations of Stillman Sr.'s urban wanderings, Quinn experiences for himself a similar disjunction between object and word. For him, the mediation of thing and language is problematised by the simultaneous nature of his task to both observe Stillman's movements and record them in his red notebook. Quinn is drawn into the complexities of Stillman's project, before he is even aware of what it is. Similarly, Quinn's early attempts to make an urban record result in an illegible and simultaneous accumulation of entries that echo the disorientating urban experience as 'he had written two or even three lines on top of each other, producing a jumbled, illegible palimpsest' (62). This palimpsest is analogous to the multitudinous nature of New York, which comes to colonise the void of the alienated self. After some experimentation he decides on an arrangement where he can hold the notebook and the pen comfortably, so he is able to see both the page and Stillman. He 'was now able to divide his attention equally between Stillman and his writing, glancing now up at the one, now down at the other, seeing the thing and writing about it in the same fluid gesture' (63). The relationship between the word and the world that Quinn finds in this episode is comparable to that in the Garden of Eden, when Adam's tongue went to the quick of the matter, and reflects Reznikoff's concern with a poetic mode of representation that is as close as possible to its poetic subject.<sup>7</sup> The accuracy of this record, the reader discovers at the end of the narrative, is of paramount importance as it is the document of Quinn's story. Equally, for Quinn it is the evidence from which he as a detective will discern clues, establish a pattern, and so solve the 'Stillman case'. The darkness of the language void symbolises

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<sup>7</sup> See also Norma Rowen. 'The Detective in Search of the Lost Tongue of Adam: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*'. *Critique*, 32.4 (Summer 1991): 224-234.



the confusion that arises when the world is no longer available as a linguistic concept, and so can no longer be grasped as a coherent whole (as Jameson would see it). Peter Stillman Jr. is kept in darkness throughout his isolation, Quinn's last days in the Stillman's apartment are recorded as a tightening spiral dominated by darkness, and Fanshawe's dislocation from the world is described as a plunge into blackness.

Quinn's problems find their echo in Blue's efforts in 'Ghosts' to report the events of his case. Reports are second nature to Blue, he records 'the outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further ... actions hold over interpretation' (146). This is because, for Blue, words are transparent, like 'windows that stand between him and the world' (146). However, this method proves unsatisfactory for this unconventional case, as he discovers 'that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things that they are trying to say' (147-148). As with the Narrator's linguistic alchemy in 'The Locked Room', Blue discovers that language does not have a simple and coherent relationship with the world. These three linguistic predicaments resonate with Reznikoff's poetics of urban representation. For our writer-detectives, too, '[s]eeing ... always comes before speech' (*Hunger* 34) and, like the poet, they discover that 'we do not find ourselves in the midst of an already established world, ... we do not automatically take possession of our surroundings' (34-35), but instead embark upon an 'inscription of the visible into the brute, undeciphered code of being' (34). That is to say, we cannot automatically take possession of our physical or social world through language, but need to fashion a vocabulary appropriate to the complexities of the metropolitan environment.

Quinn attempts to reinterpret his record, to seek clues in its text, and extract order from its chaos. It is, after all, an account of Stillman's urban wanderings, and it has acquired many of the qualities of the events it documents and the environment in which they take place. Along with a chronicle of Stillman's routine, and the discarded objects that he collects, his journal is a trace of his steps on each day. When Quinn maps these out he is shocked to discover that the pattern revealed is one of letters; one for each day (*Trilogy* 67-71). The words that Stillman's tracks spell are 'THE TOWER OF BABEL' (70). Quinn's discovery is resonant of Poe's story, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, where Pym discovers hieroglyphs carved into rock (70); and his own fate in Stillman's room (discussed below), where he attempts to speak his words directly into the fabric of the city.

Stillman's message owes its legibility to the exact detail of Quinn's record and the rational and deterministic power of the New York street pattern which bounds and regulates pedestrian movement in a rigid structure. Only on a grid could such a comprehensible pattern be discerned, while the grid also gives expression to a particular type of deterministic and institutional social power in which the individual (Stillman, in this case) is granted a degree of autonomy, but is constantly constrained by the 'parallels and intersections' of the north-south and east-west streets. Despite their legibility Stillman's pedestrian inscriptions remain fleeting. His perambulations are 'like drawing a picture in the air with your finger' (71), but however ethereal the evidence, it points convincingly to malevolence on Stillman's part. This realisation drives Quinn's mind to dispersal, until somewhere between sleep and consciousness he finds himself in a 'neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words' (72).

Stillman's pedestrian inscriptions textualising urban space reaffirm de Certeau's description of 'the long poem of walking' formed from the 'pedestrian utterances' of individuals tracing out the patterns of their everyday lives in city space. De Certeau seeks to relate the everyday routines of urban practitioners to the fabric of the metropolis in which they practice. Auster suggests, through the erasure from the text of both Stillman Sr. (when he plunges from the Brooklyn Bridge) and Quinn (as a result of an inappropriate linguistic and urban strategy) that such a practice is not in fact able to reconcile the disjunction between the individual and the contemporary urban environment. While ethereal texts can be written upon the urban fabric, as de Certeau suggests, for Auster they are only capable of communicating the constant cycle of deferrals of language that The Tower of Babel symbolises. In the case of Stillman and Quinn, the urban poem is one that promotes confusion and defers meaning. The capacity of language to negotiate urban phenomena becomes less, not more, apparent to Quinn in the pursuit of the case.

The importance of this passage lies in both Quinn's location and his 'mode' of detection. For the first time in a considerable while he is in his room, at his desk, and pursuing the activities of a writer. This practice leads him to his only real breakthrough in the case. By shifting his attention away from observation and towards interpretation (the activity of the writer) he deduces that Stillman's purposes remain malevolent. Quinn uses his powers of interpretation to decipher the letters from Stillman's tracks and the words from the letters (the first and last of which are missing). This suggests that urban events become legible when the perspective adopted is one of critical distance. Quinn is able to bring his faculty of interpretation to bear on the metropolis when he can consider

it as a text, from above, as it were. This position in relation to the object of study is similar to de Certeau's World Trade Centre view of Manhattan. This view offers a degree of legibility and clarity that is not afforded in the immediacy and confusion of the street level, but does not offer much in the way of detail. These events suggest that Quinn has found a way of occupying the role of detective more effectively than he has done, and that his place in the world is becoming more secure as his capacity to 'read' it improves. But if Quinn has found a strategy to successfully fill the role of the detective, then why does his subsequent detection fail him so profoundly? Quinn's failure is demonstrated when he records an extended wander around lower Manhattan that takes in such landmarks as the Flatiron Building, Chinatown, the World Trade Centre and the United Nations plaza. The trace of his steps is recorded with the same exactness that revealed Stillman's purpose. However, his steps reveal no readable pattern. The answer lies in the meeting between Quinn and the 'Auster' character. 'Auster' occupies a comfortable and homely domestic retreat on the busy and prosperous Upper West Side with comfort and ease. The contrast with Quinn's home life, just a few blocks away (92), provokes a deepened realisation of his disconnection and isolation. As I will show, this event has a profound importance for Quinn's destiny and the reader's (narrative) comprehension of the story.

Quinn's experience of the language void leads inexorably to urban illegibility – or more precisely, the failure to read the signs and significations of the metropolitan environment and life. Auster's central characters demonstrate an incapacity to read the symbols of the physical city, to read the social codes of public life, and to read the 'evidence' and the

'clues' of the case. The result for each of them is a slide into madness. I choose here to encompass the particular symptoms of the characters in the term 'dereliction'. Under the description 'derelict' I wish to figure certain forms of social disconnection that result in and are exemplified by mental and physical breakdown. Consequently, the urban experience that reduces Quinn to a bum and his loss of status as a member of normal society is clearly dereliction. The term that Auster himself chooses for this category of the urban population is 'vagabond' (*Trilogy* 108). Blue's experience of his predicament plays much more on the stability of his mental state, reducing him, ultimately, to violence. The complexion of the Narrator's breakdown in 'The Locked Room' encompasses violence, drunkenness and madness on the streets of Paris. However, I wish to include the experiences of Blue and the Narrator under the term dereliction because they too trace a personal breakdown in the metropolis, and are symptomatic of the instability of identity under extreme conditions of metropolitan disconnection, loneliness and alienation. Identity requires stable foundations and structural support. The foundation is an interior stability, the external support is provided by social contact mediated through language. When these supports are undermined and become unstable or incoherent, the subjective sense of self and identity begins to deteriorate. When the social domain is reduced to just the isolated self, when language is unable to represent the world, and when the interior self is evacuated by the relentless complexity and multitudes of the city, then identity disintegrates completely. Auster represents this disintegration in terms of madness. Jameson describes a similar schizophrenic condition emerging from the 'rubble' of signifiers resulting from a failure of 'perceptual equipment'. Quinn, Blue

and the Narrator all suffer from a failure of analysis and reading of both the urban text and the literary text, and it is this failure that tips them into the blank abyss of confusion.

When for the first time in 'City of Glass' Quinn becomes the recorder of his urban environment, it is the nature of social decay on the streets of New York that he records. 'Today, as never before:' he writes in his notebook, 'the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping bag ladies, the drifters and the drunks. They range from the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken. Wherever you turn, they are there, in good neighbourhoods and bad' (108). These '[h]ulks of despair' are described as 'staggering insanely through traffic, collapsing on sidewalks – they seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them' (109). The vagabond is truly lost in the city and is utterly anonymous to the urban population he lives amongst. As Quinn notes, their anonymity makes them almost invisible, but his careful urban observation redefines the derelicts against the cityscape they inhabit. These people have suffered, as Quinn himself will in the following pages, a series of personally catastrophic events. In Quinn's case, as social contacts are stripped away he has a diminishing set of social references against which to construct his social self, and the descent into dereliction begins. His personal descent into the abyss is marked by a mental and physical deterioration. Once Quinn takes the decision to stake out the Stillman apartment, he triggers the final break with social contact that was started with the death of his wife and son.

As Quinn prefigures his own destiny with his record of urban dereliction, so Blue inadvertently plays the role of his alienated self in the disguise of Jimmy Rose. Blue dresses himself as a tramp to speak with Black in an attempt to crack the case. Jimmy Rose is described as 'a wise old fool, a saint of penury living on the margins of society.

... [S]ince everything has happened to him already, nothing can disturb him anymore' (171). Auster has described how he based this figure on a real tramp, Joe Reilly, who begged for change outside his apartment block. After suffering a series of reversals in his life, Reilly found himself friendless, homeless and broke very quickly (*Hand To Mouth* 63-68). These are the conditions of possibility for dereliction, and this is where Quinn finds himself.

Quinn's desire to record the margins of New York's society marks a departure in his role in relation to the 'case' and a pivotal moment in 'City of Glass'. After Stillman Sr.'s disappearance Quinn takes up a position in an alleyway where he can observe the Stillman apartment and so protect young Peter from his father's malevolent intentions. This is a change of role for Quinn from pursuit to observation, and a change of emphasis from an active role (searching for clues), to a passive one (merely recording what goes on around him). Quinn embarks on a new phase when he enters the alleyway, and it will trigger his fall from a general sense of despair into an abyss of darkness, dereliction and erasure. It also marks a point of departure in the narrative address of the book, admitting the authorial address of a new and unnamed narrator into the narrative, and with it an additional layer of interpretation that now encompasses Quinn's experiences, their record in his red notebook, and the way they are related in the story. From this point on Auster opens up a number of debates about representation of the metropolitan environment, the adequacy of language to represent it, and the role of the author in doing so.

## CHAPTER 4

### WRITING THE STREETS – *The New York Trilogy*

Chapter 3 explored how the central characters in *The New York Trilogy* respond to the experience of particular 'systemic' urban phenomena in New York City under their own particular emotional and social conditions. The characters' experience of the abstract forces at work in the construction of their lives and in the metropolis is uniformly negative, and acts on their sense of self to unbalance them and drive them towards the margins, and ultimately to linguistic and social breakdown. The labyrinth of streets they wander has the capacity (in Quinn's case, actively sought) to erode the interior sense of self, and to colonise the void with urban stereotypes. The social world of metropolitan New York is presented for these characters as an environment with an infinite network of potential contacts. However, in the contemporary city, social contact becomes intensely ephemeral and fleeting, resulting in feelings of anonymity and deepened alienation. Prefigured by the stripping away of familial and domestic ties (in the form of Quinn's dead wife and son, and the ex-future Mrs. Blue), these insubstantial social connections serve to push the characters inexorably towards the abyss of madness.

This chapter will explore how Auster and his characters apprehend and record the metropolis as writers. In so doing they encounter some of the issues raised in Chapters 1 and 2 about modes of artistic and critical engagement with the metropolis, and help develop Auster's concerns with the capacity of language to represent the contemporary urban experience. The instability of reading, of both literary and urban texts, is



emphasised in the strategies that Auster's characters deploy to apprehend and record the metropolis – such as Quinn's simultaneous seeing and writing, and Blue's formal observation reports – that struggle to reveal any insight into the metropolitan condition. Like Baudelaire and Reznikof before him, Auster contemplates the presence of the poet-recorder within the urban text, and the impact of the environment on the recorder's physical and mental coherence. The personal consequences of taking on the role of the urban observer-recorder and poet for Auster's characters encompass a combination of Reznikoff's poetic paradox of effacement and Hamsun's and Kafka's aesthetic propositions of starvation, suffocating and extreme solitude, and anonymous violence. The way in which the characters experience New York is further reflected in the representation of that experience through the destabilisation of a number of literary conventions.

Auster emphasises the characters' urban instability by destabilising elements of novelistic convention that disorientate and confuse the reader. Authorship, narration, genre and resolution – conventionally stable elements of the detective form – are disrupted and inverted to problematise the normal relationship between the reader and the text. Thus the experience of instability is communicated to the reader through a narrative form normally associated with the resolution of urban mysteries. These unstable elements mirror the disorientation of the characters as they attempt to negotiate an urban environment that constantly denies reading and conclusive meanings. The detective motif is a particularly urban one with a rich literary tradition. Auster adopts it here to explore the role of the urban writer-observer, but in the process subverts the conventions of the detective form to exemplify and emphasise the destabilising nature of the urban

experience. At the same time the process of detection is turned in on itself so the object of the detective's investigation becomes his own identity and is thus shared by the reader, who is traditionally encouraged to identify with this urban strategist.

### **The Poet-Observer**

Quinn's surveillance of the apartment from an alleyway is his final act of folly on his route to dereliction. Once established in his spot Quinn embarks upon a strategy designed to optimise his chances of protecting Stillman. He organises his routine so that he needs as little as possible to eat, and consequently needs to leave his watch as little as possible to shop. This strategy has two related outcomes. On the one hand Quinn maintains his social contact at the absolute minimum so that he comes to 'understand the true nature of solitude' (117), ensuring that his descent into dereliction proceeds unchecked. At the same time he diminishes his physical self through fasting, thus reducing his presence in the cityscape. The balance is carefully controlled, with intake kept at the minimum:

The greatest danger ... was in eating too much. If he took in more than he should, his appetite for the next meal increased, and thus more food was needed to satisfy him. By keeping a close and constant watch on himself, Quinn was gradually able to reverse the process. His ambition was to eat as little as possible, and in this way stave off his hunger.

(114)

Quinn is unable to contemplate, because of his weakened condition, how denying himself sustenance to live is damaging his faculty to reason and his capacity to observe and record. Auster examines the implications of hunger for rational and artistic thought in an essay on Knut Hamsun's novel, *Hunger*. In the 1970 essay, 'The Art of Hunger' (reprinted in the collected essays, of that name), Auster describes how Hamsun's hero drives himself into a spiral of descent centred on starvation. He describes the way that he withdraws into a 'near perfect solitude' to become 'both the subject and the object of his own experiment' (12). According to Auster, by peering 'into the darkness that hunger has created for him' he finds 'a void of language', where reality 'has become a confusion of thingless names and nameless things' (15). Hamsun's tragic hero and Quinn pursue their misguided endeavours until the 'connection between self and world has been broken' (15), by which time it is too late to return to normal life. There is an artistic precedent for the 'aesthetics of hunger' (19) that Auster touches on briefly, explored by Kafka in his story *A Hunger Artist* (*Hunger* 19-20).<sup>1</sup> Hunger also haunts Bartleby's demise in Herman Melville's story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' – a narrative that has deep implications for the outcome of Quinn's predicament in 'City of Glass', and one of the more apparent influences on Auster's work.<sup>2</sup> Of Kafka's character, Auster says: 'the art

<sup>1</sup> In his story of 'The Hunger Artist', Kafka tells the story of how the moment passes for a previously celebrated performer who starves himself for forty days at a time. Ultimately, he becomes a side attraction at a circus, where he fulfils his desire to extend his fast to the extremes of his endurance, but he dies in the attempt – ignored by both the staff of the circus and the public (210-219).

<sup>2</sup> On the similarities between Quinn's and Bartleby's fasts see also William G. Little (158-161). 'Nothing to Go On: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*'. *Contemporary Literature*. 38.1 (Spring 1997): 133-163.

of hunger can be described as an existential art. It is a way of looking death in the face, ... death as we live it today ... Death as the abrupt and absurd end of life' (20). But before death, when the process of hunger and disconnection is at its most pronounced, Auster describes the effects on Hamsun's writer-character, a description equally applicable to Quinn. 'He loses everything – even himself', Auster says. At 'the bottom of a Godless hell, ... identity disappears. It is no accident that Hamsun's hero has no name: as time goes on, he is truly shorn of his self' (14-15). I have argued that the experience of the metropolis as a series of 'systemic' forces reduces the human form to an insignificant scale. Here, through starvation, Quinn is complicit in the process of reducing the importance of the individual in an urban analysis by symbolically diminishing his presence in the cityscape, and promoting his own invisibility through his vagrancy and dereliction. In response to his experience of 'systemic' forces, Quinn is literally making his urban presence insignificant.

The reduction of Quinn's physical presence in the fabric of the city expresses an aspect of urban writing addressed in Auster's essay 'The Decisive Moment' on Reznikoff. Quinn's anonymity and diminishment in the material sense serve to make him invisible, 'as though he had melted into the walls of the city' (*Trilogy* 116). Reznikoff's concern, as an urban poet, is to minimise his presence in the scene that he presents. Baudelaire, too, was concerned with how to experience the crowd, while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance in representing it. Auster describes the poetic paradox of Reznikoff's New York poetry in the primary objective of simultaneously seeing, while not being seen. 'The Reznikoff equation, which weds seeing to invisibility,' Auster insists, 'cannot be made except by renunciation. In order to see, the poet must make

himself invisible. He must disappear, efface himself in anonymity' (*Hunger* 38). The parallels between Quinn's position of anonymity and erasure, and Reznikoff's aesthetic of effacement are clear. Quinn's record in the notebook is now one exclusively of his life on the streets of New York, and his invisibility in the fabric of the city offers a relationship to the city that Reznikoff strives for in his poetry. The correspondences between Quinn's work and Reznikoff's poetry are strengthened in the context of Auster's consideration of the urban nature of Reznikoff's work. 'It seems no accident that most of Reznikoff poems are rooted in the city', Auster asserts.

For only in the modern city can the one who sees remain unseen, take 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.

(39)

By the end of his stakeout Quinn's sense of self, his identity, and his relationship to his environment are completely incoherent. He apprises himself of his parlous state, observing his degradation in a shop window: he 'had turned into a bum. His clothes were discoloured, dishevelled, debauched by filth. ... It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else' (*Trilogy* 120). The previous Quinn – the pseudonymous writer of detective fiction – has been erased from the physical

and social landscape of New York City. He discovers that his apartment has been let and his possessions disposed of. The material objects that connected Quinn to the social world have been removed from him, and he no longer occupies a place in it. At this point he concedes that he 'had come to the end of himself ..., he was gone, everything was gone' (125). With all social contact stripped from him, and the last remnants of his 'real' self evacuated, Quinn's identity has been occupied by the social type of the street bum. In failing to locate himself adequately in the social world of New York, Quinn has been erased from it physically.

With Stillman Sr. dead, the Stillmans having fled, and 'Auster' abandoning him, Quinn returns to the Stillman apartment. Here he finds a back room with a single window onto the airshaft, strips naked (like Adam in Eden) and settles down with his notebook (126). This room resembles Bartleby's office in Melville's story and his cell in the New York dungeons, and echoes an incident at the beginning of the case when 'suddenly, with great clarity and precision, [Quinn] saw Bartleby's window and the blank brick wall before him' (51-52). This prescient vision alerts the reader to the potential outcomes of Quinn's predicament. Unlike Bartleby, Quinn is sustained by the mysterious appearance of food in the room. However, Quinn finds that he can utilise his time more effectively writing in his notebook rather than eating. In these entries Quinn enters into the final struggle with the means to rearticulate his relationship with the world. He records a series of associations that emerge from a single word or event (129), as if by creating a 'chain' of signification he can recover the chain of signifiers that connects him to the physical world of the city. But of course he can't, and he is forced to consider instead his own relationship with the word – both written and spoken. As the pages of

the notebook dwindle, Quinn becomes aware that his capacity to relate his story is diminishing. The case is 'far behind him now', and he 'wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind' (130). Quinn's relationship to words changes, they are now a part of the material world, related in their pre-lapsarian sense to the things they represent.<sup>3</sup> This is of course because Quinn is no longer a part of the social world, and his presence in the material world is fading rapidly. As a consequence of this 'his words had been severed from him, ... now they were a part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower' (130).

Quinn anticipates the end of the notebook by exploring modes of representation that go beyond the visible inscriptions of writing. Advancing the practices of Stillman Sr. and Poe of inscribing onto the material world, he 'wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into the air, into the walls of the city ... The last sentence of the red notebook reads: "What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?"' (131). These questions strike at the very heart of Auster's quest in the *Trilogy* – how do we locate ourselves in the world when language has failed us? Further, how does the writer, as an artist, relate to the material and social realms when the relationship between the word and the world is so problematical?

These questions do not find their solution through Blue's 'detection' in 'Ghosts'. Auster sets out his linguistic intentions from the start of this story. With central characters and the 'cases' all named after colours, Auster signals that this 'investigation' too will incorporate a search for a language adequate to the detective's purpose. 'Colors

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<sup>3</sup> See also Rowen (231-2).

are irreducible as words', Auster told Allan Reich, '-how do you define blue? Or red? You can't – and I wanted irreducible figures in the book' (n.pag.). Blue has his newly emerged problem with 'transparent' words for his reports. Also, his social isolation prompts instability in his relationship with the material world, just like Quinn's struggle with 'nameless things and thingless names'. Initially Blue feels that he has a fairly secure relationship with his environment:

He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and although he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself. He has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember, fixing his attention on these surfaces only in order to perceive them, sizing up one and then passing on to the next, and he has always taken pleasure in the world as such, asking no more of things than they be there. And until now they have been, etched vividly against the daylight, distinctly telling him what they are, so perfectly themselves and nothing else that he has never had to pause before them or look twice. Now, suddenly, with the world as it were removed from him, with nothing much to see but a vague shadow by the name of Black, he finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before...

*(Trilogy 144)*



With the social world removed from him and reduced to just himself and Black, Blue begins to question his connections with the material world. With only the insubstantial and indistinct figure of Black as a reference, Blue's ontological position becomes unstable. Within the hermetic existence of his room, Blue is able to will stability into his relationship with a small and very narrowly defined world. Blue 'sees the lamp and says to himself, lamp. He sees the bed and says to himself, bed. ... It will not do to call the lamp a bed, he thinks, or the bed a lamp. No, these words fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world' (148). However, Blue's ontological stability, grasped by naming aloud the objects close at hand, does not stand up to the complexities of the world outside the window – a world of multitudinous interrelations. Like Quinn, Blue allows his interiority to become a vacuum. He chooses to live life on the surface, leaving his interior to be occupied by the narratives of his environment – in his case the stories of his previous cases, the fictions of detective magazines and films, and the story of his relationship to the 'Black case'. But ultimately Blue's unstable and deteriorating relationship with the material and the social world leads to confrontation, violence and an inconclusive resolution.

The relationship of the central characters to language in 'The Locked Room' goes through a number of transformations. At first, when the Narrator is getting to know Sophie he claims for language an erotic and seductive power (226). For Fanshawe, in his early writing, language has a pre-lapsarian quality, brought about by an understanding of the world and his place within it. However, the world that he represents is not the complex world of New York City, but the natural environment of rural France. Here

'Fanshawe's eye has become incredibly sharp, and one senses a new availability of words inside him, as though the distance between seeing and writing had been narrowed, the two acts now almost identical, part of a single unbroken gesture' (277). The Narrator tells us that this is the point at which Fanshawe's work matures – from promising to fulfilled. He also tells us that while Fanshawe's poetry is written in the country, his well-received plays and novel are written in New York (278).

What Auster seems to propose here has far reaching implications. Fanshawe's relationship with language goes through three distinct stages: first he reaches an accommodation with language while in rural France; this faculty remains with him when he returns to New York where he writes his Magnum Opus; but while still in New York he becomes alienated from his work and his environment, and language fails him to the extent that he 'came close to a kind of horror there' (309). This suggests that the subjective failure of language for Fanshawe is the result of a complex of reasons that are to do with the alienation and disconnection of the city, but are not rooted wholly in the disorientating complexities of the modern metropolis. For Fanshawe then, like Quinn and Blue before him, his urban disconnection is triggered by a personal and emotional event, that takes place in the metropolis, and sends him sliding into the darkness of the void.

As the story of 'The Locked Room' progresses and the Narrator's obsession with Fanshawe deepens, the psychosis that he descends into begins to erode his own language function. As when Blue attempts to write reports, words begin to obscure the Narrator's intentions. Instead of seducing Sophie with words, he uses them to evade her questioning, forcing her away from him (268). By going to Paris, the Narrator, like Blue

abandons the contact of the one emotional relationship able to offer the hope of stability. Once there, he feels unable to call Sophie, and the acceptance of this fact brings with it the acknowledgement that words are constantly failing him (289). The Narrator is losing contact with his interior self to the extent that the 'sky was growing dark on the inside ... the ground was trembling' (290). The failure of language and the disorientation that arises from an incoherent sense of self are symbolised here as the instability of an unsafe foundation, and the blackness, again, of the abyss. In Paris the narrator is geographically as well as mentally distant from the stabilising force of Sophie, and so susceptible to an accelerated descent into disorientation, alienation and madness – assisted by the incomprehensible forces of a foreign metropolis. It is at this stage that he begins 'to lose track' of himself and 'come apart' (293). Symptomatic of this breakdown is a fragmentary quality to memory. As writing begins with memory, a dislocated quality of recall will hamper the writing function and the individual's subjective relationship with the metropolitan world. The Narrator finally loses his struggle with a coherent and unified sense of language in a bar near the Place Pigalle, where he makes an anonymous and contingent social contact which is of a similar order to Quinn's ephemeral contacts in Manhattan. He is with a Tahitian prostitute who he names Fayaway. By employing 'some muddled chain of reasoning', the Narrator then attaches the name Fanshawe to the random figure of an American stranger (293-4). The Narrator is picking through a rubble of referents – as Jameson described – and reconstituting the chain of signifiers in an arbitrary way through 'randomness' and 'pure chance' (298). Such a practice will not return order to the chaos of a disintegrating relationship between word and world. There is a chase through the empty Parisian streets, and before the violent confrontation that

ends the Narrator's search for the real Fanshawe, the Narrator (like Quinn and Blue, before him) feels as though he is no longer inside himself, the 'sensation of life' is displaced by a 'miraculous euphoria, ... the undeniable odour of nothing' (299).

Fanshawe eventually 'reveals' his disembodied self at the end of the novel. The audience with Fanshawe in Boston divulges little, but generates a new quality of confusion and disorientation in the Narrator. He is again plunged into darkness, with his 'head going black inside', and he falls in the street, lost (313). Fanshawe provides a notebook, to explain his actions over the years. However, unlike the letters written in France and the literary work that followed, the words do not have a simple and direct relationship with what they are meant to describe. The Narrator describes the experience of reading the notebook at length:

All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. ... Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity. It is as if Fanshawe knew his final work had to subvert every expectation I had for it. ... He had answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again. I lost my way after the first word, and from then on I could only grope ahead, faltering in the darkness, blinded by the book that had been written for me.

(314)

All the essential elements of destabilised identity are here again – disorientation, the lack of metropolitan social coordinates, the void, and the darkness that symbolises it. Fanshawe's notebook mirrors language's constant deferral through constant questioning of the authority of his words, repeatedly cancelling out meanings and proliferating layers of interpretation. The symbolic darkness of the abyss returns to further disorientate the Narrator and to relate his sensory incoherence to the failing (or aphasic) relationship between Fanshawe's words and the things that they relate to. Finally, the Narrator destroys the notebook standing by the tracks at Boston's station. 'One by one, I tore the pages from the notebook', he writes, 'crumpled them in my hand, and dropped them into a trash bin on the platform. I came to the last page just as the train was pulling out' (314). This final passage has two important implications for the narratives that precede it. One is the capacity of language to obscure, and the other is the capacity of the story to confound readers' expectations. Here, Auster is at his most ambiguous (in a book crowded with ambiguities) by neither offering a resolution, a closure to the 'Fanshawe case', or concluding the Narrator's fate as we do not know whether he catches the train back to Sophie, Ben and his baby son in New York.

### Writing

The failure of resolution and the layering of ambiguities into the narratives and sub-narratives of the three stories are structural devices that Auster employs to destabilise the reader's experience of *The New York Trilogy*. As well as resolution, Auster

problematises authorship and genre. These disruptions mirror the disorientation of Quinn, Blue and the Narrator in the narratives themselves. That is to say, the failure of the characters' urban tools or tactics for living is equivalent to the failure of the reader's literary tools or reading strategies. The layering of authorship, the undermining of genre conventions, and the deferral of resolution constantly moves the ground beneath the reader's feet. The experience of instability within these aspects of literary practice parallels the way that Auster represents the instability inherent in language in these narratives. Meaning is constantly deferred as the stories are subjected to proliferating narrators, unexpected twists, and any number of possible endings. This reflects how both the insubstantial metaphysical basis for language, and the basis for identity are subject to incoherence and instability.

Authorship in these narratives operates on two levels. First it is a concept that relates the name of the person on the front of the book to the person of a writer. Secondly, it relates the characters to a force that motivates and controls their movements. These two concepts come together in the person of Quinn, who is at once a fictional detective, a pseudonymous detective novel writer, and the 'tiny life-bud buried in the breathing self' that is the man called Daniel Quinn (8). Quinn masquerades as the author of his own book by taking a case in the name of Paul Auster. The Paul Auster detective persona is added to the 'triad' of selves that he has constructed through his detective writing. Quinn writes about a fictional detective, 'Max Work', under the pseudonym, 'William Wilson'. This name is a rich source of circular puns – William Wilson, for example, can become Will, I am, the son of Will. Also, the act of authorship, of creating a character and

navigating them through their story, is an act of will on the part of the author on behalf of the character. Finally, 'William Wilson' is also the name of a story by Edgar Allan Poe in which a schoolboy and his double (or alter-ego) compete until they are destroyed. Max Work also constitutes Quinn's 'work', and so the pattern of punning on names in each of these stories is set. Auster describes the relationship between the writer, the pseudonymous author and the detective character in 'City of Glass' in this way:

Over the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him, Work had increasingly come to life. In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude.

(6)

Two aspects of this passage are important. Firstly, that the conventional ventriloquism of authorship would have Quinn manipulating Wilson, and Wilson giving words to the character, Work. Secondly, the direct relationship between Quinn and the character that he gives voice to, along with that character's name, suggest that Quinn generates his sense of self from the personality of his character, and hence the words that he, Quinn,

puts into his mouth. The result is that Quinn does not think of himself as real, living in the world instead 'at one remove' such that he 'seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work's presence in the world became' (9). However, Quinn finds himself to be unsuited to the task of detection, which Work would have taken in his stride. So Quinn is a dysfunctional detective, unable to decode the clues in the 'case', often unable even to identify them as such. Auster makes the distinction between the two clear: '[w]hereas Quinn tended to feel out of place in his own skin, Work was aggressive, quick tongued, at home in whatever spot he happened to find himself' (9). A further aspect of Quinn's relationship to his fictional creation is that self (Quinn) and not-self (Work) exist simultaneously; each giving the other meaning and authority. As a result, at the point when Quinn feels that Work is dead, his sense of self is descending to its least coherent (128-9), and appears immediately prior to his 'erasure' from the text.

The triad becomes a quartet when Quinn takes the 'Stillman case' in Paul Auster's place. Auster is both Quinn's author (in much the same way that Quinn is Work's author) and a character in the book.<sup>4</sup> That Quinn is authored becomes apparent when the conventions of the detective form require him to meet his client, Peter Stillman Jr. (12-13). Although Quinn has no intention of keeping the appointment, he finds 'himself doing a good impression of a man preparing to go out'. He 'tends toward a jacket and tie', and puts 'them on in a kind of trance.' Finally, with his hand on the

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller exploration of the layering of characters, narrators and authors in 'City of Glass' see William Lavender (217 – 240). Lavender uses an author-reader model of narrative structure (proposed by Seymour Chatman) to peel away the layers of single characters with multiple names (Daniel Quinn) and multiple characters with a single name (Paul Auster). 'The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*'. *Contemporary Literature*. 3.2 (Summer 1993): 219-40.



doorknob the truth dawns on him: 'I seem to be going out,' he said to himself. 'But if I am going out, where exactly am I going?' Quinn is 'willed' to the appointment by his author, who places his hand on the doorknob and propels him to the Stillman's apartment near Central Park on East 69<sup>th</sup> Street. By foregrounding the relationship of the author to his characters, Auster is drawing the reader's attention to the complexities of storytelling and narrative.

Quinn's relationship to his author's will is fairly immediate, and his presence in the text is strongly determined and substantial, as the quote above demonstrates. The proximity of the character to the intentions of the author has a direct relationship with the presence and materiality of that character within the text. Peter Stillman Jr., in contrast, has a less determined physical presence in the narrative. His actions are described in this way:

The body acted almost exactly as the voice had: machine-like, fitful, alternating between slow and rapid gestures, rigid and yet expressive, as if the operation were out of control, not quite corresponding to the will that lay behind it. It seemed to Quinn that Stillman's body had not been used for a long time and that all its functions had been relearned, so that motion had become a conspicuous process, each movement broken down into its component submovements, with the result that all flow and spontaneity had been lost. It was like watching a marionette trying to walk without strings.

Like Auster's father in 'Portrait of an Invisible Man', Stillman cannot be located in the world because a puppeteer mediates his presence. In Sam Auster's case he presents his own alter-ego. In Stillman's case he is controlled through a complex arrangement of authorship. The similarity of Stillman's movements to an uncontrolled marionette is in contrast to Quinn's movements under the firm control of his author's unseen hand. Stillman Jr.'s awkward movements are in part a result of Quinn's presence. Stillman has called for Paul Auster, his author, and the will that should motivate his actions, but he has been sent Quinn – the wrong author, and a mere character at that. As a result of being abandoned by his author, when Peter tries to move there are 'relapses, crumplings, catapults back, accompanied by sudden fits of immobility, grunts, words whose meaning Quinn could not decipher' (23-24). Peter's speech suffers from the same unmotivated quality as his movements, due both to his father's language experiment and his author's absence. As a consequence of the narrative distance between the character, Stillman Jr., and his author, Paul Auster, Stillman inhabits the book in a spectral way. In the interview with Quinn his appearance is insubstantial and transparent. His clothes are white, his skin pale and his hair thin – 'the effect was almost transparent. ... As their eyes met, Quinn suddenly felt that Stillman had become invisible' (15). Lavender refers to Stillman as a 'narrative anaemia' ('Novel of Critical Engagement' 226-7), whose incomplete relationship with his author distances him both from Auster's will and the signifying terms of language that can give him status within the text. Insubstantiality functions in much of Auster's early work to signify distance between people or characters. In *Solitude* he describes how his relationship with his father must have made

his presence appear to him as a 'vapor' or a spectre (60). Stillman's symbolic transparency and his relationship with language are also akin to A.'s 'wordless panic', which is described as 'watching his own disappearance'. As a result of his distance from his author and language, Stillman Jr. walks clumsily off page twenty-four and never returns.

In 'The Locked Room' Auster proposes that where the writer is not physically present, his presence can be accessed through his work, in a way similar to Quinn's relationship to his 'Work'. Fanshawe's presence in the text is related to the manuscripts of his poetry, plays and novels, which collected together in two suitcases 'were as heavy a man' (*Trilogy* 208). Consequently, to destroy Fanshawe's work would be an act of violence of the same order as attacking the man himself. 'There was no difference...' the Narrator feels, 'between giving the order to destroy Fanshawe's work and killing him with my own bare hands. I had been given the power to obliterate, to steal a body from its grave and tear it to pieces' (222). The Narrator's concern for his friend's work and reputation is based upon his own regard for the written word, his stake in writing, and his belief in the power of books that 'overwhelms the rest, and beside it one's life becomes very small' (223). Fanshawe's presence, through his works, stands in contrast to the Narrator's materiality in the text. As his obsession with Fanshawe deepens and his relationship with Sophie becomes ever more distant, the Narrator accepts that he is using language to evade meanings and obscure intentions – he is 'hiding' from her. Auster symbolises the Narrator's emotional evasion and concealment from Sophie as insubstantiality. 'You're so close to being gone already', she tells him, as he is about to leave for Paris, 'I sometimes think I can see you vanishing before my eyes. ... You're

going to vanish, and I'll never see you again' (286). Like Stillman Jr., he is having an episode of symbolic transparency within the text. However, as the Narrator's relationship to his author is closer than both Quinn's and Blue's, he is able to enter into the struggle with language and attempt to recover his materiality.

Alford notes that Quinn, Stillman, Blue, Fanshawe and the Narrator move beyond 'the constitutive purview of language' ('Spaced Out' 621) when their story no longer finds expression through words. He argues that Quinn ceases to exist when the red notebook runs out ('Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*' 23, 'Spaced Out' 614), while Russell argues that 'characters "die" when their signifiers are omitted from the printed page' ('Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction' 75). However, in 'The Red Notebook' (1992, reprinted in *Hunger*<sup>5</sup>), Auster insists that 'books are never finished, ... it is possible for stories to go on writing themselves without an author' (378). This proposition is borne out by the presence of these characters in other stories, and a passage in an early, unpublished version of 'The Red Notebook' in the Berg Collection. 'In the red notebook are all the years of my life before I bought the red notebook', Auster insists. 'There are the years and days and hours and minutes. There is a word for each thing that will come' (n.pag.). The story of the red notebook stretches before it. In 'Portrait of an Invisible Man', Auster says of the story of his father, and the story of writing the story of his father, 'that once this story has ended, it will go on telling itself, even after the words have been used up'

<sup>5</sup> First published in *Granta*. 44 (Summer 1993): 232-253. For a thorough publishing history for Auster, see also William Drenttel, *Paul Auster: A Comprehensive Bibliographic Checklist of Published Works, 1968-1994*. New York: William Drentel with Delos Press, 1994.

(*Solitude* 67). In 'The Locked Room' the Narrator explains that he must set down his story in order to escape Fanshawe's grip. But, he tells us, stories 'without endings can do nothing but go on forever' (*Trilogy* 235). Both of the previous stories end without resolution; their narrators cannot attest to the whereabouts of Quinn and Blue. Without language their story ceases to be told, but they go on beyond language's purview, when the words have been used up. Irresolution also acts in these texts to highlight the uncertainty of accounts mediated by language, and to emphasise that literature captures the moment of a story, but that the story has a life of its own stretching before the beginning of its telling and beyond its end.

### Narrative Strategies

Narrative models are explored throughout *The New York Trilogy*, and are constantly subverted to surprise and disorientate the reader. Auster presents narrative as a puzzle which is as challenging as the cases that his 'detectives' undertake. The most important 'clue' and piece of evidence in this sub-mystery is the meeting between Quinn and the character 'Paul Auster' at his apartment on Riverside Drive on the Upper West Side. As Brooker notes, for Auster, 'the fall of the author into his own work is a repeated event' (*Fictions* 144). Auster has described Cervantes' *The Adventures of Don Quixote* as 'a great source for me' (*Hunger* 275). Here, the man who would be Quinn's author presents the narrative structure of *Don Quixote* as a possible model for Quinn's story. Quinn tracks down the 'real' Paul Auster in the hope that he is the detective for whom the case was destined, and that he can help to 'solve' it. But 'Auster' is a literary essayist (as both

Quinn and the real Auster were), and he is able to offer only a friendly chat and a brief respite from Quinn's lonely pursuit of Stillman Sr. 'Auster' lives with his wife, Siri, and son, Daniel (more autobiographical references). His apartment represents an oasis of stability in New York's ephemeral social discontinuities where Quinn's recent experiences lie. This vision of domestic normality stands in direct contrast to Quinn's loneliness and taunts him with his loss, filling him with a 'lacerating self-pity' (101). 'Auster' explains to Quinn his 'imaginative reading' of 'the book inside the book Cervantes wrote, the one he imagined he was writing' (97). This reading presents Quixote orchestrating the record of his own adventures, with Sancho Panza chosen for his linguistic abilities; the barber and the priest to write it down; and Simon Carasco to translate it into Arabic. They do this to hold up a mirror to their friend's madness, and so hope to cure him of his delusions. The twist that 'Auster' introduces is that Quixote is sane and has tricked his friends into recording his adventures for posterity, possibly even posing as Cid Hamet Benengeli and translating his own story back into Spanish. This reading of events still allows Cervantes to be truthful when presenting himself as no more than an editor of the translation.

The 'clues' linking 'City of Glass' and Quixote are both linguistic and textual. Quinn's initials are the same as Don Quixote's and their predicaments have striking similarities (the delusional detective/knight fulfilling the fantasies of genre fiction). In the early part of the story we discover that 'Auster' has been recommended by a retired police officer called Saavedra – which is Cervantes' family name.<sup>6</sup> As Quinn is leaving

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<sup>6</sup> See also Alison Russell (74). 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction'. *Critique*. 3.2 (Winter 1990): 71-84.

'Auster's' apartment they agree to talk on the phone. Auster asks: 'Are you in the book?' 'Yes', Quinn replies, 'The only one' (102-3). Reading the 'clues' (as a good detective should), Auster is hinting that the reader should be guided by the literary 'map' of actors and narrators proposed in the book of *Don Quixote*.<sup>7</sup> However, this map continues the series of deferrals started with language, and is actually as unstable as the linguistic and urban maps that Quinn, Blue and the Narrator employ.

The straightforward narrative address that typifies detective fiction is present in the *Trilogy* only in the matter of style. The authority of the narrative voice of each of these stories is undermined by numerous interventions, shifts in the narrative point of view, and tense and temporal instability. In 'City of Glass' and 'The Locked Room', interventions by 'authorial' voices shift the address between first and third person, blurring the boundary between them. These intrusions give the impression of proliferating narrators and problematise the notion of a unified and identifiable author (as in 'Auster's' model of *Don Quixote*). In 'Ghosts', shifting tenses and temporal viewpoints combine to expose the mechanics of narrative strategy in the telling of stories. By introducing unstable elements into the narrative models of the individual stories and the *Trilogy* as a whole, Auster is challenging the reader's expectations of the novel, and so destabilising this experience. By problematising the notion of 'authority' within these narratives, Auster is demonstrating the connection between textual illegibility in the literary realm and the resistance of the urban realm to being read. By foregrounding the textual quality of the metropolitan environment and relating it to textual instability in literature, Auster is

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<sup>7</sup> See also Lavender (221, 224).

proposing the inability of the characters in the stories to read the urban text under extreme metropolitan conditions to be of a similar order to the disorientation of the reader.

Auster examines the instability of textual representation through the conventions of authorship, genre and resolution. The authorial veil is lifted for the first time in *The New York Trilogy* when the omniscient third person narrative of 'City of Glass' is interrupted by the following intervention that reveals the 'authority' of the narration:

The account of this period is less full than the author would have liked. But information is scarce, and he has preferred to pass over in silence what could not be definitely confirmed. Since this story is based entirely on facts, the author feels it his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention. Even the red notebook, which until now has provided a detailed account of Quinn's experience, is suspect. We cannot say for certain what happened to Quinn during this period, for it is at this point in the story that he began to lose his grip. (113)

To emphasise the connection between Quinn's sense of self and stable narrative structure, Auster warns of 'misreadings' at just the point where Quinn's sense of coherence, as both a person and a recorder, begin to fail because of his own catastrophic misreading of the urban text. The record becomes incoherent and his sense of self is occupied by the



archetype of the New York vagrant. Auster begins to shift from a third to a first person address in this passage, and completes the movement at the end of the story. In the interview with Gregory and McCaffrey Auster describes how, for him, first and third-person narrative are not discrete categories. '[T]here's a vast range between those two categories', he insists, 'and it's possible to bring the boundaries of first-person and third-person so close to each other that they touch, even overlap' (*Hunger* 316). The new, first person narrator states: 'I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations' (*Trilogy* 132). This narrator moves into the position previously occupied by Quinn, but one further 'reading' removed from the events. He disingenuously claims 'authority' for his telling of the story because of avoidance of interpretation. However, it is he now who is attempting to decipher the urban text, again through the pages of the notebook, just as Quinn did with Stillman's footsteps. Like Quinn, he follows the clues and then views the totality from above, only to find that true insight is resisted by the deferrals of language and text.

The third person narrative of 'Ghosts' conforms to the economic style of detective fiction.<sup>8</sup> However, the way that Auster plays with time across the telling of the story undermines the authority of the primary narrative address. 'The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change', we are told at the beginning (135).

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<sup>8</sup> An early version of 'Ghosts' (*A Little Book of Colours*) describes the story as 'Film Noir' (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). This sub-genre draws heavily on the narrative conventions of 1930s and 40s detective fiction most associated with Chandler and Cain, and indicates the narrative 'presence' that Auster wanted to impose on the story.

The temporal specificity of the story is exact enough to identify the actual day '3 February 1947' (136) – Auster's date of birth. However, this temporal exactitude is undermined in the closing passage. The narration is not taking place in the 'present' of 1947, as these events 'all ... took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood' (195). But before the reader's engagement with the moment of the story is abruptly curtailed, Auster intervenes once again to expose the mechanics of storytelling and show how, just as the juxtaposition of first and third-person narration can bring instability to a text, so the tense of the address can unbalance the reader. Our last sight of Blue comes close to the end of the story:

But the story is not yet over. There is still the final moment, and that will not come until Blue leaves the room. Such is the way of the world: not one moment more, not one moment less. When Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door, that will be the end of it.

(195)

Here, conventional genre intersects with a subverted narrative convention to highlight the instability of literary form. The genre requires an ending, and the narrative anticipates this for the reader, recording the nature of the denouement before it has happened. As a consequence, temporality is destabilised within a single statement, as well as across the story.

It is in 'The Locked Room' that the most profound and important intervention takes place. Here, a voice from outside the telling of this story claims authorship of all three stories. In doing so, this 'real' narrator disrupts not just the sense of a single narrator figure, but also the notion of a unified figure of an author. 'These three stories are finally the same story',<sup>9</sup> he concedes,

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. If words followed, it was only because I had no choice but to accept them, to take them upon myself and go where they wanted me to go. But that does not necessarily make the words important. 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)

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<sup>9</sup> That the three stories are interchangeable is emphasised by the way that Auster has interchanged the titles. During the process of writing these stories 'City of Glass' was called 'New York Spleen' and 'New York Confidential: experiments with color'. 'Ghosts' was also called 'A Little Book of Colors' and 'Black Outs', the name it bore as a one-act play. 'The Locked Room' had been called 'Ghosts', and included a description of Fanshawe mounting a Quinnesque observation of Sophie's apartment to watch her, the Narrator and the child. This episode obviously became Quinn's stakeout (typescripts of unpublished versions of the three stories, undated, and without page numbers, Auster Papers, the Berg Collection, New York Public Library).

The presence in the text of the author, rather than a narrator figure, is related to the presence of an 'Auster' character in 'City of Glass'. In both these instances the presence of the voice or figure acts to 'expose the plumbing' and to question the nature of the absent figure whose name is on the front of the book (*Hunger* 308).<sup>10</sup> In his 1960 essay, 'Authors and Writers' Roland Barthes describes the relationship between the author, his literary role, and the language he deploys: 'Language is neither an instrument or a vehicle: it is a structure ...; but the author is the only man, by definition, to lose his own structure and that of the world in the structure of language' (187). The author is lost in the structure of language when his name appears on the cover of a book. The linguistic function of the author's name on the book is to associate him with the text, and with other texts that bear the same name. As a result the author's name becomes a linguistic construct that obscures his materiality behind a series of signifiers. Besides his real name, the linguistic construct is comprised of his work, his image (his photo on the dust jacket), his autobiographical detail, and his physical self (for promotional events etc.). In 'What is an Author', Michel Foucault collectively terms these characteristics the "author function" (107). This function, he insists, 'does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individual' (113). Consequently, the "author function" is not the spontaneous association of an individual to a text, but 'the result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call "author"' (110). Auster has referred to the 'person' of the "author function" as 'my author self, that

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<sup>10</sup> See also Zilcosky (198).

of how the crime was carried out and by who should be resolved, the perpetrator brought to justice, and order restored to the world.<sup>11</sup>

Crime in *The New York Trilogy* is undermined as a concept by the indeterminate nature of the events that are the object of the detective's investigation. This evasion is echoed in Benjamin's observation of Poe's 'Man of the Crowd', in which 'the drapery represented by crime has disappeared' (48). In 'City of Glass', Stillman Sr.'s intentions remain ambiguous till the end. The story of 'Ghosts' is all investigation and no crime. While in 'The Locked Room', the Narrator seeks a missing person who does not want to be found. If the object of the Narrator's 'investigation' is the corporeal Fanshawe, it quickly becomes the search for an essence that constitutes Fanshawe, but this mystery has little chance of solution. At the beginning of the search for Fanshawe, the Narrator is willing to admit that 'each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose' (*Trilogy* 217). Which leads him to conclude that every 'life is inexplicable, ... no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling' (247). The Narrator's position in relation to the subject of his writing is that the essential thing – Fanshawe, a man's life, the material world – resists representation through language in a way similar to that experienced by the 'Objectivists' attempting to translate the data of the eye into a poetical language for the city. The final scene inverts the detective fiction

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<sup>11</sup> For a structuralist survey of the conventional elements of detective fiction see also Tzvetan Todorov's, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', reproduced in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, London and New York: Longman, 1988. 157-165. On the use of the detective form in *The New York Trilogy* see also Russell, Rowen, Swope and Barry Lewis, 'The Strange Case of Paul Auster'. *Review of Contemporary Literature*. 14.1 (Spring 1994): 53-61.

motif of a room locked from the inside, in which a crime (murder) has been committed.<sup>12</sup> In the *Trilogy* the mysteries, like narrators, proliferate until they encompass the metaphysical concerns of language and identity.

The detective conventionally conforms to a number of stereotypes. The Max Work character of Quinn's fiction is the archetype of the quick witted, analytically adept, strong-jawed detective who always gets his man, and invariably gets the girl too. For Quinn, the detective 'is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them' (8). Yet in these stories the precepts of convention are not maintained. As Auster told Joseph Mallia: 'the detective really is a very compelling figure, a figure we all understand. He's a seeker after the truth, the problem-solver, the one who tries to figure things out. But what if, in the course of trying to figure it out, you just unveil more mysteries?' (*Hunger* 280) Quinn and Blue clearly occupy the role of detective in their stories. The Narrator also enacts the detective function. He takes up the search for Fanshawe where a private detective, one named Quinn and employed by Sophie, had failed. Once on the case, the Narrator describes his pursuit of Fanshawe to Europe in terms of a detective hunting for clues to the 'one path' leading to the solution (*Trilogy* 282). Paris is a logical place to visit for a 'detective' searching for clues, as it is the setting for Poe's Dupin tales that are the model of the subsequent detective form. However, in Paris the Narrator concludes that there 'were no leads, no clues, no tracks to follow' (289). In short, the process of detection - the analysis of evidence, the interpretation of clues - is unable to provide any stable sense of who or where Fanshawe

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<sup>12</sup> See also Russell (79).

mysterious other who lives inside me and puts my name on the covers of books' (*Hunger* 308).

The struggle that Auster refers to in the passage above is the struggle with the means of representation that haunts all of these stories. Quinn, Blue and the Narrator each struggle with language as a way to exist in the world, and so establish a foundation on which to construct a coherent sense of identity and a stable sense of self that can be projected into the social realm through language. For Quinn and Blue language fails, and their presence in their own stories is curtailed as their pages run out. However, although the Narrator is not erased from his own text, his story is subject, as the others are, to irresolution.

## Genre

The general disorientation that the reader experiences through the shifts in narration and the dis-unity of authorship, as principles of the novel, are explored more specifically through the relative rigidities of the conventions of detective fiction. Where these customarily offer clarity and explanation, in Auster's detective fiction the form becomes characterised by distortion and confusion. Benjamin lists the essential elements at the heart of a conventional detective story as 'the victim and the scene of crime', 'the murderer', 'the masses', and the intellect of the detective that breaks through the 'emotion-laden atmosphere' (*Baudelaire* 43). At the conclusion of the story the mystery

is and, as the Narrator is dependent on comparison with Fanshawe to negotiate his sense of self, his own identity becomes incoherent.

As noted earlier, the detective novel is the most urban of texts. The complexity of the labyrinthine streets, the density of the population and the anonymity of the individual in the crowd make it the ideal place to commit a crime, and the most un-promising of environments for its solution. The metropolitan environment, as described above, is one dependent on the reading and interpretation of encoded space (after Jameson) and the 'forest of gestures' that de Certeau describes. In the city evidence is everywhere, but concrete significations are in short supply. The detective mystery too requires the identification and deciphering of encoded information, in the form of clues. For Quinn, the abundance of clues is a compelling aspect of the detective mystery. In these books every event is potentially crucial, such that '[e]verything becomes essence; the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end' (8). However, in the *Trilogy* evidence goes by the way, clues lie un-interpreted, or mis-interpreted. As a result the book does not come to its end, and so the circumference is never drawn and the centre remains everywhere. Auster is using the genre conventions of the detective fiction 'to get to another place ... altogether' (*Hunger* 279). By subverting the conventions of the crime and the detective, the other place that Auster gets to is the struggle with language and the struggle to identify not the criminal, but the self.

The final element of detective fiction that Auster undermines is the certainty of resolution. Without it the mystery or crime cannot be solved, the perpetrator cannot be



brought to justice, or the circumference of the book finally drawn. Similarly, deferral of resolution acts in the same way that deferral of meaning does in language and text. By failing to resolve the mystery, by accepting the deferrals of meaning, Auster is indicating that final and unconditional meaning cannot be read into the 'text' of New York. The detective form requires the reader to 'read' the clues as they are uncovered, and to make sense of them as the story moves inexorably to its conclusion and the solving of the mystery. However, *The New York Trilogy* eludes such possibilities as its narrators multiply, its mysteries proliferate and its solutions consistently fail to emerge from a morass of irrelevant or contradictory information. In 'City of Glass', Quinn's fate remains unknown because the pages of the notebook run out. 'At this point the story grows obscure', the narrator writes, '[t]he information has run out, and the events that follow this last sentence will never be known' (131). The interpreter of the red notebook is left to speculate on what happened to Quinn. He goes on:

As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now. ... The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand. ... my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck.

(132)

The resolution of 'Ghosts' is similarly undetermined. I have shown above that the omniscient, third person narrator manipulates the arts of story telling and genre convention by 'predicting' Blue's last actions in the story, as he puts on his hat and

leaves the room. The narrator then addresses the reader in a way that mirrors the shifts between third and first person in 'City of Glass'. Once Blue has left the room, we are told that '[w]here he goes after that is not important' (195), and the reader is drawn into a conspiratorial 'we' before the person of the narrator emerges at the very end of the story. 'I myself prefer to think that he went far away,' he says:

boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. It is even possible that America was not the end of it. In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China. Let it be China, then, and we'll leave it at that. For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing.

(195-6)

However, we should expect nothing less from a story that has already signalled its literary debt to 'Wakefield', in which our last view of Wakefield is him re-crossing the threshold of his house with a crafty smile.

In 'The Locked Room' resolution is deferred by the failure of the notebook to reveal Fanshawe's actions, intentions and motives. The deferral of language is duplicated in the ambiguity of the last sentence of the *Trilogy*, leaving the reader unsure of the Narrator's actions – does he take the train back to New York? The detective's investigation into his selfhood and his identity remains unresolved, language does not have the capacity for the Narrator to locate either himself or Fanshawe in the world. Two

simple possibilities present themselves: either he remains in Boston where his disconnected and disorientated relationship with the physical and social world will continue to drag him down into the darkness of the abyss; or he returns to his family in New York, where, through Sophie, he can build a sustainable but fragile relationship with people and his material metropolitan environment.

Auster does not encourage the reader towards the greater likelihood of either of these possibilities, each being equal and valid in its own right. It is, however, a concern that the text prompts us to examine, not least for the sake of natural curiosity and a sense of disappointment that our readerly expectations have been deceived. The implications of the first position are clear; the Narrator's story would constantly turn in on itself, and he would be condemned to constantly repeat Quinn's misreadings and failures (these stories are all the same, after all). Equally, the Narrator may board the train and return to Sophie. The cycle of loneliness and alienation, disconnection and erasure would then be broken, and some major implications for *The New York Trilogy* as a text begin to emerge.

The Narrator's options – confusion on the metropolitan streets, or domestic stability with Sophie in their new Brownstone home in Brooklyn – both represent ways of being in the world. The outcome of the first option, when taken by Quinn, has been considered in detail above. If the Narrator were to take this course his future would be an uncertain one. The dereliction that Quinn experiences carries with it the potential of an early or violent death, through starvation or exposure, or by being 'beaten or burned or tortured' (109). The place that these tragic figures (Quinn possibly amongst them) occupy is formed by complete disconnection from the metropolitan social world, leading

to the interior confusion and disorientation of madness. These characters do not come to occupy this place in the world through conscious effort, they have instead stumbled into it by misfortune and mis-reading. Equally, Quinn, Blue and the Narrator occupy this place in the world without meaningfully comprehending how they are related to the world as individuals. Quinn has his baseball conversations with the counterman in the Heights Luncheonette, which proves that he still exists. Blue also attempts to reconnect with the metropolitan social world by going to ball games at Ebbetts Field and having an occasional physical relationship with 'a blowsy tart named Violet' who he meets in a bar near his Orange Street room (158-60). But he too remains detached from all but the most meagre of coordinates. All he has is Black and Black's room, which Blue thinks of as 'a no man's land, the place you come to at the end of the world' (185). Clearly if you want to place yourself in the world, you do not want to do it when the point of reference is the very end of the world itself.

Auster's vision of New York for Quinn and Blue then is overwhelmingly pessimistic, nihilistic even. However, glimmers of hope emerge in the shape of particular places in the metropolis, and social relationships with particular people. These spaces, and the people that inhabit them, stand as antipodes to the alienation of the streets of New York, or the isolation and loneliness of writers' rooms that Quinn and Blue inhabit. Sites of familial calm and stability, such as the apartment of 'Paul and Siri Auster', operate as oases of hope for alienated characters. The 'Auster'/'Siri' relationship in 'City of Glass' bears a close resemblance to the Narrator/Sophie relationship. Auster has described 'City of Glass' as an 'homage' to his second wife, Siri (*Hunger* 278). Quinn, he says, is what he might have become if he had not met her. But the Narrator is more able to enter the

struggle to secure a place for himself and seek a metropolitan redemption than Quinn and Blue are because he is more aware of his predicament and is 'closer' to his author. The Narrator's hopes for recovery from the traumas of alienation lie in his relationship with Sophie. Along with the protection offered by a stable family and home life, it is Sophie's way of being in the world that the Narrator finds both compelling and sustaining. 'Siri Auster' has a similar quality that relates her presence to the physical world in a very particular way. Quinn describes her as 'radiantly beautiful, with an invisible energy and happiness that seemed to make everything around her invisible' (*Trilogy* 101). Equally, Sophie's view on the world allows her to form a relationship with it that is far more stable than the Narrator's by being both analytical and emotional at the same time. Sophie, he tells us, is 'both sensual and watchful, as though she looked out on the world from the heart of a deep inner vigilance' (201). The sensuality of these women, 'Siri' and Sophie, stands in contrast to the ontological rigidities employed by Quinn and the Narrator in the pursuit of Stillman Sr. and Fanshawe. Before embarking on the 'Fanshawe case' the relationship that the Narrator forms with Sophie gives him a revelatory insight into how it is possible to locate himself in the world, and a potential return at the end of the story to recover that place. Sophie, he says, changed everything for him:

and words that I had never understood before suddenly began to make sense. This came as a revelation, and when I finally had time to absorb it, I wondered how I had managed to live so long without learning this simple thing. I am not talking about desire so much as knowledge, the

discovery that two people, through desire, can create a thing more powerful than either of them can create alone. This knowledge changed me ... and actually made me more human. By 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)

Like Quinn and Blue, the Narrator is trying to negotiate the space between the self and the not-self, or the self and the everything else. Unlike Quinn though, the Narrator is attempting to negotiate the space with a significant point of social reference in Sophie. And unlike Blue, that reference is more than just a shadowy outline. Here at last, with Sophie, is the refuge from the confusing and alienating maelstrom of New York. The knowledge of how he might relate to the world, through Sophie, allows the Narrator a fleeting chance at the stable sense of self that Blue and Quinn have abandoned through their isolation. He establishes a relationship with language that is more transparent than Quinn and Blue, and equivalent to Fanshawe's 'availability of words' in rural France. The Narrator's true place in the world is related, in part, to his relationship with the world. Once he discovers that his relationship with Sophie derives its meaning between them, somewhere outside of himself, he becomes much more comfortable in the world. Auster perceives these negotiations between individuals, to arrive at a place between the

Narrator and Sophie, to be part of the process of forming a self-aware (social) identity, and being fully human again. Echoing how the Narrator defines his sense of self in relation to Sophie, Auster has said that 'we can only see ourselves because someone else has seen us first. In other words, we learn our solitude from others. In the same way that we learn language from others' (315). These narrative outcomes demonstrate that Auster is critiquing the rational and scientific view of urban life that the commentators with a 'systemic' perspective adhere to. The experience of the metropolis as a series of abstract processes forces the individual into a position of alienated remoteness – a position that Auster views with nihilistic despair. However, the possibilities that emerge from the narrator's relationship with Sophie suggest that there is a route out of the isolation and the failure of language to connect with something or someone beyond the self.

The way in which the central characters explore their metropolitan environments in these three stories encapsulates both a 'systemic' understanding and a 'local' experience of New York. Under the conditions that Quinn, Blue and the Narrator experience the metropolis neither perspective offers them a coherent or stabilising reading of the urban text. The experience of the metropolis as an unimaginable totality of incomprehensible inter-relating 'systemic' forces is destructive and erodes the character's sense of identity. The experiences of urban space that Quinn and the Narrator endure, along with the experiences of the metropolitan social world that Quinn and Blue undergo, stand as a testament to the confusing and disorientating nature of these urban processes. However, the characters' attempts to engage with the metropolis at a personal level, adopting a 'local' perspective, elicit an equally incoherent and illegible urban text. Quinn's catastrophic misreadings of the urban text and the constant deferrals of Stillman

Sr.'s 'walking rhetorics' are the primary examples of this. Blue's pursuits of White/Black serve similarly to emphasise metropolitan illegibility, as do the Narrator's episodes of confusion and 'linguistic alchemy' in Paris and Boston. The characters effectively fail to 'map' their lives onto their urban environment. Fredric Jameson sees the deployment of a 'cognitive map' as a way of relating to the material world at both the 'systemic' and 'local' levels. He proposes that by overlaying the physical metropolis with this personal map – this new 'perceptual equipment' – the individual will avoid the onset of an urban schizophrenia.

What the *New York Trilogy* demonstrates is that under extreme conditions of loneliness, disconnection and alienation the metropolis is able to deny the individual a stable basis for the construction of a coherent sense of self. A coherent reading of the urban text eludes Quinn, Blue and the Narrator as the ontological tools and strategies that they bring to bear on their metropolitan lives fail consistently to engage sufficiently with the codes and symbols of the metropolis. If telling stories is the way that we make sense of the world, then telling metropolitan stories is how Auster attempts to make sense of New York City. The stories that comprise the *Trilogy* emphasise Auster's understanding, at this stage in his writing career, of the confusing nature of contemporary city life. Simultaneously he holds up the modest hope of stabilising and redemptive relationships and spaces that are able to ground the individual enough to begin forming a coherent sense of self. The presence of Sophie in the Narrator's life provides a significant insight into how to break the destructive cycle of the story, as a small scale and personal connection formed under the conditions of an isolated one-to-one emotional bond. This contact brings some stability to the Narrator's life and a route out of the abyss.



However, the presentation of New York as a sprawling, alienating labyrinth punctuated with oases of optimism reflects a motive which Auster identifies in his own work. His work, he told Mark Irwin, 'has come out of a position of intense personal despair, a very deep nihilism and hopelessness about the world, the fact of our own transience and mortality, the inadequacy of language, the isolation of one person from another. And yet, at the same time, I've wanted to express the beauty and extraordinary happiness of feeling alive in your own skin. To manage to wrench words out of all this, no matter how inadequate they might be, is at the core of everything I've ever done' (335). It is through these painfully wrought words, through the redemptive power of art, that New York is redeemed from 'ultimate alienation' as the predominant metropolitan experience. Chapter 5 examines how emotional relationships are able to provide a stable point of reference in an unstable and intense urban environment, and how this view generates a progressively optimistic vision of metropolitan New York.

## CHAPTER 5

### DOWNTOWN – ‘great good places’

how deeply and passionately most of us live within ourselves. Our attachments are ferocious. Our loves overwhelm us, define us, obliterate the boundaries between ourselves and others (*True Tales of American Life* xvii)

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, in Auster’s work the stability of a character’s relationship with language is an index of that character’s relationship with her or his physical environment and the coherence of their interior sense of self. For his writer-characters ‘the word’ is a way of being in the world, and storytelling – one way for characters to locate themselves in the metropolitan world of New York – is dependent on a firm grasp of language. *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, like *The New York Trilogy*, chart their central character’s descent into the abyss of linguistic and social failure, before going on to explore how characters can emerge from this darkness. Auster adopts the figure of an abyss or darkness to represent both absolute solitude (social disconnection) and ‘the wordless panic’ of an ‘aphasic’ episode in *The Invention of Solitude*. The novels that form the focus of this chapter, *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, represent a more optimistic period in Auster’s career as he presents the possibility of a fragile metropolitan stability and coherence. The central characters in these texts experience the chasm of linguistic and social failure before undergoing a kind of metropolitan redemption when rescued by lovers and caring friends who are able to form social networks across New York City. These networks inhabit very

particular spaces – bars, restaurants, dinner parties and art galleries. Ray Oldenburg calls these the ‘great good places’ (in the book of that name): ‘informal public gathering places’ that become a part ‘of the citizen’s daily life’ (xxviii). The pivotal ‘rescuer’ emerges from the social networks that inhabit these places. In the two novels considered here, these are woman artists who possess a very particular relationship with their metropolitan environment, mediated through non-verbal sign systems. These urban rescuers contribute, through their spatial and linguistic competence, to the recovery of the condition of a fully social being, demonstrated by an effective relationship with language, and subsequently manifested in writing. The relative coherence of the character’s language function is a measure of her or his place in that process. This chapter traces the path for the central figures of each novel, examining the specific social and environmental conditions that first shape their descent, but then make possible their rescue and recovery. In doing so, it explores how Auster presents a ‘local’ knowledge of the physical and social metropolis, able to support a relatively stable identity, which, however, remains temporary and fragile.

As with Auster’s earlier work, linguistic instability pre-figures mental and social breakdown. In *Moon Palace*, Fogg’s language function has deteriorated to the point where the written word is indecipherable, each symbol being indistinguishable from the others. ‘I could feel my eyes making contact with the words on the page,’ he records:

but no meanings rose up to me anymore, no sounds echoed in my head.

The black marks seemed wholly bewildering, an arbitrary collection of lines and curves that divulged nothing but their own muteness.

Eventually, I did not even pretend to understand what I was reading. I would pull a book from the box, open it to the first page, and then move my finger along the first line, and so on down to the bottom of the page. That was how I finished the job: like a blind man reading braille. If I couldn't see the words, at least I wanted to touch them. Things had become so bad for me by then, this actually seemed to make sense. I touched all the words in those books ...

(30-31)

Much later, after experiencing the very bottom of the void, and ascending from it, Fogg is required to describe everyday metropolitan objects to his blind employer, Effing. Initially he struggles, 'piling too many words on top of each other' such that the object was not revealed, but buried 'under an avalanche of subtleties and geometric abstractions' (123). Fogg labours to bring the word to the world so that, like the flower that 'blooms in a stranger's mouth' in the poem 'Scribe', it can be shared between language users. 'The world enters us through our eyes,' Fogg writes, echoing Auster's 1967 'manifesto':

but we cannot make sense of it until it descends to our mouths. ... In actual terms, it was no more than two or three inches, but considering how many accidents and losses could occur along the way, it might just as well have been a journey from the earth to the moon.

(122)

In time, however, Fogg comes to realise that he needs to help Effing 'see things for himself' (ibid), because '[i]n the end, the words didn't matter'. The task of words, he tells us:

was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them [the words] disappear the moment they were pronounced. It took me weeks of hard work to simplify my sentences, to learn how to separate the extraneous from the essential. I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind travelling toward the thing I was describing for him. ... I took to practising when I was alone ... going around the objects in the room ... . I don't think there was any question that I improved, but that does not mean I was ever entirely satisfied with my efforts. The demands of words are too great for that; one meets with failure too often to exult in the occasional success.

(123)

In these passages, Fogg continues to experience the inadequacy of language to the complexities of the New York environment, but the relationship between word and thing is much more stable than in the earlier passage. He is able to will ontological stability into the world by naming the objects in his room, but unlike Blue in 'Ghosts', Fogg is also able to take this linguistic coherence out into the streets with him.

The story of *Leviathan* is the story of Benjamin Sachs' destruction as he falls unchecked into the abyss, and the struggle of his friend, Paul Aaron,<sup>1</sup> to tell that story. As the narrative progresses it is apparent that Aaron comes to occupy a similar coherent social and linguistic space as that previously occupied by his friend. Aaron's relationship with language, like Fogg's, is troublesome but through the course of the narrative achieves some degree of stability and coherence. However, he too is unable to achieve the full accommodation with language that Auster associates with the motif of Edenic innocence, which he employs here once again.

Aaron tells us that for Sachs 'the words always seemed to be there for him, as if he had found a secret passageway that ran straight from his head to the tips of his fingers. ... Words and things matched up for him ... , and because Sachs himself was hardly even aware of it, he seemed to live in a state of perfect innocence' (49-50). Sachs seems to have a pre-lapsarian relationship with language, but for Aaron the opposite is true. He describes his own relationship with language in this way:

The smallest word is surrounded by acres of silence for me, and even after I manage to get that word down on the page, it seems to sit there like a mirage, a speck of doubt glimmering in the sand. Language has never been accessible to me in the way that it was for Sachs. I'm shut off from my own thoughts, trapped in a no-man's-land between feeling and articulation ... for me [words] are constantly breaking apart, flying off in a hundred different directions. (49)

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron has some basis in the figure of a New York painter that Auster knew. In 'The Red Notebook' he records B.'s story of fatherhood, divorce, lovers (of which Aaron has a number), eviction, dinner parties and finally true love (reprinted in *Hunger* 354-7).

The figurative notion of language fragmenting and disintegrating resonates both with Jameson's description of the failure of the 'signifying chain' and Sachs' ultimate fate. In the first sentence of the book we are told that Sachs has been literally blown apart by his own bomb at the side of a lonely highway in northern Wisconsin (1). On his journey from linguistic innocence to disintegration, Sachs loses his power of speech, destroys his marriage, and abandons his facility with the written word. These episodes are triggered by a fall from a fourth floor fire escape during the Statue of Liberty centennial celebrations, which takes on the characteristics of the falls of both Adam and Humpty Dumpty. Sachs miraculously survives, but is thrust into the same post-lapsarian state to which Adam and mankind are condemned after the banishment from Eden and the destruction of The Tower of Babel (see Chapter 3, above). After the fall, '[t]he garrulous, irrepressible Sachs had fallen silent, and it seemed logical to assume that he had lost the power of speech, that the jolt to his head had caused grave internal damage' (109). Later, he would tell Aaron that every time he attempted to write he 'would break out in a cold sweat', his 'head would spin' and he would feel like he was falling again from the fire escape – experiencing 'the same panic, the same feeling of helplessness, the same rush toward oblivion' (226). Aaron employs similar language to describe social disconnection and the drive to self-destruction, as Sachs becomes 'a solitary speck in the American night, hurtling towards his destruction in a stolen car' (237). Meanwhile, Aaron's relationship with language has become more coherent as he achieves stability and harmony in his own life, which Auster once again figures as innocence. This places him in a similar linguistic position to Sachs, prompting Sachs to entrust his story to Aaron. '[Y]ou'll know how to tell it to others', Sachs writes in a note to Aaron. He goes on:

Your books prove that, and when everything is said and done, you're the only person I can count on. You've gone so much farther than I ever did ... I admire you for your innocence ...

(236)

How Aaron achieves this innocent linguistic state is, in part, influenced by his metropolitan experiences and the social spaces that he inhabits. The common thread in the New York experiences of Fogg, Sachs and Aaron is their inclusion in artistic social groups – of dancers, writers and photographers. The outcome of each character's narrative depends on the development of their relationships with individuals from these groups. Also, both of these novels are intensely metropolitan texts, and New York is central to the experiences of the protagonists. Juilliard, that features in *Moon Palace*, and Columbia, that features in both novels, are New York schools. Auster attended Columbia, as do many of the characters in the books. They live all over Manhattan and Brooklyn. New York in these novels represents a place to live, socialise, make art of, get destroyed by, and get put back together in.

In *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, Auster's stance on the alienating properties of the metropolis has developed to encompass the possible recuperation of some form of urban equilibrium. Even in the early and most nihilistic phase of his writing, Auster had suggested a glimmer of hope in locating a coherent sense of self for the Narrator through Sophie. He finds his 'true place in the world' between himself and Sophie. In 'The Locked Room', Auster could only suggest how the isolated individual might



emerge from his solitude. Through his ferocious attachment to Sophie, the Narrator begins to obliterate the boundary between himself and the world. In these later texts, instead of experiencing the city in terms of abstract and incomprehensible processes – as Quinn, Blue and the Narrator do – the central characters are able to engage with the physical and social realms of the metropolis in the terms of small, close-up and personal strategies. These small-scale and personal connections conform to a ‘local’ understanding of metropolitan experiences. That is, each character apprehends the metropolis through a sensual contact with the physical places that constitute their personal New York, and their contact with people in an immediate and situated (and here artistic) social circle. However, they do this without necessarily forming a meaningful and relational comprehension of the vast networks of social relations that extend beyond their present and particular experience. Because these social contacts are entered into without reference to the ‘absent totality’ of aggregate social relations, they are contingent on the material conditions of the moment, and quickly become unstable when those conditions change. That is to say, because of the multitudinous nature of the contemporary metropolis, personal and social conditions are constantly in flux, and so these relationships remain provisional and often fleeting.

Encountering the metropolis in an immediate way is unlikely to reveal the rational and transparent discourses of activity that a ‘systemic’ view does. Instead, the ‘local’ and everyday experience of the city produces an opaque, chaotic and often contradictory vision of contemporary metropolitan life. In the introduction to the recent collection of true stories edited by Auster, *True Tales of American Life* (2001), he said ‘the more we understand of the world, the more elusive and confounding the world becomes’ (*True Tales* xviii). In these texts, the central characters find

temporary and provisional stability, but find a coherent understanding of their own lives and their place in the vast metropolis elusive.

### Descent

M. S. Fogg summarises and encapsulates his own life in an exceptional opening paragraph to *Moon Palace*. Here Auster relates the essence of everything that is to happen to his central character. He touches upon Fogg's impoverishment and dereliction; his chance rescue by Kitty Wu; his subsequent employment by Effing; the discovery of his paternity; and his desert walk from Utah to California (1). By doing so he signals the central themes of language, identity, dereliction and paternity, and the way that they are all influenced by place.

Auster shows how Fogg's descent is set in motion by the death of his mother, Emily Fogg, and is pushed into freefall by the sudden death of his surrogate parent, Uncle Victor. Emily dies when M. S. is eleven, and he is brought up in Chicago by Uncle Victor, whose death (like Sam Auster's) from an unexpected heart attack occurs soon after Fogg has departed for Columbia University. Fogg receives a small compensation for his mother's death, and inherits Uncle Victor's collection of books, his collection of baseball cards and his suit (13). Victor's death causes a traumatic change in Fogg's life, and marks the point at which he 'began to vanish into another world' (3). Auster demonstrates that because Victor is Fogg's sole social co-ordinate, the 'one link to something larger than myself' (ibid) and his sole connection with the world beyond himself, his loss inevitably produces instability. 'In the end, the problem was not grief', Fogg records:

Grief was the first cause, perhaps, but it soon gave way to something else – something more tangible, more calculable in its effects, more violent in the damage it produced. A whole chain of forces had been set in motion, and at a certain point I began to wobble, to fly in greater and greater circles around myself, until at last I spun out of orbit.

(19)

Fogg's descent is much like Quinn's. However, in contrast, Auster shows how Fogg's fragile connections to society are enough to prevent him falling to the same depths of physical and textual erasure.

Fogg begins to measure the extent that he has vanished 'into another world' by the depletion of his financial and literary legacies. Uncle Victor's literary bequest consists of 1492 books, which also represents the year that Columbus discovered America (13). Fogg converts the boxes of books into makeshift furniture for his apartment. By reading and selling each book, Fogg measures the disappearance of his connection to the social world – he is also dismantling his apartment. At this point in his life, Fogg has 'become a gathering zero' and the room in which he lives is 'a machine that measured my condition: how much of me remained, how much of me was no longer there. ... Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear' (24). In this way, the depletion of his money, the disappearance of his uncle's legacy, and the dismantling of his furniture all measure the disintegration of Fogg's interior sense of self, and his relationship with his environment. In an earlier version of the book, then called *Columbus's Egg*, Auster describes this 'quest for zero' as 'marked by a triple

injunction: to want nothing, to have nothing, to be nothing' (n. pag.)<sup>2</sup> – so Fogg's presence diminishes along with his few material possessions.

This occurs through his paradoxical strategy of virtual starvation as a means to survive poverty. As Fogg becomes progressively weaker through hunger, he is less able to halt his downward spiral. However, unlike Quinn, Fogg responds to an emotional and financial crisis with a deliberate strategy that amounts to a 'militant refusal to take any action at all' (*Moon Palace* 20-1), designed to separate his interior sense of self from his physical body (29). 'I would turn my life into a work of art', he asserts:

sacrificing myself to such exquisite paradoxes that every breath I took would teach me how to savor my own doom. The signs pointed to a total eclipse, ... the image of that darkness gradually lured me in, seduced me with the simplicity of its design. ... The moon would block the sun, and at that point I would vanish.

(21)

'This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition', he tells us, following the same strategy as Hamsun's 'hunger-artist'. In 'The Art of Hunger' Auster describes Hamsun's 'narrator-hero' as 'a monster of intellectual arrogance' (*Hunger* 11). In *Moon Palace*, Auster tests Hamsun's model of aesthetic obstinacy through Fogg's experiences of contemporary New York. Both characters embark on an experiment with 'no controls, no stable points of reference – only variables' (12). For both Hamsun's nameless hero and Fogg, the outcome of their fast is inevitable;

<sup>2</sup> Typescript, The Berg Collection.

Auster notes that hunger 'opens the void', but 'does not have the power to seal it up' (13). Hamsun's and Auster's characters play out their predicaments on the streets of the metropolis; one in late nineteenth century Oslo, the other in late twentieth century New York. Despite the temporal and geographical distance, there are comparisons to be drawn. Auster describes Oslo in 1890 as 'a labyrinth', in which Hamsun's hero 'suffers ... nearly goes mad. He is never more than one step from collapse' (9). Fogg too experiences New York as a labyrinth of streets and conventions that he is unable to navigate because of his total social disconnection. Fogg's plunge towards confusion is assisted by his inability to deploy the appropriate 'perceptual equipment'. If he were in possession of the right ontological tools, Fogg would be able to 'disalienate' his metropolitan environment and form a more effective correspondence with the complexities of his physical and social realm.

Like Quinn, Fogg colonises his vacated interior with the stereotype of the urban bum. By occupying the social margins he confronts the necessary conventions of the streets, and the need for physical and behavioural conformity. Fogg's failure to comprehend the norms of the crowd, that most ubiquitous of metropolitan symbols, exemplifies how his descent into the abyss dislocates him from the social world. Walter Benjamin describes how the crowd is the natural environment of the *flâneur* and how this figure emerges from the crowd to observe and record it. However, Fogg does not possess the metropolitan knowledge and composure that the *flâneur* deploys to survive the 'series of shocks and collisions' of the crowd (*Baudelaire* 132). Through the work of Poe and Baudelaire, Benjamin similarly considers the conventions of behaviour that the streets require. In the crowd Fogg discovers that he is unable to adopt the behavioural norms that are required of him. His responses owe more to Poe's 'Man of the Crowd' than to the *flâneur*. Like Poe's character 'his

composure gives way to manic behaviour' (129), and disorientation forces Fogg to retreat to the relative calm of Central Park. Initially the homeless Fogg wanders midtown Manhattan indiscriminately. But soon he finds the streets to be an unforgiving environment. The rigid codes of metropolitan behaviour dictate 'the way you act inside your clothes' and preclude any 'spontaneous or involuntary behaviour' (56-7). 'In the streets', Fogg discovers that:

everything is bodies and commotion, ... you cannot enter them without adhering to a rigid protocol of behavior. To walk among the crowd means never going faster than anyone else, never lagging behind your neighbor, never doing anything to disrupt the flow of human traffic. If you play by the rules of the game, people tend to ignore you. There is a particular glaze that comes over the eyes of New Yorkers when they walk through the streets, a natural and perhaps necessary form of indifference to others.

(56)

Where Auster presented Quinn's streets as devoid of life, always empty and lonely, he shows Fogg's streets to be tumultuous, so admitting into his literature a sense of the interrelation of myriad lives intersecting in the metropolis. A metropolitan environment teeming with life, even if it is hostile to Fogg's predicament, is more able and likely to offer the possibility of rescue for him. However, the streets become a place that he dreads as they emphasise his status as 'a speck, a vagabond, a pox' (57) – in short, a derelict. Central Park, in contrast to the streets, is 'a sanctuary, a refuge of inwardness against the grinding demands of the streets' (56). The park

offers a retreat from the gridwork of 'the massive streets and towers', where the self is easily separated from the world (ibid). Here, the 'democratic' space of the park enables Fogg to contemplate his inner life. For him, the boundary of the park marks the edge of a space that promotes interior reflection, while the streets beyond demand the examination of the individual's relationship to a wider social realm through external projection. However, the park alone is unable to physically sustain Fogg, and he needs to venture on to the streets to buy food when the scraps left by picnickers are insufficient. Fogg's experiences both in the park and on the streets demonstrate to him that 'you cannot live without establishing an equilibrium between inner and outer' (58). As a result of this episode in his life, Fogg comes to understand his place in 'the monstrous / sum of particulars', and the need to break the cycle of his isolation. But at the time, these confusing events represent the lowest point in Fogg's life.

Where *The New York Trilogy* figured an incoherent relationship with the metropolitan environment and with language as a physical erasure or disappearance, *Leviathan* associates these things with a physical, literal and bodily disintegration. When Aaron describes 'my poor friend bursting into pieces when the bomb went off, my poor friend's body scattering in the wind' (242), he is describing the final event in Sachs' long and eventful descent into the abyss. 'In fifteen years', Aaron tells us, 'Sachs travelled from one end of himself to the other, and by the time he came to that last place, I doubt he even knew who he was anymore' (13). Thus, Sachs' unstable and incoherent identity drives him towards his own physical destruction.

When they first meet in the West Village's Nashe's Tavern for a book reading, Aaron is struck by Sachs' 'generosity', 'warmth and intelligence' (13). Aaron relates

these aspects of Sachs' identity and personality to his early capacity with language and the way 'he steered himself through the world' with a clear sense of direction (16). Then, Sachs was 'at home in his surroundings' (17), and his marriage to Fanny is a picture of domestic happiness of the same order as the 'Austers' in 'City of Glass' (17, 52). Indicative of Sachs' stability is the accomplishment of his writing and storytelling, through which Auster shows that he has located himself securely in the world. Sachs' writing is 'marked by great precision and economy, a genuine gift for the apt phrase' (17). He also apprehends the world with a literary sensibility, able to 'read the world as though it were a work of imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real' (24). By adding an imaginary dimension to the world he inhabits, Sachs is able to disalienate and re-enchant his metropolitan environment, and to insert himself into its physical and social structures with a greater degree of flexibility than Aaron.

In the early passages of the narrative, Auster shows how the availability of language for Sachs is in part related to his ability to operate flexibly within the constraints and structures of New York social life. Aaron describes the social conventions Sachs employs so as to freely explore the sensations and impressions of New York:

Social life in New York tends to be quite rigid. A simple dinner can take weeks of advance planning, and the best of friends can sometimes go months without any contact at all. With Sachs, however, impromptu meetings were the norm. He worked when the spirit moved him (most often late at night), and the rest of the time he roamed free, prowling the streets of the city like some nineteenth-



century *flâneur*, following his nose wherever it happened to take him.

... He wasn't beholden to the clock in the way other people are.

(40-1)

Auster's representation of an urban wanderer here reaffirms Benjamin's description of the *flâneur* 'botanizing on the asphalt'. Because Sachs operates, as de Certeau would describe it, 'below the threshold' of conventional New York routines and in 'the city's grasp', he experiences the metropolis at a 'local' level that reveals to him the power of the streets. Through his immediate experience of the city, Sachs is able to respond to his metropolitan environment flexibly and intuitively. And by employing his time to 'peruse' the metropolis, his experience of it reveals the 'phantasmagorical' and lyrical qualities of metropolitan life that are to be found in galleries, museums and books.

The literary product of Sachs' unstructured routines is a stream of magazine essays and a novel, *The New Colossus*. This text is named for the Emma Lazarus poem engraved into plinth of the Statue of Liberty. Lazarus appears as a character in this most post-modern of texts that, like E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1976), incorporates real and fictional characters in events from across history and literature. *The New Colossus*, in a similar way to Stillman's fictional text in the *Trilogy*, explores the national cultural myth of America as the new Eden, and how that vision has become corrupted by a new 'fall' and the consequent post-lapsarian failure of language. In Sachs' novel, Emma Lazarus is given Thoreau's pocket compass as a gift. Aaron interprets this act as 'America has lost its way. Thoreau was the one man who could read the compass for us, and now that he has gone, we have no hope of finding ourselves again' (38-9). In *Leviathan* this compass represents a way of locating himself in the world for Sachs, and plays a crucial symbolic role in his

attempt to re-establish his stability. As a writer without a structured routine, Sachs' participation in this street-level activity is invisible to the rational and geometric view of power, and so has the capacity to contradict power's discourses. Auster relates the fugitive and clandestine activity of Sachs' *flânerie* to his facility with language. The relaxed nature of Sachs' relationship with New York also demonstrates that at this point in his career, Auster wanted to incorporate the metropolis into his work as a potential location for a supportive sense of self that is situated and relational. Sachs is able to orient himself in his Manhattan milieu, and relates comfortably with the social realm of artists and writers, but only in as much as it is immediate and 'local'.

However, Sachs suffers a catastrophic accident that critically undermines his stability. At a party given by Aaron's literary agent in Brooklyn to witness the centennial celebrations of the Statue of Liberty, he suffers a personal and literal version of the collective national 'fall'. Like Adam, Sachs faces the temptation of a woman (Maria Turner), and in succumbing he topples from the fire escape and is only saved by a clothesline (106-7).<sup>3</sup> After his fall, Sachs at first refuses to speak, later claiming this to be a turn inwards to focus on a profound and 'extraordinary' event (119). Auster presents this fall as a pivotal point in the narrative, marking the point at which Sachs' grasp on language begins to fail, and his mental and eventual physical disintegration began:

His body mended, but he was never the same after that. In those few seconds before he hit the ground, it was as if Sachs lost everything.

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<sup>3</sup> This event is a reinterpretation of a fall Auster's father had from the roof of a tenement. His fall was broken by a clothesline, and he escaped virtually unhurt (*Hunger* 374).

His entire life flew apart in midair, and from that moment until his death four years later, he never put it back together.

(107)

At this point the trajectories of the three author-characters (Fogg, Sachs, Aaron) diverge. Sachs goes on to leave his domestic stability with Fanny, to continue his descent into the language void, to become lost and confront death in a parodic American wilderness (Vermont), and to embark on his disenchantment with America's political direction that will lead him to a campaign of benign terrorism. Along this route, he attempts to re-impose stability on his life by participating in Maria Turner's art and inserting himself into a family, but as I will show, the conditions under which this stability is sought is fundamental to its success or failure.

### Rescue

Meanwhile, in *Moon Palace*, Fogg's emotional rescue comes through Kitty Wu, a dancer, while the photographer and conceptual artist, Maria Turner, rescues Aaron from his linguistic and social dysfunction. Both Kitty and Maria bear some resemblances to the character Sophie in 'The Locked Room': Sophie's sensuality and watchfulness comes, in part, from her involvement with the arts – she is a music teacher (*Trilogy* 204). The potential connection between Sophie's view of the world 'from the heart of a deep inner vigilance' and her music is reinforced by the relationship Kitty has with the physical world and her artistic practices. It is with the support of these women that the Narrator and Fogg find their 'true place in the world'

beyond themselves. Semiotic art forms are exclusively feminine in these texts, but as Effing in *Moon Palace* and Auggie in the films (see Chapter 8) demonstrate, painting and photographic art forms are not exclusively gendered feminine in Auster's work.

A further important aspect of Kitty and Maria's relationships to the world is that of chance. For both of them, but for Maria in particular, chance is a primal force that drives their lives and their aesthetic practices. Chance operates in a 'local' understanding of metropolitan living as an essential form of causality when experience cannot be organised into large and deterministic structures. When metropolitan life is lived close-up, structures are not visible in their entirety to the individual, and so the intersections of myriad relationships take on the appearance of pure contingency. Consequently, in these texts, chance meetings within artistic and creative social groups provide affirmative connections for 'fallen' characters to begin emerging from the abyss.

In an environment as complex and multitudinous as the city, rule and chance can operate to bring some kind of order to chaotic urban artistic forms, such as Maria's photography. Auster uses rule and chance as an important aspect of his literary aesthetic. Rule clearly is an ordering discourse, setting limits and providing structures such as conventions of representation, subject matter, composition and interpretation. Chance operates within these structures when the individual, such as the artist Maria, allows aleatorical processes to bring together unexpected elements, images and practices. Auster, then, comes to understand chance too as an organising principle in art and life. Rule and chance operate in Auster's work on two aesthetic bases. On the one hand, chance paradoxically provides causality in a seemingly chaotic environment, which is nonetheless constrained by highly regulated structures which set limits. On the other hand, the rule and chance encountered in Maria's

aleatorical artistic production, like the structures and play of language and the grid and possibilities of the streets, provide Auster with a prime metaphor for urban social relationships.

In an interview Auster said:

In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist. Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives. ... What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in.

(*Hunger* 287-8)

He goes on to say:

what I am talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen... . In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency.

(288-9)

The philosophy of the contingent is translated in these books as a series of chance meetings at social gatherings, and Maria's aleatorical art, which is based on the work of French artist, Sophie Calle.<sup>4</sup> In the opening passage of *Moon Palace* Fogg

<sup>4</sup> An inscription in this book reads: 'The author extends special thanks to Sophie Calle for permission to mingle fact with fiction.'

invokes chance as a motivating force in his life. He says of his chance meeting with Kitty: 'I came to see that chance as a form of readiness, a way of saving myself through the minds of others' (1). Much later, Fogg's paternity is restored by chance when he unknowingly works for his grandfather, and subsequently meets his father. However, the conventions of genealogy are constantly undermined here. Genealogy is usurped in this text by coincidence, paternity is discovered by accident, and the privileges that it conventionally confers, such as inheritance, are lost as soon as they are acquired.<sup>5</sup> As such, chance emerges as an aesthetic strategy in Auster's work at this point in his career, and contingency can be seen to become an organising principle in the chaotic environment of New York. Consequently, we should not see chance in Auster's work as complete randomness at work, or as a deterministic process. Chance is, instead, more a denial of statistical reality and an expression of his own seemingly bizarre experiences.

Fogg's and Sachs' fates contrast fundamentally. The outcome of Fogg's nihilistic project depends on the combination of random factors intersecting around him at the critical moment – some of his making, some the making of others. Hamsun's model of the 'hunger artist' suggests that in the nineteenth century metropolis the artist will 'arrive at nothing' because his fate is existentially fixed by his own actions (*Hunger* 20). However, in Fogg's contemporary New York, Auster proposes a more optimistic outcome. The artist's fate remains undetermined as a consequence of the complex interrelation of lives in the contemporary metropolis, and Fogg's openness to chance 'through the minds of others'.

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<sup>5</sup> On the conventional use of genealogy in the *Moon Palace* see also Steve Weisenburger (130-134). 'Inside *Moon Palace*'. Dennis Barone (ed). *Beyond the Red Notebook*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995. 129-142.

The contingent interconnection that emerges from Fogg's 'form of readiness' comes in the person of Kitty Wu. In Fogg's unbalanced life, she represents a balance between control and chance. In contrast to him, Kitty is able to hold herself in physical and mental readiness for the random events with which the metropolis confronts her. Fogg becomes aware of the influence that such a coincidence of powers in one person could hold over his perilous condition, and is immediately drawn to her combination of spirituality and physical grace. Dancing provides Kitty with her physical ease but also, as a non-verbal spatial system of language, it offers an accomplished capacity of expression, that Fogg lacks. Through a sympathetic relationship with Kitty, Fogg is able to go on to recover some degree of language facility.

Kitty and Fogg's initial meeting occurs by chance. In a period of desolation just prior to eviction from his apartment, Fogg attempts to contact David Zimmer, his freshman roommate (33). However, Zimmer's apartment has been taken over by a group of students from Juilliard who are 'musicians, dancers, singers' who have gathered for a communal breakfast, and amongst whom is Kitty (35). Fogg is attracted by the ease of her physical relationship with the space she occupies. She in turn is fascinated by the learning and intensity that he displays in an extended and rambling monologue on literature and space travel.

Contingency haunts Fogg and Kitty's early encounters. Their initial meeting and their reunion in the park are the consequence of the intersection of countless possibilities. Michel de Certeau describes how the life of the unsuspecting individual is influenced by the intersection of myriad powers circulating around them, such that 'each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of ... relational determinations interact' (xi). Uncle Victor describes the same process

in a more lyrical way. 'Everything works out in the end, ... everything connects' he tells Fogg. 'The nine circles. The nine planets. The nine innings. Our nine lives. ... The correspondences are infinite' (14). After his rescue from the park, Fogg attends an army medical to assess his suitability for service in Vietnam. He explains the causal motivations for his current condition in terms that echo his uncle's. 'Our lives are determined by manifold contingencies', he tells the military doctor, 'and every day we struggle against these shocks and accidents in order to keep our balance' (80). By abandoning himself to the forces of contingency, Fogg hopes to 'reveal some secret harmony', a pattern that would give meaning to the world (ibid). That he fails to find a coherent pattern confirms Fogg's belief that the world has become entirely random, and that he must seek an ordering principle elsewhere.

One such contingent event, and interaction of incoherent determinants, is Kitty and Zimmer's discovery of the delirious Fogg in Central Park. Given the multitudes that inhabit New York, the chances of finding an individual are slight. That, against all the probabilities, Kitty and Fogg are re-united, exemplifies Auster's 'philosophy of the contingent', and pre-figures the bizarre coincidences that unfold through the rest of the narrative. The emotional dimension of his rescue is of the greatest importance to Fogg. Like the Narrator in the *Trilogy*, he suddenly discovers that the love of another individual has redemptive powers. Discovering what his friends did for him prompts Fogg to reassess the reality of his experiences. In a striking passage, Fogg describes how Kitty and Zimmer drop everything to search for him. 'That was how I finally came to be rescued: because the two of them went out and looked for me', he writes:



I was not aware of it at the time ... . In some sense, it alters the reality of what I experienced. I had jumped off the edge of a cliff, and then, just as I was about to hit bottom, an extraordinary event took place: I learned that there were people who loved me. To be loved like that makes all the difference. It does not lessen the terror of the fall, but it gives a new perspective on what that terror means. I had jumped off the edge, and then, at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair. That something is what I define as love. It is the one thing that can stop a man from falling, the one thing powerful enough to negate the laws of gravity.

(50)

Fogg's descent is arrested, first through the chance encounters with Kitty, and then through the love of his friends. In expressing this love, Kitty and Zimmer begin to re-articulate the connections between Fogg and the wider society. Once rescued, Fogg realises that his nihilistic experiment had not demonstrated courage, but had displayed his 'contempt for the world' (73). With this realisation Fogg begins to build his recovery with the help of his friends. Zimmer insists that Fogg recuperate at his apartment; and soon they venture out each night to a nearby West Village bar to drink beer and watch baseball. This time marks 'an exquisitely tranquil period' in their lives: 'a brief moment of standing still before moving on again' (82). Zimmer (room in German) once again represents a sanctuary from the tumultuous processes of the metropolis.

Fogg moves on from the safety of this pleasant and static existence when he and Kitty become lovers. Physical and emotional love with Kitty alters Fogg. 'I am

not just talking about sex or the permutations of desire', he insists, 'but the crumbling of inner walls, an earthquake in the heart of my solitude' (94). Fogg's inner state is profoundly altered, and to mark the beginning of this new social phase of his life, he shares a meal with his friends at the Moon Palace Chinese restaurant near to his old apartment in Columbia Heights. Fogg had eaten here alone at a particularly desperate time in his experiment. Then he had forced the food down his own throat – the lonely and traumatic event conjuring an image of himself in pieces (43). In contrast, the meal with Kitty and Zimmer represents for Fogg 'a moment of astonishing joy and equilibrium, as though my friends had gathered there to celebrate my return to the land of the living' (96). This social space, a 'great, good place' for gathering and sharing, represents Fogg's rehabilitation into a social being.

Auster introduces a further element of ease between the individual and her environment with Kitty's choice of a physical art form – that of dance. By being in control of her own bodily space – 'the geography closest in' (as Soja terms it, *Thirdspace* 123) – Kitty exerts far greater control over the spatial realm that she inhabits, in contrast to Fogg. Consequently, her role in his rescue is not entirely dependent on chance. In contrast to his discomfort in his own clothes, Kitty is at ease with her own beauty and corporeality. Fogg relates how she dominates the space around her by combining her physical and cerebral powers. 'I found her beautiful,' he writes:

but more than that I liked the way she held herself, the way she did not seem to be paralyzed by her beauty as so many beautiful girls did. Perhaps it was the freedom of her gestures, the blunt, down-to-earth

quality I heard in her voice. This was ... someone who knew her way around, who had managed to learn things for herself.

(37)

Kittys's control over and in space is inherently connected to her dancing, because she:

was not afraid of herself, and she lived inside her body without embarrassment or second thoughts. ... Because she took pleasure in her body, it was possible for her to dance.

(94)

Kitty's corporeal ease and control contrasts with Fogg's father, Sol, who he meets near the end of the narrative. He is 'a pandemonium of flesh' who occupies more space than ordinary people and 'seemed to overflow it, to ooze out from the edges of himself and inhabit areas where he was not' (235). This spatial instability ultimately proves fatal, and he topples into an open grave and later dies of his injuries (295-300).

Although Fogg finds a new accommodation with language through Kitty, certain linguistic sign systems continue to evade his powers of interpretation. Both the non-linguistic spatial expression of dancing and Chinese symbols remains a mystery to him. In 'White Spaces' Auster writes of the relationship between the movement of a body and speech:

To think of motion not merely as a function of the body but as an extension of the mind. In the same way, to think of speech not as an extension of the mind but as a function of the body ... sounds are no

less a gesture than a hand is when outstretched in the air toward another hand ...

(*Ground Work* 82)

Each move, each gesture of dance, carries meaning that is interpreted between the dancer and the audience. But for Fogg, despite following 'her body around the stage with a kind of delirious concentration', Kitty's dancing remains 'utterly foreign ... a thing that stood beyond the grasp of words' (*Moon* 96).

When Fogg and Kitty rent an apartment in New York's Chinatown, Fogg encounters a similar quality of 'dislocation and confusion' promoted by the impenetrability of the Chinese language. Here because of the language barrier and the unfamiliar system of signs, Fogg is unable to 'penetrate the meanings' of his surroundings, and so he is limited to 'the mute surfaces of things' (230).

In *Leviathan*, Aaron's 'rescue' is less dramatic than Fogg's but, given Sachs' ultimate fate, no less timely. Since the break-up of his marriage Aaron has been living, like A. in *Solitude*, in a sublet on Varrick Street that has become his 'sanctuary of inwardness' (57). Through Sachs and Fanny's social network of artistic and creative people, Aaron is drawn out of his solitude. He meets Maria Turner at a dinner party at their Brooklyn apartment that exemplifies the interrelationships that form their New York social world. It is here that 'half of New York' seems to assemble to eat, drink and talk (58). The parties are made up of '[a]rtists, writers, professors, critics, editors, gallery owners' (*ibid*) , and it is from this crowd of people that Maria emerges to rescue Aaron from his loneliness. The physical presence that Maria and Kitty present has many similar qualities. Maria is a self-possessed woman in control of her body, a

power that she extends to her physical and social environment. An important aspect of her physicality, like Kitty's, is her eroticism. Aaron describes the graceful 'way she carried herself in her clothes ... that would unmask itself in little flashes of erotic forgetfulness' (59). It is this sexual charge to Maria's presence that will later tempt Sachs to his fall.

Maria understands the complexities of contemporary metropolitan society, and she is able to draw many of the seemingly uncontrollable elements of the metropolis into a strategy and contain their disorder – understanding the interplay of structure and chaos, rule and chance. Aaron describes Maria as 'a good bourgeois girl who had mastered the rules of social behavior, but at the same time it was as if she no longer believed in them' (59). Because Maria has such a mastery of the rules she is able to insert herself into metropolitan settings, and experience them as the subject matter of her art. Maria's art, like that of the French artist Sophie Calle upon whom she is modelled, depends on the aleatorical play of contingent elements to shape the outcome of a piece. Maria's life is lived as a 'set of bizarre, private rituals', in which experiences are systematised within their own risks and limitations (60). In other words, Maria's life is contained by the limits of rule, but within those structures chance and contingency are allowed free rein to produce one of any number of outcomes. Because of her influence on peoples' lives and her mode of artistic production, Aaron calls Maria 'the reigning spirit of chance, ... the goddess of the unpredictable' (102). The streets of New York City provide an ideal environment for this interplay of rule and chance. Maria constructs two particularly metropolitan 'pieces' on the streets. For the first one, she would leave her loft on Duane Street and follow a randomly chosen individual around the streets for the day, photographing them and constructing fictional biographies. For the other she made herself the

subject of the piece by employing a private detective to follow her and file a report on her movements (62).<sup>6</sup> Maria's purpose as a *flâneuse* is to watch and be watched, to expose the 'fraught meanings of microscopic actions', and to reconstitute the essence of things from a fragment (63). This approach to urban life and art emphasises the same metropolitan phenomena as the 'local' perspective. Maria's art focuses on the human scale of metropolitan activity, recording the 'practices of everyday life' (de Certeau, see Chapter 1) and the visceral and the sensual aspects of the streets. Her attempt to trace and read the movements of individuals around New York is a reaffirmation of de Certeau's 'urban poems' as her pieces attempt to diagnose individual's metropolitan psychoses from the fragments of observable symptoms. Like Sachs earlier in the novel, she experiences the city in close-up, dense with detail and urban impressions, which at the same time means that her view is incomplete because it is unable to accommodate the panoramic scope necessary to apprehend the totality of the metropolis.

Maria's metropolitan stability provides Aaron with a social and personal foundation from which to explore his own social contingencies. A brief affair with Fanny (a curator of American landscape painting at the Brooklyn Museum) provides him with an 'enigmatic point of stillness' (84) amid the turmoil of his life. Then, under the influence of Maria's 'spirit of chance', Aaron meets Iris, and all is motion again. They meet at a gallery on Wooster Street, on the night of the opening of Maria's second exhibition. Iris is drawn into Aaron's social orbit through the network

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<sup>6</sup> For more about Maria's 'pieces' and their origins in the artistic career of Sophie Calle, see Calle, *Double Game* (London: Violet, 1999), in which Parts I and II explore the 'rituals' that Auster borrows from Sophie Calle, and reinterprets two of those using the additional rules supplied by Auster in

of creative types that has Sachs and Fanny at its centre. It is only through a series of partial and contingent connections that Iris and Aaron come to meet. Aaron acknowledges that '[d]ecades would have passed before we found ourselves standing in the same room again' (101). She becomes his 'happy ending, the miracle that had fallen down on me when I was least expecting it. We took each other by storm and nothing has ever been the same for me since' (103).

The character of Iris remains very much in the background of this story, but provides the stability for Aaron to continue building his secure sense of self and to locate his place in the world. Iris does not conform to the model of the non-verbal artist negotiating an exceptional spatial environment set by Kitty and Maria. Iris is, instead, a literary character, a graduate student in English at Columbia. Her name, too, is resonant of Auster's poetic concerns, and those of the 'Objectivists', as they sought to occupy the 'realm of the naked eye'. Iris's symbolic ocularity also stands in contrast to Fanny's (symbolic and actual) corporeality, and Maria's physical and erotic presence. These qualities put Iris in the poetic order that Oppen and Reznikoff occupy. This suggests that, for Auster in these texts, corporeal characters, such as Fanny and Maria, are essential to 'fallen' writer-characters to recover the relationship between the word and the world. However, once they have achieved a stable relationship with the world, then new relationships need to be formed to maintain that stability. Finally, Iris is Siri spelled backwards, the name of Auster's second wife, with whom there are a number of biographical correspondences.<sup>7</sup>

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*Leviathan*. Calle also collaborated with Auster on a piece called 'Gotham Handbook' included in *Double Game* (see Chapter 8).

<sup>7</sup> Iris is not just a representation of Siri in Auster's work, she also represents one of his intertextual borrowings. In an interview, Siri Hustvedt has described how Iris is a character in her own book

Aaron's story acts as a counter-narrative to Sachs'. After his fall Sachs renegotiates the terms of his relationship with the physical and social metropolis. Aaron sees little of him until he encounters him on the street in Downtown Manhattan. Aaron spots Sachs on an aimless urban wander similar to his earlier *flânerie*. However, Sachs' engagement with his environment is now incomplete; he appears to apprehend objects in a partial and fleeting way, merely acknowledging their surface. In the two hours that Aaron follows him through the 'canyons of New York', 'Sachs wandered around the streets like a lost soul, roaming haphazardly between Times Square and Greenwich Village at the same slow and contemplative pace, ... never seeming to care where he was' (125). But Aaron himself is going on 'partial evidence' (126). Sachs has become one of Maria's pieces, and she is following him around Manhattan photographing him for a project called 'Thursdays with Ben' (125-30) – a 'combination of documentary and play, the objectification of inner states' (127). Maria tries to capture Sachs' inner state with her camera as he wanders the streets of New York. Auster employs the city itself as the measure of Sachs' turmoil, and his partial connections with it indicate the imbalance between his interior and exterior selves. Maria plays the part of the detective (reversing again the roles of her earlier piece) who attempts to reveal some truthful or authentic sense of Sachs from the evidence because 'he was no longer able to see himself' (129). Ultimately, the project fails as a consequence of Sachs' inability to recover the social connections that had formed the basis for his earlier self, and he is unable to retake his place in metropolitan society. These failures, of Sachs as a *flâneur* and Maria's piece, suggest

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*Blindfold*, and how Paul asked if his character could marry hers in *Leviathan*. *Front Row*. Radio Four.



that the metropolis as Sachs is experiencing it here is illegible, and that *flâneurie* as a way of engaging with the city is an inappropriate tool in contemporary New York.

Sachs withdraws from New York society completely when, at Aaron's prompting, he is offered the chance to publish a collection of his essays. He leaves Fanny, and goes to the family farmhouse in the Vermont countryside to work, where he is more settled (133-6). However, when Sachs attempts to explore the Vermont woods, in a similar way to Thoreau exploring the Massachusetts countryside, he soon becomes lost (147-51). He loses his bearings, becomes disorientated, and is unable to establish coordinates that will either reveal to him his location or allow him to navigate his way out of this new predicament. Sachs is literally unable to locate himself in the world. The disorientation he experiences and the environment in which he finds himself recall the key theme of Thoreau's compass explored in *The New Colossus* – without it, Sachs has no hope of finding himself again. Beaten by the impenetrability of the woods, he sleeps on the ground, and the next morning flags down a truck on the first highway he comes to. The young driver, Dwight, takes a country road back towards the farmhouse. It is on this journey that violence and terrorism enter Sachs' life.

They encounter a car on the lonely road and Dwight stops to offer assistance. The driver of the car shoots Dwight dead, and Sachs, in both anger and self-defence, bludgeons the killer to death with a softball bat from the truck (152-3). In panic he flees the scene in the man's car, and when he stops he discovers in the trunk bomb-making equipment, around one hundred and sixty five thousand dollars in cash, and a passport in the name of Reed Dimaggio for the man he has killed (156-7).

Sachs' experiences demonstrate that even in rural Vermont the innocent spaces of the American Eden have been swept away by the corrupt spaces of the

'fallen' society of modern America. Just as in the metropolis, the Vermont countryside contains the potential for disorientation and random, anonymous violence. The chance encounter with the gunman also serves Auster as a causal narrative event that provides a link between Sachs' 'fall' and his eventual destruction. Coincidence can clearly be the bearer of misfortune as well as rescue.

In *Moon Palace*, Uncle Victor identified the infinite coincidences that occur in contemporary life. One of these 'confluences' hauls Fogg from the void into the light of the social realm and sanity. In *Leviathan*, Aaron asserts that '[e]verything is connected to everything else, every story overlaps with every other story' (51). He also believes that '*[a]nything can happen. And one way or another, it always does*' (160, original emphasis). For Sachs, the powers of contingency act not to rescue him, but to accelerate his descent into the abyss. Maria Turner knows Reed Dimmagio as the husband of a friend, Lillian Stern, demonstrating, in Auster's fiction, the almost infinite interconnectedness of lives and the power of the metropolis to bring them together. The rapidly disintegrating Sachs grasps the opportunity of this 'nightmare coincidence' (167) to redress the balance of his actions. He would embrace this uncanny event and 'breathe it into himself as a sustaining event' (ibid). He travels to Berkely in California to hand the money over to Lillian.

Auster once again exploits the uncanny results of coincidence when Maria decides to use a diary she has found in the street as the basis for a project, and she re-establishes her friendship with Lillian. This project exemplifies how Auster represents the 'local' understanding of contemporary metropolitan life. By visiting the social and material landmarks that constitute an individual's metropolitan existence, it is possible to map their local experience onto the urban fabric to reveal the personal, immediate and sensual city that they experience. Maria proposed a

'portrait *in absentia*' of the man the diary belonged to, 'an outline drawn around an empty space' that she could fill in by exploring his social world and interviewing the individuals who constitute it (67, original emphasis). Lillian is an actress paying her way through drama school by prostitution. This combination of imitation and eroticism reveals itself in a series of photographs that Maria takes of Lillian that echo Kitty's physical presence. Lillian, Maria tells Aaron, has 'a quality that is always coming to the surface ... . She's completely relaxed in her own skin' (71). At this stage in their lives, Lillian and Maria seem similarly visceral; they are corporeal and sensuous, spontaneous and open to chance.

In California, Lillian and her daughter, Maria, come to represent for Sachs the opportunity for redemption and domestic stability that Aaron has achieved with Iris. Sachs takes the place of the man he has killed: as husband to Dimaggio's wife, and father to his daughter (195-212). However, the prevailing conditions are unpromising.

Auster shows that, unlike Kitty, instead of Lillian representing a series of connections to a wider society, she represents a withdrawal from it. She is not in New York where Sachs' social circle operates, and he has severed his connections with Maria and Fanny (195, 159). As a result, rather than finding stability with Lillian, Sachs is put 'permanently off balance' because Maria only reveals to him her surface beauty; 'she refused to reveal herself ..., which meant that she never became more than an object, never more than the sum of her physical self' (198). Consequently, Lillian does not have the depth of personality or the necessary relationship with the world to become the force in Sachs' life that can act as a stable point of reference, the foundation on which to establish a coherent sense of self, and the catalyst to launch

the progressively disconnected Sachs back into the social realm where he had once been so effective.

For less than two weeks Sachs and Lillian do manage a kind of domestic stability, following a night of passion during which Lillian 'emptied him out ... dismantled him', (211) but in no way releases him from the solitude which is consuming him. Later Sachs describes Lillian as 'wild', 'incandescent', and 'out of control' (228). It is this boundary-less aspect to Lillian that sets her apart from Maria or Iris in the life of Aaron, or Kitty in the life of Fogg. These other women understand the limits that structures – artistic, social or physical – inscribe in their everyday lives. Maria particularly allows free rein to interplay within strictly regulated limits, but it is the way that these women's metropolitan strategies contain a particular understanding of contemporary life that gives their physical presence the power to check Aaron and Fogg's descent into the void. Sachs' attempt to locate himself in the world with Lillian as the point of reference founders because she is as unstable and disorientated as he is.

Finally, the end of the relationship with Lillian strips Sachs of his last vestige of social contact, and he embarks on his nihilistic campaign. Under the pseudonym 'The Phantom of Liberty' he tapes explosives to the crown of scale models of The Statue of Liberty in America's small towns (215-6). Dimaggio's emergent campaign against environmental targets for The Children of the Planet provides the inspiration, while the money finances the four-year bombing spree. After he had completed his thesis on the anarchist Alexander Berkman, Dimaggio abandoned academia and writing for direct political action (223). Sachs adds his personal dimension to the crusade by incorporating The Statue of Liberty, which is central to both his fall and *The New Colossus*, and channels his creative energies into concocting false identities

and cover stories for his activities (231). 'The Phantom of Liberty' attempts to rearticulate the fallen America with its founding principles by offering a version of Thoreau's compass by which to map a political and moral path, and 'to look after itself and mend its ways' (217). The extent to which America has fallen though, is measured by the way the 'Phantom' is commodified, even to the extent of inspiring a stripping act in which the 'Phantom' seduces and disrobes the Statue of Liberty (234).

*Leviathan* is inscribed to Auster's friend, Don DeLillo, and is contemporaneous with *Mao II*, a book that is also about terrorism. Both these novels question the power of literature in a complex world where the transparently violent acts of terrorists are more influential than books and poems. That Sachs fails, and entrusts his story to Aaron strongly suggests that Auster retains his belief in the power of art and that he personally, as an artist, feels more attuned to Aaron's experience. Interestingly, while DeLillo was writing and publishing his epic *Underworld* (1998) encompassing most of America's post-war history, Auster was producing his slight and introverted autobiographical *Hand to Mouth*, which once more records his early years of struggle. This divergence of artistic paths suggests that Auster perceives fiction more as a way of examining and emphasising the personal than confronting the political, an emphasis suggested too by the peripheral role that major historical events, such as the depression, wars and the moon landings play in his work.

Sachs' political project is not just his own, however, since his choice of direct intervention is driven by the work started by Dimaggio (228). Accompanying his abandonment of social contacts (first Fanny, then Maria, and finally Lillian) is a sense that Sachs is emptying himself out, vacating his interiority for the man he has killed – 'a gradual surrender to Dimaggio', Aaron calls it (223). By abandoning the

personality of his disintegrating self, Sachs finds new purpose and coherence. 'It was a marvellous confluence', Sachs tells Aaron:

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)

The prescience of this statement is depressing given the information that the reader is armed with from the opening passage of the book. Clearly Sachs' 'unifying principle' is unable to prevent his 'body burst[ing] into dozens of small pieces' (1).

In many ways, the symptoms of Sachs' breakdown parallel Fredric Jameson's descriptive model of cultural and linguistic schizophrenia. When the relationship between a word and what it means breaks down, and 'when the links of the signifying chain snap', Jameson observes:

then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to

unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.

(*Postmodernism* 26-7)

Sachs too struggles to stabilise his language, his temporal experience, and his 'psychic' internal life. Along with the rubble of his language and his life, Auster represents Sachs' interior disunity as a literal disintegration into thousands of bodily fragments.<sup>8</sup> Sachs is unable to differentiate his past from his future and create for himself a stable present. Like his novel, episodes from across his life, like a childhood anecdote about the statue of liberty and his fall, become confused in the failure of his 'unifying principle'.

### Recovery

At this point in the story, the counter-narratives of Sachs and Aaron intersect in Vermont on their different trajectories. Sachs entrusts his story to Aaron, and the mantle of linguistic and literary achievement passes to him as Sachs concedes that he is no longer able to connect with the earlier self who had such a close relationship

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<sup>8</sup> See also Linda L. Fleck, 'From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster's *Leviathan*'. *Critique*. (39.3) (Spring 1998): (258-270).

with the word. Soon Sachs is dead, and the book of his story, *Leviathan*, stands as a testament to Aaron's recovery.<sup>9</sup>

Fogg comes to occupy a similar position to Aaron. He too produces the book to testify to his recovery from his 'aphasic' episode. The story of Fogg's salvation, from the time of the indecipherable squiggles of Uncle Victor's books to the accomplished first person narrative of *Moon Palace* effortlessly straddling the twentieth century, is also the story of artistic lives – including his own. Fogg's text supports another of Uncle Victor's philosophical observations. Referring to the initials, M.S., Victor tells Fogg that '[e]very man is the author of his own life ... . The book you are writing is not finished yet. Therefore, it's a manuscript' (7). More than twenty years later Fogg has attained the linguistic ability to tackle the subject of his own life; to give it shape and form and rescue it from the symbolic indistinctness that his name invests it with. By doing so he relates the experiences that shape him as a person to the larger social and political processes of the time – the moon landings, Vietnam, campus revolts and Woodstock – without admitting them into the narrative as causal agents. Auster describes this process in the introduction to *True Tales of American Life*. 'We all have inner lives', he observes.

We all feel that we are part of the world and yet exiled from it. We all  
burn with the fires of our own existence. Words are needed to express  
what is in us ... (xvii)

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<sup>9</sup> Aaron takes the name *Leviathan* from the unfinished manuscript of Sachs' last novel. The term, once again, refers to Auster's concern with living numerously. Mark Osteen considers the parallels between Hobbes' and Auster's *Leviathan*, and he compares the state to an artificial man, 'a multitude unified in



Artists help Fogg to form points of reference upon which to construct his progressively re-socialised self. Kitty provides Fogg with a particular focus as he emerges from his personal abyss. Effing's life too provides examples of artists attempting to find ways of being in the world. His own story of isolation in the Nevada desert stands as an example of the artistic struggle for expression (152-82). Here Effing learns that art is not only about beautiful objects, but also 'a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an incidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things' (171). The work of the marginal American landscape artist Ralph Alfred Blakelock also has an instructive role in Fogg's understanding of how representational art can help the observer to understand the world (133-9). Effing directs Fogg to study Blakelock's painting, *Moonlight*, in the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>10</sup> The painting is 'a deeply contemplative work, a landscape of inwardness and calm' (137). Blakelock's paintings are dominated by moons, which become 'holes in the canvas, apertures of whiteness looking into another world' (141). *Moonlight* is no exception, where the moon represents an aperture – 'a tiny hole between self and not-self' (*Trilogy* 232) – that connects the interior self to the exterior world. As so often in Auster's literature, the figure of circles and pinpricks in the fabric of life and reality

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one person' (87). 'Phantoms of Liberty: The Secret Lives of *Leviathan*'. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 14.1 (Spring 1994): 87-91.

<sup>10</sup> This section was first published as a critical essay, 'Moonlight in the Brooklyn Museum', in *Art News*. 86.7 (September 1987). 104-105.

represents the channel between inner consciousness and an outer social world.<sup>11</sup> This picture, like *The New Colossus*, also represents the America that lost its innocence to the advance of the white man (*Moon* 139).

Fogg's encounter with Blakelock's picture helps him to find a fuller accommodation with language so that he is able to take Effing's words and record them as a documentary representation of that man's life. Effing 'authors' the 'text' of his own life through Fogg, and so Fogg needs to accurately represent what he is told. The journeys around the streets of New York prove to be a training for this central task. The accidents and losses that occurred there cannot be tolerated in a biography, where words come to be the representation of the man – his life is at stake. This is borne out by the brief appearance of the character Orlando. He is a 'linguistic alchemist' in the tradition of the Narrator and Stillman Sr. who gifts Effing an umbrella that has lost its covering and is now like 'some huge and improbable steel flower' (209). When Effing deliberately uses this 'magic' umbrella in a storm he soon catches pneumonia and dies (211-20). Effing's deliberate mis-apprehension of a linguistic sign therefore leads directly to his death.

On the death of Effing, Fogg discovers his paternity, but with the death of Sol, his life starts to disintegrate again. Fogg's own chance at fatherhood is denied when Kitty has an abortion, and the happiness they found together is found to be temporary and fragile. Despite the insights gained from his experience, Fogg is too inflexible to reconcile his internal feelings and emotions to Kitty's needs. With the loss of Kitty, Fogg's life, like Sachs', 'flew apart' (278) and his 'Chinatown paradise' (273) comes to an end.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Weisenburger (140-1).

When his inheritance is stolen, Fogg's narrative begins to draw to a close, but not a conclusion. He begins to walk west from Nevada, and three months later reaches the Pacific Ocean at Laguna Beach (306-7). Fogg has traversed the continental United States in what appears to be a traditional quest narrative. However, despite reaching journey's end, he has not found his place in the world. In a novel saturated with word plays (Fogg, Effing and Sol) the use of the word laguna at the end of the novel raises questions of resolution in a similar way to those raised in *The New York Trilogy*. Lagune is a French word, the Latin root of which is lacuna, meaning hiatus or gap. Consequently, the resolution of this novel suggests the ending is an empty space, into which nothing should be read. This interpretation is supported by the definition of lacuna as a missing page from a manuscript. Thus, the manuscript of this portion of Fogg's life remains incomplete. Instead of an ending, Auster offers us a potential beginning, where the rest of Fogg's life starts (306). His attempts to place himself in his vast and incomprehensible world of New York and America find their symbolic expression in the path of the moon into the Western sky:

Then the moon came up from behind the hills. It was a full moon, as round and yellow as a burning stone. I kept my eyes on it as it rose into the night sky, not turning away until it had found its place in the darkness.

(307)

## CHAPTER 6

### OUT OF TOWN – ‘Not New York’ and the lives of a man

The epigraph to Auster's most recent novel, *The Book of Illusions* (2002), reads:

Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery.

The quotation comes from the works of Francois-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848). Chateaubriand's autobiography is also the biography of his age, *Memoires d'outr-tombe* (*Memories From Beyond the Grave*). This text represents a significant key to understanding Auster's novel, and reflects back over the novels that immediately precede it. By invoking Chateaubriand's sentiment, Auster suggests to the reader that the characters narrated here live a number of lives within the one life, and that we should be sensitive to the various phases that these lives encompass.

Auster said in 1987 that by writing 'The Book of Memory' in the third person he had fulfilled Rimbaud's dictum of 'Je suis un autre' ('I am another'). At the same time he suggested that this capacity to become somebody else writing about himself revealed something about the solitude of the writer. Being alone in his room which is at the same time inhabited by someone else ('un autre'), is 'the moment when you are not alone anymore, when you start to feel your connection with others' (*Hunger* 277). However, the notion of the many lives in the one life adds another level of experience to looking into yourself and finding 'the world' (315-6). While Auster as a writer finds the world inside him is a place to write from, the central characters in *Illusions*

find a number of selves out in the world, each influenced by the material conditions of place. By travelling in search of an inner peace, these characters are pursuing a 'harmony' between their inner terrain and the external terrain they move through. Viewed in this way, the character's experience of transition and change from one self to another appears as a way of attempting to negotiate 'the monstrous sum / of particulars' that concerned Auster in the poem 'Disappearances'.

Earlier novels, as the preceding chapters demonstrate, explore a particular phase of the central characters' lives. Fogg, for example, describes at the beginning of his narrative how the story he has to tell marks the beginning of his life (1). The later novels considered in this chapter – *The Music of Chance*, *Mr. Vertigo* (1995), *Timbuktu* (1999) and *Illusions* – however, seek a broader view that acknowledges Uncle Victor's observation in *Moon Palace* that a man's life is a 'manuscript', incomplete until his death. Consequently, these later texts describe phases in the lives of the characters that accumulate to form a fuller appreciation of a life than Auster has represented in earlier works. His temporal and geographical focus has expanded to encompass a greater range in a single text than previously. Each phase for these characters is associated with a place, and the time to move on marks the end of that identity and the emergence of a new one.

An indication that the focus of Auster's work might expand to encompass a character's whole life – told, as it were, from beyond the grave at a point where it can be viewed as complete – can be found in the following quotation from an abandoned narrative frame for 'City of Glass' (then called *New York Spleen*). The un-named narrator, in describing the mysterious Quinn, writes:

No man is ever just one thing. To some, he will be one man, to others another, and to himself a third, or perhaps even many, all of these various men constantly appearing and receding, given the various situations in which he variously finds himself. Any number of human contradictions can exist in a single body. That has never presented a problem for the faithful observer of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

(n.pag.)

Like de Certeau, then, Auster is proposing the individual, and his or her sense of self, to be a locus of incoherent and contradictory pluralities and interacting determinants (xi). Identity depends therefore on the perception of others, and is consequently faceted. Crucially, Auster is the 'faithful observer of mankind', recording how different senses and manifestations of self advance and recede according to the 'various circumstances' of place in his novels. Mobility and movement inevitably mean the abandonment of New York City as the single focus of the characters' experience of place, and the introduction of a multitude of geographical locations across Europe and the American continent.

The places beyond New York City in Auster's work, from his own experiences described in *Solitude* through to the events described by the narrator of *Illusions*, embrace the capital cities of Western Europe, the cities and prairie-lands of America's mid-west (Chicago, Kansas), the cities and countryside of the north east (Boston, Baltimore, Vermont), and the west of the desert and California. Each of the places represented in these relatively loose geographical categories has an effect on the lives and the sense of self experienced by Auster's characters. This chapter will

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<sup>1</sup> TS, Berg Collection.

consider in detail how these spaces operate in Auster's fiction, and particularly examine how constructions of self shift in the move from one place to another.

As earlier chapters show, Auster's characters rarely fare well outside their metropolitan and predominantly New York environment. The Narrator in 'The Locked Room' suffers a complete social and linguistic breakdown in Paris. Sachs' attempt to balance the scales of justice in *Leviathan* by going to Berkeley proves ill-founded, and his lonely campaign around America's small towns ends in tragedy in Wisconsin. In *Moon Palace*, Fogg began his life in Chicago with his Uncle Victor, but Victor's quest to realise his musical talent by achieving some success ends with a lonely and untimely death in Bois, Indiana. The unfortunate Fogg then ventures to Los Angeles, only to find that irresolution and uncertainty reign there too.

In this chapter, the spaces explored range from the mid-west and Chicago of *Mister Vertigo*, to the northeastern states of America in *Timbuktu*. Rural Vermont figures as the scene of arbitrary violence and crime – a predominantly urban concern – in *The Book of Illusions*, in much the same way as it did for Sachs. The central character, Zimmer, then seeks solace in the deserts of New Mexico. First, though, we shall explore the fabular spaces of *The Music of Chance*, in which a mansion in rural Pennsylvania is the site of a bizarre and ritualistic poker game that robs the nomadic protagonists of their freedom.

It is tempting to think that this extension of geographical scale, moving from the metropolitan to the regional or continental, might represent a further opening of the fist to which Auster alludes in describing his move from poetry to prose. Chapter 2 described how the fist opens as his focus expands from the individual to the metropolitan. So why not a further opening along with this further extension of the social and geographical experience? The simple answer is that disconnection and

emptiness are the defining experience of these new places just as they are for Quinn and his like in their metropolitan environment. Foreign and distant cities lack the extended social circle that characters such as Sachs need to feed their gregarious natures. The reality of non-metropolitan spaces is that they can be literally empty, and the opportunities for locating references for self-formation and the social relationships for maintaining coherence are few.

The experience of place in these texts is also necessarily partial. Here, place, unlike the density of New York, is an underdetermined quantity in relatively empty spaces. Unlike the texts considered in preceding chapters, these places in Europe, in the mid-west and the northeast are 'un-engaging', not only because they might be complex and overwhelming like Fogg's experience of the 'systemic' and alienating metropolis, but because they are empty, or sterile, or socially limiting.

The Auster novel that best exemplifies mobility is *The Music of Chance*. This book presents the phases of the life of Jim Nashe as he passes from family man, to wanderer, to gambler, and then to the prisoner of unseen powers of control and oppression in a mysterious meadow. The period of enforced labour in the hermetically sealed and dystopic world of the meadow will be dealt with in Chapter 7.

Auster told Sinda Gregory that the origins of his central character's desire to wander lie in the closing pages of *Moon Palace*:

I realized that I wanted to get back inside that car, to give myself a chance to go on driving around America. So there was that very immediate and visceral impulse, which is how *The Music of Chance* begins – with Nashe sitting behind the wheel of a car. (*Hunger* 325)



So Nashe (figuratively) gets back into Fogg's car and sets off across the continent on his own quest for identity. Like Fogg, Nashe has been stripped of his family; his wife has left him and he sends his daughter to live with his sister in Minnesota (2).<sup>2</sup> However, unlike Fogg, Nashe's fate is signposted by Auster with an obscure literary hint. In his introduction to *The Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry* (1982, edited and translated by Auster, reprinted in *Hunger*), he mentions Thomas Nashe, the author of the 1594 prose narrative, *The Unfortunate Traveler*, 'generally considered to be the first novel written in the English language' (200-1). As a result of his literary antecedence, Nashe is clearly a character with an uncertain future.

Supported by an unexpected inheritance of nearly two hundred thousand dollars from a father he has never known,<sup>3</sup> our unfortunate traveller sets off around the United States guided by instinct and chance. Thus Auster again examines two of his favourite themes: the role of contingency, and the inheritance that he received on the death of his own father. Auster weaves these two themes together to explore the nature of freedom through Nashe's unfettered ability to go anywhere he wants at any time, and then his subsequent incarceration in Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mark Irwin describes Nashe's life as being without 'centre' (80). 'Inventing the Music of Chance'. *Review of Contemporary Literature*. 14.1 (Spring, 1994): 81-91.

<sup>3</sup> Auster borrows heavily from the true story, told in *The Red Notebook*, of his friend, C.'s inheritance from a virtually unknown father (*Hunger* 363-368).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Woods describes an 'interrelated matrix of agency, freedom and power' at work in this novel that constantly undermines the central figures' ontological status (145). *The Music of Chance: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies Within "The City of the World"* in Dennis Barone (ed). 143-161.

Chance intervenes in Nashe's adventure early, and marks the transition from one life to another – from Boston fireman and family man to wanderer. Instead of returning to Boston after visiting his daughter, Nashe:

soon found himself traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the freeway – a common enough mistake – but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up the next ramp ... in the brief time that elapsed between the two ramps, Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same. ... It was a dizzying prospect – to imagine all that freedom, to understand how little it mattered what choice he made. He could go anywhere he wanted...

(6)

The immediate consequence of this action is that, as Woods says, '[c]hance disrupts the logic of causality', releasing Nashe from his 'geographical and temporal fixity' (*The Music of Chance: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies Within the "City of the World"* 146). Everything that follows is the result of this single chance event that instead of pointing him east to Boston, takes him west into Wyoming.

Chance intervenes again a year later. With Nashe's financial resources rapidly disappearing (like the pages in Quinn's notebook), he is driving along a back-road when he encounters the beaten and penniless Jack Pozzi, whose friends (ironically?) call him 'Jackpot' (*Music* 23). As the narrative progresses the reader can't help thinking that Pozzi neither has any friends, nor has enough luck to deserve his

sobriquet. As a consequence of this intersection of their lives, Nashe enters a new phase as a gambler and bank-roller. He comes to understand meeting Pozzi as 'one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air – a twig that breaks off in the wind and suddenly lands at your feet' (1).

The novel's title also encapsulates the way that chance operates in this novel, and the way that Auster shapes chance, coincidence and contingency in much of his work, where the 'music of chance' provides an accompaniment for his characters' lives. Here, specifically, the phrase refers to a rejected title for the book borrowed from Francois Couperin's *Les Barricades Mysterieuses*.<sup>5</sup> In the early notebook version of the novel, Auster describes it as 'a strange, paradoxical little work ... its meaning eluded him. It was as though the piece represented everything all at once ... a resolution that never came' (*The Mysterious Barricades* 23). This description could easily be applied to this novel, as well as to much of Auster's other work. For Auster, the mysterious barricades refer to the transitions in the composition, with its pauses, suspensions and repetitions. 'The music started and stopped,' Auster says, 'then started again, then stopped again, and yet through it all the piece continued to advance, pushing on toward a resolution that never came' (*Music* 181). These crescendos and lulls, without satisfactory musical closure, display the same 'unresolved harmonies' (*ibid*) as Auster's fiction, and offer yet another literary-artistic clue to Nashe's fate.

The early part of the novel traces a geography of the country's backwoods. As a principle Nashe avoids large population centres, sticking instead to the back roads of northern New York, New England, the prairies of the mid-west, and the Western

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<sup>5</sup> Holograph notebook, Berg Collection. Auster gives the book its published title in a margin note at the point where Nashe and Pozzi are set to work on the wall.

deserts – before heading south for the winter (12). In the car he becomes both totally free and totally solitary, barely speaking to another person, ‘except for the odd sentence ... when buying gas or ordering food’ (7). This solitude promotes a solipsism that, combined with speed, makes Nashe feel ‘[h]e was a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared’ (11-12). As a result of this motion and solitude he becomes lost in the vast spaces of America, reduced to the point of fixity in a landscape which rapidly moves past him, rather than the other way round. In time the car becomes ‘a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge’ in which he felt ‘that he was coming loose from his body, that once he put his foot down on the gas and started driving, the music would carry him into a realm of weightlessness’ (12). Nashe’s disengagement is so complete that the physical realm becomes secondary to him. Consequently life is a purely interior experience for him.

Travel and mobility, then, act to both release Auster’s characters from their corporeal reality, and to convey them from one phase of their lives to another – from one sense of self to the next. However, we should always remember Sachs, a speck racing across America, and measure Auster’s characters in terms of their disconnection or dis-harmony when anticipating what fate they hurtle towards.

## Europe

European cities, in both Auster’s early autobiographical writings and his fiction, promote disorientation and confusion. This is because they are, quite simply, *not* New York. In ‘The Locked Room’, the Narrator compares Paris to New York:

I felt as though I had been turned upside-down. This was an old-world city, and it had nothing to do with New York – with its slow skies and chaotic streets, its bland clouds and aggressive buildings. I had been displaced, and it made me suddenly unsure of myself. I felt my grip loosening ...

(*Trilogy* 287)

This old-world chaos is to be found too in Amsterdam. At the time he visited the Anne Franks House and the Van Gogh Museum, Auster spent three days wandering around the city. In *The Invention of Solitude*, he describes how his disorientation forced him further and further into himself:

Cut off from everything that was familiar to him, unable to discover even a single point of reference, he saw that his steps, by taking him nowhere, were taking him nowhere but into himself. He was wondering inside himself, and he was lost.

(86-7)

A. is lost because Amsterdam does not follow the rational street pattern of New York's grid. Although Amsterdam is a small city in comparison to New York, it is easy to get lost because 'you cannot simply "follow" a street as you can in other cities' (86). A. possesses no 'cognitive map' to navigate a city which is based on a circular pattern with intersecting roads, canals and bridges, and as a result he often finds that he has been within feet of his destination before turning away in the wrong direction. Eventually he feels 'that the city had been designed as a model of the

underworld, based on some classical representation of the place. ... And if Amsterdam was hell, ... then he realized there was some point to him being lost' (ibid).

These events in old-world European cities are a part of the self-formation process for Auster and the Narrator. The selves that inhabit these chaotic spaces are unable to establish any coordinates to begin a coherent Parisian or Dutch episode in their lives, consequently they leave, and head back to New York and the familiar spaces and networks upon which they can potentially build a coherent sense of self. However, as we shall see, this sort of confusion is not restricted to irrational European cities, but is as much a result of straying from New York as it is the failure of a perceptual model.

### **The Mid-West**

Auster's sixth novel, *Mr. Vertigo*, leaves New York behind to explore both the urban and the rural mid-west, and at the same time to explore the many selves that eventually form the life of Walter Clairborne Rawley. The novel describes the five major and discernable stages of his life, and plots each onto a map of the urban centres of St. Louis, Chicago and Wichita, as well as the plains of Kansas and the backwoods towns of the mid-west.

The various incarnations are not given equal weight by Auster. Walt's early years occupy more than two-thirds of the book and are punctuated by his childhood, sexual awakening (which marks the emergence of his ability to levitate), and ends with his maturity into manhood. But by pursuing a life to its conclusion – however briefly – Auster is bringing the manuscript to a close and ensuring that it is complete.

This frame, looking back on and recording events from the end of a life, gives the narrative a particular quality and authenticity. Also, Walt's first-person narrative recalls his life as a series of scenes, and his dialogue is reminiscent of a gangster B-movie ('I was a boogie-toed prankster, a midget scatman with a quick tongue and a hundred angles' [14], for example). These stylistic aspects of the novel emerge later in Walt's desire to turn his fame as a levitator into a movie career in Hollywood, his slide into Chicago's criminal gangs at the end of prohibition, and Auster's own film projects that were taking shape around this time.

The novel's themes encompass self-hood, family, the idea of a record of a life, and illusion, told against the indefinite background of the dustbowl, the Wall Street Crash, and war. The element of illusion is explored through Walt's ability to levitate. Family is explored through the father-son relationship that develops between Walt and the master, and the experience of love and support from the small group of misfits that inhabit the farm during his initiation as a levitator.

Walt's first incarnation is as a nine-year-old, begging for change on the streets of St. Louis, Missouri in the late 1920s. As an orphan he has no family other than Aunt Peg and the evil Uncle Slim. Master Yehudi takes Walt away from this, promising to teach him to fly by the time he is twelve (3).

The master takes Walt on a journey to begin the next phase of his life, as a disciple and pupil. They travel by train to Kansas (the home of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*) and on to the claustrophobic city of Wichita, 'a town built so low to the ground that your elbow knocked against the sky' (28). From there they travel to nearby Cibola and the master's farm. The property consists of 'thirty-seven acres of dirt, a two-story farmhouse, a chicken coop, a pigpen and a barn' (14). This is no place for 'a city boy ... with jazz in his blood, a street kid with his eye on the main

chance', used to 'the hurly-burly of the crowds, the screech of trolley cars and the throb of neon' (ibid). The comparison between the two could not be more marked. '[A] flatter, more desolate place you've never seen in your life', the master tells Walt. 'There's nothing to tell you where you are. No mountains, no trees, no bumps in the road' (10). Thus Auster's ever-present theme of locating oneself in the world finds its expression in a geography that is literally without features or landmarks. Location is then further problematised by Auster's fictionalising of some places. Walt notes the association of Kansas with the mythical Oz, and compares Cibola to it. In addition, Cibola refers to the Seven Cities of the Zuni tribe, which are in New Mexico, not Kansas. Together, these aspects of place give the farm an un-real or dream-like quality, reinforced by the tricks of weather and geography that hamper Walt's early attempts to escape (23-4, 28-31).

The farm is the scene of Walt's thirty-three step 'initiation' (38). These tests include being buried alive, flogged, thrown from a horse, lashed to a barn roof, swarmed by insects, struck by lightning, and each 'test was more terrible than the one before it' (41-2). Walt's toughest test is to cut a joint from his little finger, physically losing a part of himself (42). Walt is driven into himself to look for points of reference there, and forced to examine his most deeply buried inner self. To fly, he must ultimately disconnect his interior self from his body and (literally) let it float free. Auster mirrors the internal process of severance with Walt's bodily separation from the earth. Part of the process is Walt's severance from his past, and the disembodied pinky joint is symbolic of this. Auster relates the missing digit to Walt's St. Louis boyhood, which by now has become just words, that 'summoned forth no pictures, took [him] on no journeys' (46-7). Walt's fabular Cibola self is taking over from his previous real and grounded St. Louis one. Eventually he is able to approach



'places of such inwardness that I no longer knew who I was' (49). These events are voyages of discovery – self-discovery – and like Marco Stanley Fogg, Auster gives Walt the name of a great explorer, the 'adventurer and hero', Sir Walter Raleigh (43). The magical quality of Walt's existence is further emphasised by his middle name, that can be read as CI / airborne to reinforce the un-grounded episode in his story.

During this time, the other inhabitants of the house, along with Walt and Master Yehudi, are forming themselves into an unconventional family – the family that Walt has never known. Along with the father-son relationship, Walt finds a brother in a crippled black boy, Aesop, and a mother in an elderly Indian woman, Mother Sioux. These characters, particularly Aesop, reinforce the dream like quality of Cibola, and emphasise the fabular quality that Auster invests these novels with. *Mr. Vertigo* adopts what Barone calls a 'sufficient realism' ('Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel' 6) that is supported by the narrative frame containing Walt's story. Here fable allows Auster to investigate places that do not appear on maps, but in myths, dreams and the imagination, particularly in childhood or in association with children's stories.

Walt's dreams and imagination are a way of escaping the harsh realities of a childhood spent on the streets. As an escape from the rigours of the master's training Walt retreats into a fuller experience of family than he has experienced before. The 'family' at Cibola is unconventionally constituted from the margins of American society – 'a Jew, a black man, and an Indian', as Aesop points out to Walt (*Vertigo* 22). In Walt, the household gains a representative of the white urban under-class. Aesop lends strong moral support during Walt's mental battles with the master and they form a strong fraternal bond. In a landscape without points of reference, Aesop provides co-ordinates to Walt's emerging sense of self. Walt says of Aesop:

He marked me in ways that altered who I was, that changed the course  
and substance of my life. ... Aesop became my comrade, my anchor  
in a sea of undifferentiated sky

(36-7)

Mother Sioux plays a similar role in supporting Walt through his torments. In her, he finds the love of a mother that he has not previously known. It is she who gives him the first kiss since his mother's death, giving him a 'warm and welcoming glow' (33). During his initiation Aesop and Mother Sioux stick with Walt like 'flesh and blood', making him 'the darling of their hearts' (43).

Despite the torments inflicted upon Walt by the master, the relationship between the two develops into a strong paternal bond, a connection that Auster presents as a primary force in his work. *The Invention of Solitude* includes a long meditation on the relationship between Auster and his son Daniel, in which he recalls lying in the dark telling his son Collodi's story of *Pinocchio*. Pinocchio is 'made' from wood by his father, Gepetto, emerging from the block of magical wood in the same way that he emerges from the author's pen. Auster connects the practice of story telling to his son's emerging imagination and personality (*Solitude* 154, 162-5). In *Mr. Vertigo*, Auster acknowledges the flow of sympathies that pass between the child and the father-figure in the darkness of the sick room. When Walt becomes dangerously ill, the master comes to understand that he needs Walt as more than just a spectacle – he needs him too on an emotional level. The master sits stroking Walt's hand and sobbing, unconsciously adopting the pose of the concerned father at his son's bedside (34).

The strength of the paternal bond and its power to help form an emerging sense of self in the young Walt is exemplified by the events leading up to his first levitation. The master disappears, and Walt learns that 'everything I was flowed directly from him. He had made me in his own image' (53). When Walt thinks that the master has abandoned him he experiences a fit of panic, rage and grief. His emotional response is so extreme that he enters a state of disconnection able to separate his inner and physical selves, and he rises from the ground. 'I was weightless inside my own body,' Walt writes, 'floating on a placid wave of nothingness, utterly detached and indifferent to the world around me' (58). As he describes this experience, 'my soul began to rush out of my body and I was no longer conscious of who I was' (227). Walt's change in self-hood is so profound that he likens it to waking up with a new face (62). In fact, Auster is relating Walt's new-found powers of levitation to his sexual awakening. This feeling in Walt is reinforced by the symbolic presence of Mrs. Witherspoon, the master's lover, and a woman whose appearance marks every turn of Walt's life. She appears in this episode as an apparition charged with erotic imagery. Mrs. Witherspoon is standing in the doorway, 'wearing a crimson overcoat and a black fur hat, ... and her cheeks were still flush from the winter cold' (60). Auster presents Walt's awakening with a figurative description of Mrs. Witherspoon as female genitalia that invests her with a sexual potential that re-occurs from time-to-time throughout Walt's lives.

Walt soon hones his levitation skills, while Aesop and the master explore colleges in the East. This period in the lives of the characters marks a point of transition in the novel. For Walt this is 'the end of an era, and we were all looking ahead to the future now, anticipating the new lives that waited for us beyond the boundaries of the farm' (81). Aesop is to depart for Yale, and Walt and the master are

to embark on a tour of small towns promoting the levitation act. But tragedy intervenes when the local Ku Klux Klan burn down the farm, lynch Mother Sioux and Aesop, and rob Walt of his surrogate mother and brother (90).

Following this tragedy, Walt's new incarnation, 'Walt the Wonder Boy', emerges. The animosity of the local population in Cibola drives the master and Walt away and into the next phase of their lives, as travelling entertainers. Starting at the Pawnee county show in Larned, Kansas (110), the pair embark on a tour. '[M]oving around from one backwater to another' they cover Oklahoma, 'Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana', before, like Nashe, dipping south for the winter (122). Eventually the act becomes big-time, moving into the theatres of the Eastern cities. In the theatre the act requires a different dimension to the outdoor shows of the county fairs. The master dubs Walt an 'aerial artist' (162). To achieve a sense of narrative progression the act requires '[s]tructure, rhythm, and surprise' (165), which Walt injects with the visual and corporeal language of slapstick (166).

Walt's career as 'Walt the Wonder Boy' comes to an end in Scranton, Pennsylvania. 'Puberty, Walt ...', the master explains to him. 'Adolescence. The bodily changes that turn a boy into a man', which cause debilitating headaches whenever he leaves the ground (190). With these changes Walt begins the next phase of his life. He and the master attempt to drive to Los Angeles, where Walt is to use his slapstick skills to break into the movies. But they are robbed on a lonely and empty highway, and the master is killed (204).

This next, lonely phase of Walter's life, at the age of fourteen, turns him back into a vagrant, and the beggar he 'was born to be' (215). He hunts out his Uncle Slim who carried out the hold-up and robbed him of the last vestige of his Cibola family. Once Uncle Slim is dead, Walt takes his place in the Chicago underworld and opens

his ironically named club, Mr. Vertigo's (239-41). He is forced out of Chicago and begins a phase of his life as an ordinary guy. He has an undistinguished war, before taking a job in construction, helping to form the post-war suburban landscape of 'ranch houses and tidy lawns' (264). After this period he meets and marries Molly, who, in an echo of Auster's earlier novels, puts him back together again (265).

Molly dies young, and Walt finds his way back to Wichita. The city is much changed as a result of the same forces of suburbanisation that he served earlier in his life (270). Walt discovers that Mrs. Witherspoon is still alive, and he joins her in business, eventually, despite her great age, becoming her lover (273-4). When she is dead and with his mortality in the forefront of his mind, Walt decides to write the record of his life and to have it published posthumously (275).

In closing, Walt writes of the secret to levitation. It reads like an instruction manual on how to perform the transition from one self to another, reflecting how he has moved around the country, in each place leaving his old self behind and inventing a new one. Levitation and transformation can be achieved, he says, by learning 'to stop being yourself ... you let yourself evaporate' (278). Like Nashe, through travel, and the experience of disconnection from the physical world, Walt fully understands the process that can cleave the self loose from the physical body, and enter a 'realm of weightlessness'.

Walt's 'lives', then, have oscillated between the city and the country, from notoriety to anonymity, and from contentment to tragedy. The spaces and environments that have been the crucible for his ascendancies and reverses have helped to shape both a sense of self for Walt, and the outcomes of the narrative of each episode. For example, where else could Walt be a gangster but in 1930s Chicago? Auster adopts more subtlety in evoking the wide-open and undifferentiated

spaces of the mid-west. Kansas does not inspire Walt into a move to the west, as is traditional in the American novel (in Auster too, as in *Moon Palace*), but upwards, into a dreamlike realm, disconnected from the realities and certainties of firm ground.

Beyond the fabular quality of this novel, Auster adopts the form of the fragment to layer a number of stories into the one narrative, and so present a number of lives within the one life. The fragment as a form of literary practice has interested Auster since he translated Mallarmé's *A Tomb for Anatole*.<sup>6</sup> *Mr. Vertigo*, in the manner of its sudden transitions brought about by catastrophic events, suggests a lack of continuity in the selves that constitute Walt's lives and the stories that constitute this narrative. *Timbuktu* further suggests that an underlying metaphysical or 'original' harmonious self-hood is unattainable or is indeed an illusion. In the later *Book of Illusions*, Auster treats this same predicament not as a loss, but as a necessarily unresolved or unharmonious part of identity – as identity simultaneously maintained and deferred through the artifices of acting and naming.

### The North East

When the master and Walt are at the height of their fame, and their relationship is at its closest (due to a kidnapping episode involving Uncle Slim) they take a holiday on the coast of Cape Cod. Here they pose as a father and son; Tim Buck and Tim Buck the Second, or Tim Buck One and Tim Buck Two (160). *Timbuktu* functions here,

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<sup>6</sup> *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan* also exhibit a fragmentary form, with abrupt transitions in the lives of the characters prompted by critical events. On Auster's concern with the fragment as a literary mode see also Linda L. Fleck, 'From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster's *Leviathan*'. *Critique*: 39.3 (Spring 1998): 258-270.

and in Auster's 1999 novel of that name, as a place of mythical and dream-like happiness, where two people who find their identities defined by the presence of the other will achieve equilibrium and contentment.

*Timbuktu* is a novel haunted by mythical and magical places that inhabit the imaginations of the two central characters. The beatific tramp, Willie G. Christmas (a.k.a. William Guerevitch), and his scruffy mongrel, Mr. Bones, pursue their Nirvanas through myth, dream, history and literature. At first Mr. Bones finds happiness as Willie's disciple. After Willie's death, Mr. Bones pursues happiness, first as a brother and friend, and then through a belief in the potential of the American nuclear family, and, as Brooker points out, 'show[s] it wanting' (*Modernity and the Metropolis* 130). Both master and dog find outlets for their desires for happiness in 'other' spaces, beyond the limits of the material and knowable world, where hopes can be fulfilled. Mr. Bones pursues four lives through the novel. His early life on the road as Willy's disciple is documented through the early part of the book. After Willie's death Mr. Bones samples life as the canine friend of a lonely Chinese-American boy in Baltimore, before fleeing to the suburban tracts of Virginia to seek the security of conventional family life. When he finds suburban life to be a compromise between comfort and monotony, he sets off again to find Willy in Timbuktu.

Willie and Mr. Bones embark on a road trip from New York to Baltimore to secure the future of Willie's manuscripts with Mrs. Swanson, his old high school teacher (*Timbuktu* 9). Their life together ends with Willie's death outside Edgar Allan Poe's house in Baltimore, which Willie christens Poe-land in an echo of both his family's origins in Eastern Europe, and his literary debt to Edgar Allan (46-7). Willie is the archetype of a tramp, on the margins of society, alone in the world with

only his dog, racked by mental illness and alcoholism, but harbouring a literary talent. He is a 'troubled soul' (9), whose father died when he was twelve. This event marked Willie 'as a tragic figure, disqualified ... from the rat race of vain hopes and sentimental illusions, bestowed ... [with] an aura of legitimate suffering' (14-15). By the time he arrived as freshman at Columbia, Willie was a 'malcontent, ... rebel, ... outlaw poet prowling the gutters of a ruined world' (16). Willie's descent into vagrancy is prompted and accelerated first by drugs, then mental illness, alcoholism and eventually his mother's death.

Like many of the episodes in Auster's novels, there is an autobiographical basis for Willie. In *Moon Palace* Fogg writes of how his method is drawn from Montaigne, adopting personal experience as a scaffolding for writing, and so constructing a 'subterranean version' of his own life (233). Indeed, it is possible to delineate episodes for Auster from his autobiographical texts (*Solitude* and *Hand to Mouth*), that occur in the lives of various characters. By being first the traveller, then the struggling and penniless poet, receiving the unforeseen inheritance, forming a new partnership, and finally achieving the successful literary career, Auster himself has a number of 'subterranean selves' within the one. Willie is a prime example of the autobiographical emerging in the fictional. He is based on the 'the legendary, forgotten novelist, H. L. Humes', who became an unwelcome house-guest in Auster's senior year at Columbia (*Hand to Mouth* 38). Humes was a founding member of the *Paris Review* and played chess with Tristan Tzara (44).<sup>7</sup> Like Willie, Humes was a 'logomaniac' (*Timbuktu* 6) and 'a living example of failed promise and blighted

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<sup>7</sup> Tzara was instrumental in spreading 'the corrosive exuberance' (*Hunger* 209) of Dada to America. Auster notes that America has its own natural Dada, and quotes Man Ray in response to Tzara: 'Cher Tzara - Dada cannot live in New York. All New York is Dada, and will not tolerate a rival ...' (210).



literary fortune' (*Hand* 37). And like the Jimmy Rose 'character' from 'Ghosts', Humes 'had endured a long run of reversals and miseries' – 'a ruined marriage, several stays in mental hospitals' – leaving him unable to write (38-9).

Mr. Bones is prepared for Willie's death with stories of the after-life, when he will enter a land called Timbuktu. Auster relates how Mr. Bones has come to understand Timbuktu through Willie's ramblings:

That was where people went after they died. Once your soul has been separated from your body, your body was buried in the ground and your soul lit out for the next world. Willy had been harping on this subject for the past several weeks, and by now there was no doubt in the dog's mind that the next world was a real place. It was called Timbuktu ...

(48)

Timbuktu is not the 'real' desert city in Mali, but the place designated by popular use as so distant and exotic as to be unimaginable. Willie tells Mr. Bones that it is 'an oasis of spirits', that begins '[w]here the map of this world ends' (49). The other-worldly quality of Timbuktu is emphasised after Willie's death by his appearance in dreams. Willie appears to Mr. Bones to issue warnings, to encourage him with stories of Timbuktu, and to admonish him for selling out to the materialist comforts of the suburbs. This route back to Willie and the completeness that they had known together confirms the use of illusion and imagination as a potential route to happiness, although deferred to an after-life or another world.

Once Willy is dead, Mr. Bones has to fend for himself. He's been with Willie since he was a puppy and feels that the world 'was saturated with Willie's presence' (4). A world without Willie would be one of 'ontological terror'; it was possible even 'that the world itself would cease to exist' (4). Mr. Bones' worst fears are not realised, and the world goes on. However, he is unable to bring the right ontological tools to bear on his environment, and finds himself subject to attack. In the city he is kicked and threatened by a gang of boys (99-100), and in the country he is considered a pest and shot at (121-2). Now, alone without Willie, Mr. Bones is turning into a homeless and friendless dog travelling 'around in circles, lost in the limbo between one nowhere and the next' (92). Mr. Bones is turning, like Willie did, into a vagrant as his 'cognitive map' proves not to match up to the reality of his experience.

Mr. Bones is rescued from the violent attentions of the boys by one of their classmates, Henry Chow. Henry, like Willie and his dog, is at the margins of his society. As a Chinese-American he is not accepted by his classmates, and as the only child of hard-working immigrant parents, he is lonely. The relationship they form is a symbiotic one. 'Thus begun an exemplary friendship between dog and boy', Auster writes:

Each wound up giving to the other something he had never had before. For Mr. Bones, Henry proved that love was not a quantifiable substance. ... For Henry, an only child whose parents worked long hours and had steadfastly refused to allow a pet in the apartment, Mr. Bones was the answer to his prayers.

Auster presents Mr. Bones' desire to connect to the wider world, beyond himself, through the person of another. In this case the bond is fraternal, rather than the paternal relationship between master and dog that preceded it. When their friendship is broken up by Mr. Chow, Mr. Bones seeks sanctuary from the dangers of metropolitan Baltimore in rural Virginia. But here too he faces dangers. In a dream he tells Willy of how he is nearly shot and run over taking a shortcut through a field (121). The countryside, it seems, contains as many dangers as the city.

Finally he stumbles upon a vision of the happy American family embedded in an idealised landscape. Mr. Bones wanders in to a place of 'lawn mowers, sprinklers and birds', where 'on an invisible highway ... , a dull bee-swarm of traffic pulsed under the suburban landscape' (124). This is the landscape that Walt helped to form. The post-war spread of suburbia pushed city limits further and further from the old urban population centres, creating nodes of population to serve the major metropolises, and themselves becoming in time significant cityscapes. Edward Soja calls these emerging population nodes 'Edge Cities', or 'Exopolis' (*Thirdspace* 238). Soja says of these new centres and the mode of living they promote:

Ex-centrally perched beyond the vortex of the old agglomerative nodes, the Exopolis spins new whorls of its own, turning the city inside-out and outside in at the same time, unravelling in its paths the memories of more familiar urban fabrics, even where such older fabrics never existed in the first place.

(239)

David Harvey identifies a 'recursive and serial monotony' associated with urban growth of this kind (*Condition of Postmodernity* 295), that promotes a repeatable aesthetic through the creation of reproducible spaces. Auster recognises this monotony and represents a landscape of shopping malls and identical housing developments, connected to each other and the distant metropolitan hub by a network of super-highways. Auster reimagines this suburban landscape as a series of ordered economic and gender power relationships, played out through the conventional suburban family. Embedded in the serial monotony of recursive spaces strung out along super-highways, the capacity of the individual to experience extended and stimulating networks of people becomes severely limited. The result is disconnection and loneliness.

Auster describes this suburbia as 'the America of two-car garages, home-improvement loans, and neo-Renaissance shopping malls' (*Timbuktu* 162). Here, in contrast to Mr. Bones' time on the road with Willie, time does not flow 'without interruption' (164). Instead, he finds that the calendar is broken down into the structures of work and rest, national holidays and the like. The structured nature of the physical and temporal environment of the suburbs is emphasised by the promise of a trip to Disney World (165-6). Here time is dictated by the routine of the park entertainment, and culture is presented in a palimpsest of pastiche where partial representations of American history are simultaneously available in a perpetual and repeated present, which Jameson considers to be endemic to contemporary American culture (*Postmodernism* 20, 26-7). In *Timbuktu*, suburbia is presented as the domestic expression of a cultural process encapsulated by Disney, and translated to the contemporary landscape as the 'serial monotony' of the mall, the ranch-house and the

lawn. Despite the material benefits Mr. Bones experiences, he soon sees the rigid structures of this life as carceral and oppressive.

Mr. Bones emerges from the Virginia woods onto the manicured lawn of the Jones family. The two perfect children persuade their beautiful mother to keep the dog, and once the almost impossibly masculine father (an airline pilot) gives his assent, Mr Bones has a new home, and has become a new dog (with, of course, a new and diminutive name). This arrangement appears to be perfect; he is cleaned and clipped, well fed and has his own house in the garden. Mr. Bones is 'no longer a bum, no longer an embarrassment', and has become a 'dandified, ... bourgeois dog-about-town' (146). However, Auster knowingly critiques this presentation of the suburban myth, and undermines its reality with the imagery of Disney when a deer (Bambi?) walks across the Jones' perfectly manicured garden (154). The doghouse and a trip to the vet begin to expose the price to be paid for the comforts of Mr. Bones' new domestic arrangement, and to expose the destructive undercurrent of suburban family life.

The spatial formations of suburbia express the economic and social relations that support the conventional view of family life. Mr. Bones finds himself trapped by a symbolic expression of how power is deployed in an environment like this. During the day Mr. Bones is restrained by a mechanical lead that allows him a degree of movement, but only as far as the lead will stretch:

They had turned him into a prisoner. They had chained him to this infernal bouncing wire, this metallic torture device ... to remind him that he was no longer free, that he had sold his birthright for a mess of porridge and an ugly, ready-made house. (144)

The father, Richard, imposes these outward signs of control on Mr. Bones. He also instigates a less obvious expression of the unnatural sterility of suburbia by insisting on the dog being neutered. Mr. Bones remains unaware that a constituent part of his physical and psychological self has been removed at the vets. Auster thus echoes the insidious actions of power, control and homogenisation in suburbia, that are able to manipulate and co-opt the subject without their knowledge. Richard embodies the anti-imaginative sterility of the suburban environment, which he enforces on his family and the dog. Richard's will oppresses the hopes and wishes of his beautiful but miserable and lonely wife, Polly. Below the surface of the 'perfect' family seethes resentment and 'the plots and counterplots of dying love' (162). Through Mr. Bones' experiences here, Auster critiques the newly centred and homogenising 'post-suburbia'. The geographical dispersal of formerly urban populations into these domestic prisons makes community (reduced to the conformity of domestic architecture and lawn care) an unlikely process, and forces Polly to rely on the dog as her friend and her distant sister as her only human confidante.

The chance to escape from the artifice and contestations of the Joneses presents itself when Mr. Bones is sent to a boarding kennels while the family vacation in Florida. Once free he finds his 'salvation' in the same 'dazzling' six-lane highway that pulsed across the landscape (184-5). Mr. Bones employs the driving force and symbol of suburbanisation to join his master in Timbuktu.

Ultimately, the many lives of Mr. Bones demonstrate the provisional nature of stability and selfhood. With Willie he discovers that disappointment and failure can lead to premature death, and with this loss comes disconnection and loneliness.

Friendship proves to be no more robust with Henry Chow. Mr. Bones also finds the family to be undermined by the illusory nature of the suburban dream. In this story, the 'places' that harbour the potential for true companionship for Mr. Bones are the illusory and imagined worlds of Poe-land and Timbuktu. The fabular rendering of Mr. Bones' story can only propose a better place that is literally out of this world.

### The West

The Western United States functions in Auster's work as a potential site of revelation and discovery inherently present in the quest form that the novels at times adopt. However, the westward journeys that Effing, Fogg and Sachs embark upon reveal only further layers of disconnection, loneliness, confusion and irresolution.

*The Book of Illusions* traces the many lives of two men, Professor David Zimmer and 1920s film actor Hector Mann. Auster presents their constant movement in pursuit of inner peace, and the construction of a strange family in the desert of New Mexico. He also contemplates the relative values inherent in literature and film. The novel here stands as a testament to the power of the word in comparison with that of images. This novel comes after two highly acclaimed films, *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* (1995) and Auster's declared belief in the communal power of the film making process (see Chapter 8). However, Auster's last venture into film, *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998), has been a critical disaster and remains virtually unseen. Consequently, the representation of film making in *Illusions*, as potentially ephemeral, critiques the capacity of film to continue to speak to a film-going public, while the novel stands as a testament to both the power of storytelling and the primacy of the form.

*The Book of Illusions* returns to the themes of the many lives of a man contained within the one, and how the 'manuscript' of that life is brought to completion by death. Like *Mr. Vertigo* (and *Timbuktu*, to a degree), *Illusions* considers how the story of a life can be told, and adopts the model of a posthumous address to reinforce the completion of the narrative cycle. This novel also returns to the persisting insecurities of being singular in a plural world. The torment and loneliness of singularity is explored through bereavement and an unconventionally composed family, this time hidden away in the New Mexico desert, which again proves to be fragile and provisional. Auster also examines, as he did through the many lives of Walt Rawley, how movement from place to place reconstitutes the sense of self, and how different environments, constituted through different historical and social processes, influence those identities.

Auster had early on insisted that '[a]ll of my work is of a piece' (*Hunger* 275). Professor David Zimmer, the central character and first person narrator of *The Book of Illusions*, reinforces the notion of continuity in the Auster canon, as he is Fogg's friend from *Moon Palace* and the addressee of the narrative of *The Country of Last Things*. Moreover, the name Zimmer (itself the German word for 'room', of course) is closely associated with the solitude of the writer's room in Auster's early writing. Zimmer's experiences in this text serve to explore the implications of not just leaving the room, but leaving the city and the country, and entering an alien environment. In terms of theme also, Hector is the slapstick star who Walt set off for Hollywood to become before tragedy intervened. This is not to suggest that Auster's work rehearses the same concerns over and over. But rather that his fiction and films explore recurrent themes in different and testing environments and conditions for the



characters. Thus, each of Auster's works re-imagines familiar narrative tropes, setting these in motion in new and extreme – often fantastical – scenarios.

The concept of the many lives, or stories, within the one is explored through the narratives of Zimmer and Hector Mann, a film actor from the slapstick heyday of silent film who mysteriously disappeared in 1929. Through their narratives, interwoven into a delicate balance of differentiated presents, many similarities emerge. Both men suffer tragedy and loss and both contemplate suicide as a result, before finding companionship and some contentment.

The episodes of Zimmer's life recorded here encompass life as an academic committed to the study of literature and the word, the despair he experiences at the loss of his family, his spell as a translator, and his conversion to the power of the image as he writes a treatise on Hector's films as a way of dealing with his sorrow. Hector's life, like Walt's, oscillates between fame and anonymity, notoriety and obscurity. His lives encompass his origins as Chaim Mandelbaum, a Dutch Jewish refugee, his film career in Hollywood as Hector Mann, his travels around America as an itinerant worker under the pseudonym Herman Loesser, and his final incarnation as Hector Spelling in New Mexico. But it is as Hector – significantly employing the artifices of acting – that he achieves his most secure and persistent self. At the very end of Hector's life, he and Zimmer meet, allowing their narratives to overlap and their stories to be told.

Zimmer has a happy and complete family and professional life in Vermont until his wife and two young sons are killed in an air disaster (5-6). Like Quinn in 'The City of Glass', the loneliness that this causes disconnects Zimmer from the world. He withdraws from his academic life and plunges into 'a blur of alcoholic grief and self pity' (7). Auster emphasises the depth of Zimmer's loneliness by

presenting his desperate attempts to hold on to the memory of his family by playing with his children's toys, touching his wife's clothes and invoking her presence by smelling her perfume 'to bring her back more vividly, to evoke her presence for longer periods of time' (7-8).

The writing of a book, *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, becomes Zimmer's escape from his grief (5). The research gives a purpose to his life, requiring him to travel to see the copies of Hector's films kept in six different film archives in Europe and America. Once the research is complete, Zimmer retreats to New York to write the book because it is the city 'least likely to wear on my nerves' (27). But for once, New York does not have an impact on this Auster text. Zimmer does not return to the Greenwich Village where he and Fogg had spent the period of tranquillity recounted in *Moon Palace*. Instead he buries himself in an apartment in Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn Heights, four blocks from Blue's surveillance of Black and within sight of the Brooklyn Bridge. This place becomes a sanctuary for Zimmer, where he can go into hiding in his own thoughts and the material for the book, but of all the manifold possibilities available to him, it is the one best suited to his circumstances. 'I wasn't really in Brooklyn ...', he writes:

I was in the book, and the book was in my head, and as long as I stayed inside my head, I could go on writing the book. It was like living in padded cell, but of all the lives I could have lived at that moment, it was the only one that made sense to me. I wasn't capable of being in the world, and I knew that if I tried to go back into it before I was ready, I would be crushed.

Zimmer recognises that he is only 'half human' without the family that had constituted so much of his identity, and until he has established who he is and what he wants he cannot begin to construct a new self (56). So far this story echoes that of the disconnected characters in the early novels, particularly Quinn. However, Zimmer's cultural connection to Hector opens up a whole new world to him.

The book opens up a new lexicon for Zimmer. His previous work has been firmly grounded in 'books, language, the written word' (13). Now he has become an expert on silent film and cinema as a 'visual language' (14). Hector's medium is slapstick and he is a 'talented gag-man with exceptional body control' (12). Hector adopts two forms of physical expression – his body and his mustache. The physical comedians of this time are more compelling for Zimmer because 'they had understood the language they were speaking' (15). These actors 'had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis ... . It was thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body' (ibid). There are parallels between this physical comedy and dance; each is a form of expression that adopts a spatial vocabulary. Slapstick and music also have structural similarities. Auster's description in *The Music of Chance* of Couperin's *Les Barricades Mysterieuses* as a series of 'unresolved harmonies', invites a comparison of all three forms as modes of artistic expression. Both music and dance rely on the resolution or irresolution of refrains in the creation of their effects. The appeal of slapstick lies in the unexpected resolution of its passages to provide comic effect, and Hector is an accomplished practitioner of this art.

Hector's films adopt facial close-ups to emphasise his emotions. Zimmer embarks upon a long discourse on the communicative powers of Hector's mustache.

Hector's facial adornment is 'the link to his inner self, a metonym of urges, cogitations and mental storms' (31). In other words, the mustache is a 'seismograph' of Hector's 'inner states' (29). The mustache is a 'twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, ... it tells what Hector is thinking, ... allows you into the machinery of his thoughts' (ibid). Zimmer, like Auster in 'White Spaces' and Fogg speaking of Kitty's dancing, is introduced to a new form of non-verbal communication that opens the possibility for reading new and enlightening cultural forms.

Once the book is finished, Zimmer moves into a new house in Vermont, and a new phase of his life. He takes on the task of translating the two-volume, two thousand page memoirs of Chateaubriand from the French. Zimmer prosaically translates the title as *Memoirs of a Dead Man* (62). This work illuminates the mechanics of this novel, which posthumously presents the lives of both the narrator and his subject. Francois-René Chateaubriand (1768-1848) was a man of many lives. In the introductory essay to *Chateaubriand: Selections* (1926), Roger describes him as:

Standing astride ... two epochs, Chateaubriand saw three revolutions; he was by turn soldier, teacher, traveller, ambassador, plenipotentiary, minister and journalist; he concluded a peace ... and made a war ...; he directed the election of a pope and ... [built] one of the most voluminous and important literary edifices of modern times ...

(5-6)

Like Couperin, then, Chateaubriand's work inhabits Auster's own to provide artistic clues as to the method of the novel, and the fate of his characters. The many lives of Chateaubriand are projected forward to become the many lives of Hector Mann, and then again to those of David Zimmer – each spoken in the voice of a dead man (62).

The voice of a dead man propels Zimmer into a new phase of his life. A letter claiming that Hector is still alive arrives, and Zimmer is forced out of his solitude and into the bizarre arrangement in New Mexico inhabiting a dream-like and mythical space. 'Everyone thought he was dead', Zimmer begins his narrative (1). In January 1929, Hector Mann:

without saying good-bye to any of his friends or associates, without leaving behind a letter or informing anyone of his plans, ... walked out of his rented house on North Orange Drive and was never seen again ... it was as if Hector Mann had vanished from the face of the earth.

(ibid)

What happened to Hector Mann, and how he disappeared so effectively, becomes apparent when an emissary is sent to Vermont to take Zimmer to New Mexico. A woman named Alma arrives with a gun to persuade him to go with her to the Blue Stone ranch in Tierra del Sueño where Hector now lives. Alma means soul in Spanish, and Tierra del Sueño means land of dreams (as D. T. Max reminds us in his review of the novel 6). After a violent confrontation, in which Zimmer blatantly courts his own death, Alma persuades him to accompany her to the ranch where he is to bear witness to the genius of Hector's secret films, which will be destroyed, at his own insistence, within twenty-four hours of his death (*Illusions* 102-111). Alma and

Zimmer become lovers and he is rescued from his intense solitude (102). Zimmer records that '[a] series of accidents had stolen my life from me and then given it back, and in the interval, in the tiny gap between those two moments, my life had become a different life' (112). Zimmer, like the Narrator and Fogg before him, experiences 'microscopic holes in the universe' through which he has been able to pass and begin to build a new sense of self (115). Fogg encountered the circles and holes of Blakelock's *Moonlight* painting, while the Narrator found in 'the tiny hole between self and not self' the power of his relationship with Sophie to reconnect him with the world. Zimmer puts himself uncomfortably close to death, and now, through Alma, he views the world from a new perspective. This is not to suggest that the Narrator's story is Zimmer's too. Zimmer, like Hector, lives a number of lives before comprehending the full implications of Alma's role in his life.

Hector also emerges from one life-changing event to another, gradually accumulating them into the life that Zimmer relates in *Illusions*. Auster employs a complex narrative structure to set out Hector's life between 1929 and the novel's present (1988). Auster narrates Zimmer, narrating Alma, recounting Hector's life in his own words and from his journal. She is collecting the information into a biography that is to be published after Hector's death. Despite the complexity of the narrative structure this extended passage of the book (seventy two pages) provides the most compelling section.

Hector's first narrated reincarnation occurs when his pregnant former lover, Bridgette O'Fallon, is accidentally killed by his fiancé, Dolores St. John. Hector buries the body out in the hills beyond Los Angeles that will later become suburban Malibu (138-9). His movie career at an end, Hector flees to Seattle and takes on a new identity. First he shaves off his trademark mustache, and then adds a workman's

hat found in a public bathroom. Finally he adopts the name inside the comfortably fitting cap, Herman Loesser. This name satisfies both Auster's sense of word play and Hector's need to retain some small part of his previous self, while acknowledging his remorse for his part in Bridgette's death; an act of penance that haunts each of his subsequent incarnations. While he remains Herr Mann, he is also '*Lesser*' or '*Loser*', and 'Hector figured that he had found the name he deserved' (144, original italics).

Hector works in a number of manual jobs in Seattle and Portland. Because he has not been connected with Bridgette's disappearance, he is not pursued for his part in it. As a consequence he administers his own punishment, squirming 'under the stringencies imposed on himself, to make himself as uncomfortable as possible' (146). The next phase of his life begins when Hector embarks on the most tortuous and painful test: to live in the same city as Bridgette's family, Spokane.

In Spokane, Hector ends up working in the O'Fallon family business, where he is necessarily required to deny his own identity at every turn. Bridgette's younger sister, Nora, coaches Hector in elocution to disguise his accent. She talks to him about her sister, and asks if he knows of Hector Mann. He is compelled to deny his own existence, and destroy another part of that self still residing within him (163-4).

Again, Hector flees, this time to Chicago, when it becomes clear that Nora has fallen in love with him. Here he discovers a way to 'go on killing himself without having to finish the job ... to drink his own blood ... devouring his own heart' (176-7). Hector becomes the male half of a sex act with a prostitute called Sylvia Meers, giving live performances for the wealthy of Chicago (176-90). Again Hector is forced to deny himself, maintaining his anonymity by wearing a mask during the act. Hector literally empties himself out during this episode, unable to look into himself and record his thoughts in his journal.

When Sylvia becomes aware of Hector's identity and attempts to turn it to her own financial advantage, Hector flees once again. He is reaching his lowest ebb, and his sense of identity is becoming so unstable that he barely has any coherent residue of self-hood at all. The transition from one life to another, from one sense of self to the next, evacuates Hector's humanity. In Sandusky, Ohio, Auster projects the emptiness of Hector's soul onto the broken-down depression era industrial landscape of America's mid-west:

he found himself looking at a dreary expanse of broken-down factories and empty warehouses. Cold gray weather, a threat of snow in the air, and a mangy three-legged dog the only living creature within a hundred yards. ... he was gripped by a feeling of nullity ... . He couldn't remember his name. Bricks and cobblestones, his breath gusting into the air in front of it, and the three-legged dog limping around the corner and vanishing from sight. It was the picture of his own death, ... the portrait of a soul in ruins, and long after he ... had moved on, a part of him was still there, standing on that empty street in Sandusky, Ohio, gasping for breath as his existence dribbled out of him.

(192)

Despite this nihilistic and despairing experience, Sandusky provides Hector with his salvation. Here he meets a young and headstrong banking heiress, Frieda Spelling, who is to become his wife and much later write to David Zimmer. They move to New Mexico where they can live anonymously in a 'blank and savage' New Mexico



landscape. The savagery of the environment kills their three-year-old son. They take up filmmaking, using Frieda's inheritance, to displace their grief. This episode marks Hector's last environment, his last new self, and his last change of name. After Chaim Mandelbaum, Hector Mann and Herman Loesser, 'Hector became Hector again' (202). This time, and in a play on the arbitrary nature of naming, Auster christens his central character Hector Spelling.

Hector had vowed to never make films again as part of his life-long penance (145). Now, he seeks a way to justify breaking his own promise. 'He would make movies that would never be shown to audiences,' Alma tells Zimmer. 'It was an act of breathtaking nihilism' (207). Hector gathered a group of filmmakers together, including Alma's father, from his Hollywood days, and they set about building a film studio in the desert.

Like Auster's own films, which are made with independent producers, Hector's films are out of 'the commercial loop' of Hollywood, and they are both able 'to work without constraints' such as conventional style and subject matter (209). And like all of Auster's work, Hector's fourteen desert films have a 'fantastical element running through them, a weird kind of poetry', which break with the conventions of narration (208-9). Hector and Frieda achieved this by creating a small community of filmmakers on the ranch, 'a self-contained universe, a private compound for making films' (209). Movie making becomes the fabric of the ranch, and it becomes a communal process where '[n]o one did just one thing. They were all involved' (211). The community becomes a family with the arrival of Alma, who is a child of the ranch, as Hector tells Zimmer (225). This extension of Zimmer's social realm represents a shift from personal love to the 'comradeship' of an extended and unconventional family, similar to Cibola.

Hector dies and Zimmer returns to Vermont after having seen only one of the films. Frieda is determined to destroy all traces of Hector's life after 1929, and sets about systematically destroying his work, his journals and then Alma's biography. In a tussle with Alma, Frieda falls and is killed (302-5). Alma is unable to bear another tragic loss in her life, with the deaths of Hector and Frieda she has lost the last two remaining coordinates in her life. She takes her own life using the tranquillisers meant to sedate Zimmer against his fear of flying on the flight to New Mexico. Zimmer is left alone once again. The remainder of the book sketches in brief details of the rest of Zimmer's life, before informing the reader that, like Walt and Chateaubriand, he speaks to us from beyond the grave.

The family as a form of community, for the characters of this book at least, provides a point of stillness and equilibrium that remains constant under certain conditions. However, once those conditions are interrupted and the points of reference start slipping away, the capacity of the family to provide a site of self-formation is eroded. The family then, in this novel, is shown to be fragile and provisional. The location and conditions of the desert experiment in filmmaking demonstrate that without the network of social connections radiating out from a central relationship of self and other (here variously represented as Zimmer and his wife, Hector and Frieda and Zimmer and Alma), then the arrangement remains fragile and prone to disintegration. However, Alma acts upon Zimmer's psychosis, allowing him to emerge into the world without being crushed. In time this new vision allows him the clarity to set down his own story, along with that of Hector and Alma.

The persistence of this story suggests that in this novel Auster is setting up a comparison between the filmic and novelistic form. Auster's return to the novel, after the failure of *Lulu* and in contrast to the smoky fate of Hector's canon, suggests that

Auster believes the word to be more enduring than the image, while emphasising that storytelling is held in common.

Within the theoretical framework of the present argument, the characters' experience of place in these texts is fleeting and partial, and so generally falls into the category of the 'systemic'. Consequently, the constitution of self remains an incomplete project as coordinates and points of social reference are few and provisional. However, whereas Auster's earlier novels presented characters (Quinn, Sachs) overwhelmed by the complexity of the environment, the characters in *Mr. Vertigo*, *Timbuktu* and *Illusions* find the places they inhabit are empty, underdetermined and un compelling. Brief episodes of equilibrium and local-type contentment (like those experienced by Fogg and Aaron) present themselves to Walt, Mr. Bones and Hector. But the barrenness and sterility of Kansas, suburbia and Sandusky, along with the capriciousness of the traveller, fail to provide enough connection to anchor them, and so they move on and continue their search for harmony.

Ultimately we can read these four stories as road novels that take the central characters to a place that does not exist. We can also read *The Book of Illusions* through the lens of the one film of Hector's that Zimmer was able to see at the ranch. *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* is a text-within-a-text in which the eponymous author creates and falls in love with a beautiful female character. But as the pages of the story he is writing run out, he realises that to keep her alive in his imagination he needs to destroy the manuscript. Once the text is finished she will fully become a fiction – a character and nothing more. Following this reading, Alma becomes the imaginative creation of the author, David Zimmer. Equally, 'Walt the Wonder Boy' and Walt the gangster are alter-egos of Walter Clairborne Rawley; author (or Paul

Auster, author, whose name is on the cover). As well as the real and physical locations of these books, these characters go to the place of imagination and dreams, and Mr. Bones knows that it is called Timbuktu. Mr. Bones clings to the promise of Timbuktu as the place where unity will be achieved, where he will be with his master, and he will be whole again. Walt achieves a unity of spirit when in his fabular, airborne state, but once this is lost he becomes a lost and wandering soul whose incarnations are collected as a series of random stories. Hector's lives, in contrast, have an underlying 'unresolved harmony' based not in any fundamental origin or identity, but in his most vigorous incarnation; that of Hector Mann, actor. Chaim Mandelbaum is a character born in transition (on an immigrant boat from Holland), but he gains a conditional stability as Hector. When each disaster strikes, Hector moves on to a new self, each time retaining the persona of actor. In Spokane he is a salesman using the sporting goods as props (168), in Chicago he becomes a sexual spectacle, and in the desert he becomes the consummate filmmaker. But film and acting are artifice and illusion. Ultimately, where harmonies do connect the phases of Hector's life and hold his identity together, they have no metaphysical basis, and are founded on the shifting sands of illusion, just like levitation and dreams. Or in Auster's art, the work of re-imagining a life as story

## CHAPTER 7

### NO PLACE – Dystopias and Utopias

Chapter 6 demonstrated the way in which movement and travel can be constitutive of a series of relational and situated selves. Walt, Mr. Bones, and Hector are searching for some inner peace and find it ultimately, not in a real place, but in the space of imagination and illusion; in flying, dreams, and films. These places are, like the mythical idea of Timbuktu, beyond the rational representation of maps. They are instead no-places – unreal, un-locatable and un-plotable. In short, they are utopian places.

Auster's work incorporates many unreal or unearthly places. In each, social relations, time and space have a different quality to that experienced elsewhere. The farm at Cibola in *Mr. Vertigo* and the Blue Stone Ranch in *The Book of Illusions* are prime examples of this, and Fogg's Central Park experiences in *Moon Palace* also display qualities at odds with the tumultuous streets in which they and the park are embedded. These places generate a different experience of space because they are subject to different social forces than the more conventional spaces of St. Louis, Vermont and New York. They are also, to one extent or another, spaces of imagination themselves, meant by their creators to act as a refuge from the cruel practices of the world beyond their boundaries. Places that are constructed entirely within the realm of the imagination, or are occupied by the imaginary and the symbolic are, according to Lefebvre, 'utopian' (366). Auster has explored the fine line between utopias and dystopias in his work since Quinn discovered Stillman Sr.'s apocryphal story of Henry Dark and his attempts to establish a

new innocent language and Eden in America.<sup>1</sup> 'Unlike the other writers on the subject,' Auster records:

Dark did not assume paradise to be a place that could be discovered. There were no maps that could lead a man to it ... Rather, its existence was immanent within man himself: the idea of a beyond he might one day create in the here and now. For utopia was nowhere – even, as Dark explained, in its 'wordhood.'

(*Trilogy* 46-7)

This chapter will examine how in two novels in particular, Auster represents spaces which, like the unimaginable 'Timbuktu' or Eden, cannot be found on the map. The places represented in *The Music of Chance* and *In The Country of Last Things* are born entirely of imagination, and contain unreal and unknowable forces, but none-the-less display characteristics that have their origin in real locations. As a result of the representation of 'fictional' places, the novels are able to explore the extremes of human experience, and how ontological stability is constantly undermined by spatial instability. *The Music of Chance* explores the results of translating a political and aesthetic conception of utopia, as encoded in a model of 'The City of the World', into spatial

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<sup>1</sup> See also Pascale-Anne Brault. 'Translating the Impossible debt: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*'. *Critique*. 39.3 (Spring 1998): 228-238. Leo Marx describes how pastoral thinking of this kind would view 'America as nature's garden, a new paradise of abundance' (75). He also examines a pamphlet called 'The Golden Age' with similarly celestial ambitions as Stillman's (105-107). *The Machine in the Garden*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

experience. *In the Country of Last Things* presents a dystopic vision of urban possibilities and explores the capacity of the human spirit to survive the brutalities of the metropolis, and strategies to do so.

From these texts it also becomes apparent that for Auster illusion, in the forms of magic and dreams, is important to how he represents place, and how his characters subsequently construct their sense of self in many of his novels. For the central characters in *Mr. Vertigo*, *Timbuktu* and *Illusions* fantasy provides a refuge from their corporeal and emotional reality. *Last Things* demonstrates that language and storytelling also have an illusory power, obscuring the reality of a cruel, incomprehensible and intolerable existence. However, storytelling can also provide secure references in an unstable environment to make sense of a complex world. Storytelling emerges in Auster's recent film work as the most powerful strategy for comprehending the contemporary metropolis. Illusory practices such as flying, high-wire walking, dreams and film-making are features of Auster's later texts, and represent a way for central characters to establish a more secure sense of self than those available in the seemingly unknowable material world. This chapter explores Auster's places of the imagination, and considers the role non-places play in the novels.

### **The 'City of the World'**

In *The Music of Chance*, Nashe's relentless and mobile pursuit of a grounded self comes to an end in bizarre circumstances. He stakes his last ten thousand dollars on Pozzi's poker game with the two eccentric lottery millionaires, Flower and Stone. Poker

functions here as another expression of the way that rule and chance intersect to shape the lives and narrative outcomes of Auster's novels. Like baseball (see Chapter 8), poker comprises a series of uncontrolled, chance events occurring within a highly regulated structure of rules and etiquette. Each chance event (hand) translates into a tangible and measurable outcome, and each game ends with winners and losers. To participate in this ritual of contingency, Nashe first reduces his life to ten one thousand dollar bills. 'There was something clean and abstract about ...this', Auster writes, 'a sense of mathematical wonder in seeing his world reduced to ten small pieces of paper' (92). However, this rational simplicity takes on a menacing quality when the game is lost. Nashe's money becomes the property of Flower and Stone, and with it goes the agency to dictate the course of his own life. When he cuts the cards for his car, and loses, Nashe even forfeits his capacity to leave (100). But he has reached a nihilistic point in his life, and is ready to risk his freedom in this way. The life on the road, stripped of connections and responsibilities, has not provided a coherent and grounded inner self for Nashe. Thus, when the game turns against Pozzi, he feels that this is a 'crisis that he had been searching for all along' (98). As Auster himself observes elsewhere, Nashe's position swings rapidly from freedom to confinement during the game (*Hunger* 327-8). Later Nashe comes across a line in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*: '... until someday in very disgust he risks everything on the single blind turn of a card ...' (*Music* 202). The pivotal event of the novel is encapsulated in this statement, found by chance by Auster while writing *The Music of Chance* (*Hunger* 337). Nashe's incoherent inner state drives him to trust entirely to chance, hoping that from chaos order will emerge. Pozzi, on the other hand, relies on a different organising principle to comprehend his world. He trusts



to a mystical superstition which Nashe calls 'some hidden purpose ... God or luck or harmony' (*Music* 139). Pozzi blames Nashe for swinging the game away from him by breaking off the model figures of Flower and Stone from the 'City of the World' (96-7). Pozzi sees this as 'violating a fundamental law' before which they had 'everything in harmony ... turning into music' (138). However, Pozzi's strategy for achieving harmony with the world proves no more successful than Nashe's. Neither character manages to establish a degree of ontological certainty by locating correspondences between his understanding and experience of reality.

The card game takes place at Flower and Stone's Pennsylvania mansion. The house itself has a quality that distorts the experience of space and a rational sense of present reality, both of which give the estate and the novel a dream-like quality. On arrival at the gate Nashe felt that:

An overpowering sense of happiness washed through him. It lasted only an instant, then gave way to a brief, almost imperceptible feeling of dizziness ... . After that, his head seemed curiously emptied out, and for the first time in many years, he fell into one of those trances that had sometimes afflicted him as a boy: an abrupt and radical shift of his inner bearings, as if the world around him had suddenly lost all its reality.

(65)

Like characters in the novels examined in earlier chapters, Nashe is unable to locate himself in the physical realm with any certainty. Also, like *Vertigo*, *Timbuktu* and

*Illusions*, this novel is suffused with what could be termed a 'sufficient realism' which represents the characters' experiences as plausible in a recognisable world, but tends to obscure the unreal quality of the environments in which they occur. The interior of the house, and the resemblance of Flower and Stone to Laurel and Hardy remind Nashe of a movie set, and reinforce the representation of the house as 'an illusion' (69). These spatial and experiential aspects of the house are further reinforced by the maze-like roads leading to the house (64), and the location of Ockham, Pennsylvania which, like Cibola, is not on a map. All of these elements combine to emphasise the importance of the cognition of space and the experience of spatiality in Auster's work.

In a room which feels as though it is 'suspended in the middle of the air' (77-8) is an object of fundamental importance to how we read *The Music of Chance*. For housed here is Stone's 'City of the World', a 'miniature scale-model rendering of a city ... with its crazy spires and lifelike buildings, its narrow streets and microscopic human figures' (79). The model has a space reserved for a representation of the house, with a model of the room containing a model of the model, and so on. Nashe sees the futility of this endless cycle of representation, as each model eternally refers to all the others in a nightmare of perpetual and continuous presents. But Flower sees Stone's work differently, describing it as 'an artistic vision of mankind', 'an autobiography' and 'a utopia' (79). Stone sees the model as the way the world should look. Flower goes on to describe the institutional forces that both create the spatial formations of the city, and maintain order. He points out 'the Hall of Justice, the Library, the Bank and the Prison. Willie calls them the Four Realms of Togetherness, and each one plays a vital role in maintaining the harmony of the city' (80). Here then is a social order that seeks to

impose harmony on the spatial organisation and lives of its subjects, through the rational power of state institutions. This (modernist) order stands in contrast to the (postmodern) contingent and random composition that Nashe has so far brought to his life, taken to an extreme by the 'single blind turn of a card'.

Stone's vision is presented as a utopian one and, as such, is in a tradition of an ideology of space stretching back to Thomas More's *Utopia*. As Joseph Rykwert notes in *The Seduction of Place* (2000), More 'founded a new literary genre, since utopias – in which the problems of society may be discussed by reference to some fictional ideal and remote city or country – are inevitably a criticism of current urban practice and a polemic about policy' (17). Both the 'City of the World' and its practical spatial application hold up a vision of social organisation which becomes destructive to individual consciousness. Stone insists on imposing the concept of institutional control in the metropolis, which the inhabitants would experience as the imposition of 'systemic' forces upon urban space and identity. However, as earlier chapters have shown, this experience of 'systemic' determination disengages the individual from their environment, and causes instability. Tim Woods notes that the model city in *The Music of Chance* expresses an 'architecture of control' ('Aleatorical (Dis)Harmonies' 152) that encodes Flower and Stone's ideological constructions and their relationship to American capital (150). That is to say, the spaces of 'The City of the World' are 'literally filled with ideologies' (to use the expression Soja borrows from Lefebvre, *Postmodern Geographies* 80), which are themselves 'systemic' forces. The 'City of the World' conforms to Lefebvre's definition of a utopian space, containing both the symbolic and the imaginary in the form of the "Four Realms of Togetherness". The model also confirms Rykwert's observation that

utopian visions are a 'rationally conceived social order incorporated into a city plan' as a 'cure for conceptual chaos' (57). For example, in the prison, the prisoners appear happy in their rehabilitation through work as they are reintegrated into the regulated city life that they have transgressed. For Stone, such aspects of life in his city are positive as they reimpose order and certainty where he clearly sees chaos in the contemporary metropolis. Consequently Stone's vision conforms to Rykwert's contention that utopia can be both a 'no-place' and 'the good place' (17). Here, Nashe's chaotic (postmodern) understandings collide with Stone's rational (and modernist, in the Enlightenment sense) model. The elision of the two in the meadow interrogates both as 'organising principles' for the contemporary environment, and finds both wanting.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is a fictional narrative, but subsequent visions have taken the form of manifestos or blueprints for the future-present city – such as Bentham's 'Panopticon' and Le Corbusier's plans for Paris.<sup>2</sup> The novel has also been a primary form for utopian thinking, presenting an opportunity to explore spatial and social formulations within contexts that do not yet exist. This freedom allows writers to examine an imagined space without the rational and scientific constraints that limit much geographical thinking. The spatial imagination that Auster's novels display is a way of interrogating imaginary spaces to their utmost limits and stepping, by way of fiction, onto the territory of geographers. David Harvey attempts the inverse of this in the appendix to *Spaces of Hope*. In imagining a possible future, he employs the practices of fiction to illustrate the spatial possibilities proposed in the rational-empirical geographical text that

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<sup>2</sup> Rykwert's *The Seduction of Place* (2000) is a long meditation on the history of utopian models in the planning of cities.

precedes it. He takes the premise of existing material social conditions, and 're-imagines' their potential for a more socially just society.

Harvey examines utopian models in *Justice Nature and the Geography of Difference* and *Spaces of Hope*. He identifies two types of utopian expression – the utopianism of process, and the utopianism of fixed spatial form. For him, the utopianism of process holds the greatest potential for successful realisation in practice, as it is a 'dialectical utopianism', is flexible, and builds upon material social conditions (*Spaces of Hope* 173-96). In contrast, the utopianism of fixed spatial form, of which the 'City of the World' is emblematic, represents a dangerous recipe for 'authoritarian oppressions in the name of law, stability and order' (*Justice, Nature* 435). In *The Music of Chance*, the "Four Realms" represent the powerful, unknowable and authoritarian forces which constitute a 'systemic' experience of the metropolis. They also share aspects of the 'citadel-panopticon' that Soja identifies at the heart of Los Angeles (*Thirdspace* 204-237). This site incorporates the state and corporate powers of control, surveillance and incarceration. As such, the processes at work in Stone's aesthetic vision contradict and oppress the social and spatial elements that Lefebvre identifies for 'Spaces of Representation', which include the liberating practices of art and language. Instead, the 'City of the World' conforms wholly to Lefebvre's conception of 'Representations of Space' as a 'conceived' space of administrative forces. As a result it is constructed of purely rational, scientific and controlled spaces that invariably fall under the jurisdiction of the institutions of state control. Consequently, the 'City' offers no possibility for subversive or fugitive activity. Indeed, on closer inspection, Nashe finds the organisation of the 'City' to be oppressive and menacing, rather than co-operative and benign. The

model displays a 'voodoo logic', with 'a hint of violence, an atmosphere of cruelty and revenge' (87). This is confirmed by an execution taking place in the prison yard, and Nashe realises that there is an 'overriding mood ... of terror, of dark dreams .... A threat of punishment seemed to hang in the air' (96). The 'City of the World' is clearly a society based on surveillance and discipline. The cruel and carceral nature of a society controlled by powers that punish non-conformist acts soon becomes apparent in *The Music of Chance*. Lefebvre calls ideologies with this level of abstraction 'negative utopias' (60). The outcome represented by the model for the inhabitants of the 'City of the World' is one of fear and menace, suggesting that a practical application of Stone's vision would be profoundly dystopic.

The opportunity for Stone to realise his vision comes with the outcome of the game. Without a car, with the last of his inheritance lost, and a further ten thousand dollars in debt, Nashe and Pozzi are 'employed' by Flower and Stone to build a wall '[t]wo thousand feet long and twenty feet high' (117). The wall will be built from the stones of a fifteenth century Irish castle and be 'a memorial to itself' (86), but it is to be built without foundations (123). Stone's aesthetic representation of his utopian society is translated into spatial practice in an enclosed meadow on the estate, where the wall will be built. Like the house itself, this space has the unreal quality of an enchanted meadow in a fable. It is '[s]urrounded by woods on all four sides'; a 'desolate place' with a 'certain forlorn beauty to it, an air of remoteness and calm' (116). This section of the book has its origins in a play Auster wrote in the 1970s, which was performed only once. Originally called *Eclipse*, the play was a Beckettian story of Schubert and Brahms building a wall that eventually separates them from the audience. It is reprinted in a

revised version, *Laurel and Hardy Go To Heaven*, in *Hand to Mouth*, where Auster also describes the only performance of the play (129-66 and 101-5).

Nashe and Pozzi's new relationship with Flower and Stone is formalised in contract and agreement, with conditions to be fulfilled on both sides (*Music* 112). However, the mystical meadow soon becomes the site of a brutal regime of control and repression. The futile labour of building the wall becomes a corrective measure imposed by Flower and Stone upon Nashe and Pozzi, in a parallel with the prisoners in the model. Co-operation is enforced by a translation of the panoptic forces from the model to meadow. Woods notes that an 'allegorical and symbolic structure' emerges between the 'City of the World' such that the 'ideologies that are theorized and conceptualized in the model are reproduced practically in the meadow' (153). Flower and Stone's authority is imposed by a combination of confinement, coercion and fear. Nashe and Pozzi are confined to the estate by a barbed-wire fence (125-6), and are supervised by Calvin Murks, an employee of Flower and Stone, who rigidly enforces the terms of the contract. When relationships between the men – between control and labour – becomes confrontational, Murks demonstrates his power by wearing a gun, the threat of which temporarily gains the co-operation of the rapidly disintegrating Pozzi. The threat of violence also alerts Nashe to the full extent of their predicament (144-5).

Finally, when Pozzi's battered and near lifeless body is dumped in the meadow after an escape attempt, and Nashe is forced at gunpoint to remain in the meadow rather than go to the hospital, his already fragile sense of self-determination begins to disintegrate (172-4). Like the 'City of the World', the meadow has become disciplinary, repressive and carceral. The powers that control the space in which Nashe's life is

enacted are remote, incomprehensible and cruel – in short, ‘systemic’. The clear expression of the unequal and oppressive power relationships in the meadow, above all the other events that befall Nashe, force him to question his capacity to be in control of his own life, and further undermine his increasingly unstable sense of self.

In the meadow, then, Auster presents the development of a set of labour relations in a starkly empty landscape. Stripped down to the barest and most extreme expression of a social structure, the differential power relations of labour come to dominate.<sup>3</sup> By establishing a correspondence between the model ‘city’ and the meadow, Auster emphasises how these same forces produce social relations, which are then inscribed in the metropolitan fabric. The reading of the meadow sequence of this novel as a meditation on the confining nature of labour relations is reinforced by a poem written on the back of one of the pages in a draft manuscript. The order of the first lines is unclear, but the poem appears to be called ‘Labor is the life of the lost’:

Life is a labor of love,

And labor is the life

Of the lost.

But I who live

But to love, am lost

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<sup>3</sup> Ilana Shilo investigates the relationship between money, power and enslavement in *Chance* (504-6). ‘A Place Both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*’, *Contemporary Literature*. 43.3 (Fall 2002): 488-517.



In the labor of life.

What is this strife

That haunts me?

What is this life

That taunts me?

O me O my –

I am alone with the lost

And labor is not love

Love is the labor of the lost

(n.pag.)

Nashe throws himself into building the wall as a way of recovering a coherent and balanced self lost during his itinerant phase. However, the close of this novel, like the of irresolution in some of the novels already examined, shows that for Auster the difficulty of locating a metaphysical basis for the construction of self-hood and identity is in the same order as the deferral of resolution. Once Nashe has 'earned' his freedom he finds himself once more behind the wheel of his car, given to Murks as a reward for 'policing' the work. He speeds along the wrong side of the road towards the 'cyclops' headlight of an oncoming vehicle (216). The novel finishes with this line: 'And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore' (217).

This novel, then, presents a series of processes that are condemned to endlessly refer to themselves without establishing a metaphysical point of origin. The model of the

'City of the World' depicts Stone in his studio making models of himself; the wall that Nashe and Pozzi build is destabilised by its lack of foundations, and only memorialises its own existence; and Nashe's search for a coherent and stable construction of self founders on ontological uncertainty.

Ultimately, *The Music of Chance* is an exploration of freedom and control in contemporary American society. As Raymond Williams notes, the 'relations between men' are increasingly being expressed as 'relations between things or relations between concepts', which Harvey identifies as 'money relations'. In the metropolis, in the 'City of the World', and in the meadow these relations are expressed spatially. By exposing the relative power relations of the labour process, Auster is laying bare the brutality of the carceral and surveillance apparatus that is emerging in metropolitan spatial formations, of which LA's 'citadel-panopticon' is an example. The consequences for Nashe in the extreme environment of the meadow, with society reduced to a population of just three, is that he is unable to exercise control over his surroundings because uncertainty and exploitation haunt him at every turn, while Pozzi is beaten near to death, and even Murks is confined by his role as supervisor.

### **The City of 'Last Things'**

Although sections of *In The Country of Last Things* appeared in the *Columbia Review Magazine* in 1969 as 'Letter from the City', this text was Auster's second full length prose novel to be published. It immediately succeeded *The New York Trilogy*, with

which it shares the concerns of language, the influence of the urban environment on individual consciousness, and the form appropriate for presenting the complexities of the metropolis. In particular, *Last Things* explores the capacity of the individual to maintain a unified mental self when the physical self is subject to the most extreme urban conditions. The central character, Anna Blume (an homage to *Ulysses*, perhaps), undergoes an urban nightmare in a distant and apocalyptically dystopic city. Turbulent metropolitan spaces, language and spaces of sanctuary, and their effect on identity are the key themes in the novel. Auster presents Anna's experience at the extremes of human suffering and cruelty, and the metropolis at the limits of change, disorientation and alienation. Like the 'City of the World', this is an unreal place, filled with the imaginary and the symbolic. Thus, like the 'City of the World' it displays the characteristics of a 'negative utopia'. However, unlike the model in *The Music of Chance*, the city here is a dystopia of process rather than physical form.

Anna has gone to the city to search for her journalist brother. This demonstrates the central position of the unnamed city in this story, and in much of Auster's work. The city is already a story here, generating its own narrative, with its own causal paths and outcomes. Anna's personal narrative takes the form of an extended letter that details her experiences in the city. It is written in a notebook and related to the reader through an intermediary narrator, in this case David Zimmer from *Moon Palace* and *The Book of Illusions*. The novel is told predominantly in Anna's first person, but is interrupted by Zimmer's interventions making the reader aware of how the narrative is layered and mediated, and subject to the many lapses and losses of memory and language.

Anna's experiences are formed through the constant reinscription of social relations on the fabric of the metropolis. Constantly shifting social formations lead to a spatial instability, which is destructive to her sense of self and the language necessary to express shared experiences. Like Nashe in *The Music of Chance*, Anna is subject to constant and multiplying uncertainties in an extreme and rarefied environment. Auster shows how Anna experiences the city as massively stimulating, complex and disorientating, as both the physical and social urban fabric disintegrates. The novel follows Anna's battle for survival, her attempts to stabilise her sense of self, and her search for sanctuary from the city's many hardships. Through her letter-diary, Auster describes Anna's initial experience of the city in this way:

Life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what has taken its place. Those of us who were brought up somewhere else, or are old enough to remember a world different from this one, find it an enormous struggle just to keep up from one day to the next. ... The brain is in a muddle. All around you one change follows another, each day produces a new upheaval, the old assumptions are so much air and emptiness.

(20)

Tim Woods describes *In the Country of Last Things* as 'a spatial cartography that explores the manner in which human history is subject to various structures and forms of

power that traverse the body and the world, break it down, shape it, and rearrange it' (109). This city demonstrates a number of material attributes that reveal how Auster has constructed it from the human history of the twentieth century. As a result, the city is not a recognisably real, locatable and mappable place, but it does display characteristics that relate it to the material experience of cities in crisis. Or to put it more simply: real places and events. Among the identifiable events are the Holocaust, the siege of Leningrad, the New York fiscal crisis of the 1970s, and the Cairo garbage system. Thus, this city is both a no-place and an every-place at the same time. While writing the book, Auster sub-titled it 'Anna Blume Walks Through the 20th Century' and she encounters the terrible manifestations of these historical events in the city from the outset (*Hunger* 284-5). Like Soja's 'Aleph', the city simultaneously contains multiple spaces and times, representing them in a dystopia of disturbing presents. Soja's concept of 'Thirdspace' and the 'Aleph' helps to explain what makes Anna's experience of the city so unstable. Soja identifies how in some spaces everything can be seen 'as a simultaneously historical-social-spatial palimpsest ... in which inextricably intertwined temporal, social, and spatial relations are being constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again' (*Thirdspace* 18). It is this same process, of social relations being constantly renewed, that proves so disorientating for Anna.

Reinscription of social and power relations in Anna's city is enacted on the material fabric of the city in a graphic way, in what Walker calls a 'dystopic city of continually shifting landscapes' ('Criminality and (Self)Discipline' 406). That is to say, the tangible manifestation of social change is displayed in new spatial formations. Anna describes the physical experience of a shifting landscape at the very beginning of her

narrative. 'A house is there one day, and the next day it is gone', she writes. 'A street you walked down yesterday is no longer there today' (*Last Things* 1). Anna goes on to describe the mental toll that the uncertainty of a constantly altering cityscape has:

When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn't waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it.

(1-2)

Anna witnesses a dangerously unpredictable environment at the confluence of competing social forces, which constantly erase and reinscribe social relations. The way that these forces alter the physical formations in the city can be accounted for by applying the spatial thinking of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, and is particularly captured by Edward W. Soja's term, 'the socio-spatial dialectic'. Lefebvre insists that '(social) space is a (social) product' (26). Consequently, he is able to demonstrate that social relations are 'concrete abstractions' which 'have no real existence in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*' (404, original emphasis).

Soja, extending Lefebvre, explains that 'the organization, use and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience' ('Dialectic' 210), such that:

all social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially "inscribed" – that is, *concretely represented* – in the social production of social space.

(*Thirdspace* 46, original emphasis)

Social relations and spatial relations are fundamentally linked in the work of both Lefebvre and Soja in a two way process; social relations form space, but space also influences social relations in a constant process of production and reproduction. Or, as Soja puts it, spatiality is 'simultaneously ... a social product (an outcome) and a shaping force (a medium)' (*Postmodern Geographies* 7). Thus Anna's experience of a constantly shifting cityscape is driven by constantly changing social relations. Equally, because of the dialectical relationship between space and society, this spatial disruption further destabilises social relations, creating a dystopic vortex.

These spatial understandings lead us to consider how spatial formations will change under the stress of significant shifts in social relations. The response of the individual to change will vary according to their knowledge of and control over the forces at work. Not surprisingly, the less control there is, the more confusing these forces are. Consequently Anna finds the city disorientating as a result of her lack of power. Doreen Massey describes the relationship between the individual and the forces at work in their environment as a 'power-geometry', while Harvey calls it 'situatedness'. Auster shows repeatedly how Anna's place in urban power relations is a weak and distant one, and how she is manipulated by forces beyond her control or comprehension. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey considers the outcomes from the changes in financial practices

and production processes in the most recent phase of capitalism. He describes how a transition in the formation of social relations, in the shift from one mode of production to another, for example, will result in a change in spatial formations and, very importantly, the way that individuals experience space. Thus Harvey asserts that during 'phases of maximal change, the spatial and temporal bases for reproduction of the social order are subject to the severest disruptions' (239). What accompanies these shifts has been an accentuation of the 'volatility and ephemerality of ... values and established practices' (285). The result of the 'bombardment of stimuli' that assails the individual at these times, Harvey insists, 'creates problems of sensory overload that makes Simmel's dissection of the problems of modernist living at the turn of the century seem to pale into insignificance by comparison' (286). The experience of these social changes and the crisis in representation that goes with it are encapsulated in what Harvey terms 'time-space compression', under which continuing and rapid change promotes a feeling of instability. For Harvey, the alteration of the way that time and space are experienced results from the revolutionising of 'the objective qualities of space and time' that forces us to alter 'how we represent the world to ourselves' (240). For Auster too, Anna's struggle to grasp the changes that occur in the city, and the transformations of the cityscape, are caused by the constant rearticulation of social relations under pressure from a new mode of production. Anna therefore finds it necessary to completely overhaul her internal value system, and needs constantly to re-assess the 'established practices' that make up her everyday life in order to survive.

As a consequence of the constant disintegration of the physical environment, Anna's battle to retain control over her understanding of it is rapidly lost. The



correspondences between her inner terrain, and the external terrain of the physical and social city, are progressively eroded. Fredric Jameson records how the individual attempts to familiarise her or himself with city space by 'the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories' (51). Auster demonstrates that Anna's attempts to deploy the appropriate 'cognitive map' or 'articulated ensemble' in this city will be constantly undermined by the altering spatial formations, denying her the opportunity to memorise potential alternative trajectories through the city in a conventional and rational map form. Like Quinn before her and Fogg and Sachs after, Anna does not possess the appropriate navigational tools for her city. Or perhaps more appropriately here, the city no longer coincides with her urban expectations and comprehensions. De Certeau too identifies that the streets present a 'forest of gestures' for the individual to interpret as they navigate through the metropolitan environment. In Anna's city, these markers are constantly remade and the individual loses the ability to read the signs, making the urban text illegible. For Anna, this most extreme of urban environments proves to be unmappable, and provides no stable landmarks upon which to establish herself in relation to a physical or social environment, or a way to locate herself in the world. The result is a struggle to retain a hold on identity. Auster shows here how the intensity of the contemporary metropolitan process can be presented in the novel at its most extreme. When the city is portrayed in this way it is seen to be destructive of all manner of personal coordinates and references.

As a consequence of the 'ungraspable' nature of the city and her 'situatedness' in it, Anna's experience is firmly placed in the realm of the 'systemic'. The metropolitan processes that form the spaces that she occupies remain beyond her comprehension. The governance and policing of the city remain virtually invisible, while spaces evacuated by the institutions of the state are rapidly filled by other power groups. These use fear and intimidation to impose an order based on the extraction of 'tolls', sometimes in the form of money, and sometimes in the form of food or sex (6). These 'tollists' block streets with the debris of the disintegrating urban fabric, and are actively engaged in re-forming the cityscape (5-6). However, Anna attempts to overcome the incomprehensibility of the city by deploying local, sensual and tactile strategies of engagement and negotiation. From time to time this proves successful, but she often finds the urban text illegible, with terrible consequences. Anna attempts to avoid the possessors of social power, because in this environment it is predominantly gained and held by force. Her strategy is visceral, makeshift and provisional, relying on intuition rather than rational interpretation to navigate through the streets and away from trouble. Despite the fact that Anna is Auster's only female central protagonist, and her mode of urban engagement parallels that of the artist, Maria Turner, he does not generally gender urban experiences one way or the other. While these two women seem to be connected by their improvised responses to urban life, so are some of the men in his work (particularly Sachs early on in *Leviathan*). Also, their status as artists is not peculiarly feminine, as we shall see when considering Auggie Wren in Chapter 8.

Like Sachs, Anna experiences the city in the most immediate of ways, on foot. Her status as a wanderer places her in the category of de Certeau's pedestrian

practitioners. What emerges, however, is not de Certeau's 'pedestrian speech acts' with a syntax of 'walking rhetorics', but an illegible and constantly shifting text of competing social powers and confusing reinscriptions of social (dis)organisation. Auster records how Anna puts 'one foot in front of the other, and then the other foot in front of the first, and then I hope I can do it again' (2). This is a long way from the relative optimism of 'White Spaces', where 'I put one foot in front of the other. I put one word in front of the other, and for each step I take I add another word'. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster notes how 'just as one step will inevitably lead to the next step, so it is that one thought inevitably follows from the previous thought'. However, for Anna walking is not part of a thought or enunciative process, but a battle to survive in which 'the only thing that counts is staying on your feet' (2).<sup>4</sup>

The instability of the environment forces the inhabitants of the city into ever more extreme and bizarre attempts to make sense of their experiences and Anna describes some of the strategies people adopt to explain or escape the reality of their lives. Quasi-religious sects emerge which attempt to make sense of their contemporary condition by inventing stories about surviving it; none of them are simple, and all employ complex and illusory narratives and strategies. Some go as far as removing limbs to reduce the physical presence in the world (11-16, 26-7). They each attempt to provide a way of

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay, 'Looking for Signs in the Air: Urban Space and the Postmodern in *In the Country of Last Things*', in Barone (ed.), Woods too contemplates the correspondences in Auster's earlier works, Anna's wandering and de Certeau's 'walkers' (111). He describes the city as 'a place and non-place, in which people are completely indifferent to reality, knowing no logic or negotiation or causality or contradiction, wholly given over, as they are to the instinctual play of the desires and the search for survival' (112).

comprehending the city's condition, and to locate members' lives in some mystical way to the events that surround them.

The economy of the city has also reached a profound point of decay and disintegration. The dominant activity is now 'scavenging' on the streets for refuse. In *Last Things* the collection of waste and salvage has become the dominant mode of production – effectively replacing production with recycling. Lefebvre relates how social relations and their spatial expression are a result of the prevailing mode of production, while Harvey notes that transitions between modes of production create the experience of social and spatial crisis. The economic crisis in the city is so deep, and the social consequences so profound, that Anna estimates up to twenty percent of the population are engaged as either 'garbage collectors' or 'object hunters' (31). These activities have become necessary as this city has no municipal system of garbage collection. Instead, each census zone has a private garbage broker who owns the rights to collect garbage. He in turn sells permits to the individuals who do the collecting, and then takes a cut from their earnings. Auster based this seemingly bizarre system on a *New York Times* article on the 'garbage collectors' of contemporary Cairo (*Hunger* 285, 321), which describes the poor migrants who collect the city's refuse and sell it on for recycling.<sup>5</sup> In *Last Things*, all refuse, including bodies, is burned at power plants on the edge of the city. The social structure that emerges from this regressive mode of production – really a mode of gradual destruction (nothing is made, just recycled and eventually destroyed) – is a hierarchy with street collectors at the bottom, rising through inspectors, Resurrection

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<sup>5</sup> The article, 'Cairo Garbage Gives Migrants a Good Living', is included with early drafts and other materials relating to *In the Country of Last Things* in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

Agents, and garbage brokers. While 'garbage collectors' trade in waste to power the city, the 'object hunters' seek out 'broken and discarded things' and salvage them before they reach the state of 'absolute decay' (35-6). As in 'City of Glass', broken objects become symbolic of the breakdown metropolis.

It is clear that Auster is influenced by Baudelaire in allying Anna with the figure of the ragpicker. She becomes an object hunter, an activity which is recognisably close to that of ragpicker. Benjamin quotes from Baudelaire's poem, 'The Ragpickers' Wine', in which he compares the drunken ragpicker to a poet (19). Benjamin himself notes:

When the new industrial processes had given refuse a certain value, ragpickers appeared in the cities in large numbers. They worked for middlemen and constituted a sort of cottage industry located in the streets. The ragpicker fascinated his epoch. The eyes of the first investigators of pauperism were fixed on him with the mute question as to where the limit of human misery lay.

(19)

Auster has consistently shown an awareness of the relationship between the urban observer-recorder and the marginal figures of the metropolis (Quinn, Fogg, and now Anna). He clearly links Anna's experience of human misery as a ragpicker to her status as an urban recorder, and through her is contemplating the contemporary complexities of urban representation in a way that echoes Baudelaire's concerns in nineteenth century Paris. That Auster considered 'New York Spleen' as a title for 'City of Glass', that he

consciously inserts a ragpicker character into his degraded cityscape, and that he too is searching for a language adequate to the urban experience, demonstrate the influence of Baudelaire. However, there seems to be no power to compel and fascinate in this city, from early in Auster's career, as there was in nineteenth century Paris. Instead, Anna's encounters with 'the crowd' are typified by fear and danger.<sup>6</sup>

In *Last Things*, Anna experiences the 'limit of human misery', and the intensification of urban processes to which she is subject problematises the nature of her urban record in similar ways to those in the *Trilogy*. Anna's record is layered and mediated and in places unknowable in a way that echoes the complexity and unknowability of the city. She admits that some of her recollections are not linear or complete, but are instead 'random clusters, isolated images removed from any context, bursts of light and shadow' (124). Through Anna, Auster joins Baudelaire and Benjamin in the debate on the complexities of urban representation for the artist. Anna's anguish at her inability to conjure the misery of the city in words reflects Baudelaire's appeal for 'a poetic prose' adequate to the 'intersecting ... myriad interrelations' of 'giant cities'. Anna writes; 'unless I write things down as they occur to me, I feel I will lose them for good'. She goes on:

The words come only when I think I won't be able to find them anymore,  
at the moment I despair of ever bringing them out again. Each day brings  
the same struggle, the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kirkegaard also comments on the relationship between Auster's characters and Benjamin's description of urban types (165-6). 'Cities, Signs, and Meaning in Walter Benjamin and Paul Auster, or:

not to forget. When it begins, it is never anywhere but here, never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write. The story starts and stops, goes forward and loses itself, and between each word, what silences, what words escape and vanish, never to be seen again.

(38)

The intensity of Anna's urban experiences creates such a conflict between the word and the world that she is able to find the words to represent the horror of her existence only under conditions of despair. Her difficulty results from both the mental instability that results from the constantly changing physical and social environment, and the effect this has on the language of the city.

The capacity of language to represent the intensities and extremities of city life is a central concern of *In the Country of Last Things*. Early provisional titles convey the importance of language to the construction of the urban environment (as *City of Words*), and the corrosive effect of an extreme urban condition upon words (as *Dead Letters*).<sup>7</sup> In this novel language has an illusory and obscuring quality, which in turn translates as a misapprehension of the physical environment for Anna. The breakdown between language and the physical realm is driven by the constant destruction that defines the cityscape. As Anna writes at the start: '[o]nce a thing is gone, that is the end of it' (2). This is illustrated when Anna seeks a way to escape the city. When she asks about an airplane she finds that the word has disappeared from the language. She rationalises the

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never sure of any of it'. *Orbis Litterarum*. 48 (1993): 161-179.

<sup>7</sup> Holograph notebook. The Berg Collection.

erasure of things and then their words from the collective social consciousness in this way:

It's not just that things vanish – but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well. Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever. ... Memory is not an act of will, after all. It is something that happens in spite of oneself, and when too much is changing all the time, the brain is bound to falter, things are bound to slip through it.

(87)

However, it is not just an environmental amnesia that erodes language in collective social use, but also individuals differentially forgetting a degrading physical realm. Because the city is a 'historical-social-spatial palimpsest', people's experiences of its decay are located at different temporal points. When people forget different things at different times, their capacity to use language to generate shared meanings is eroded. Tim Woods notes how the 'gradual obsolescence of language and the entropy of reference causes isolation and the collapse of social interaction. The disappearance of the material realm destroys the realm of representation, and this in turn destroys collective understanding and comprehension' (121). Anna puts it this way: 'In effect, each person is speaking his own private language, and as the instances of shared language understanding diminish, it becomes increasingly difficult to communicate with anyone' (88-9).



## Sanctuary

Nevertheless, Anna's narrative is not inhabited entirely by the nihilism and uncertainty of the streets. From time to time Auster shows that a provisional and temporary stability can be found in even the most volatile environment. Anna is able to find and occupy small, almost utopian spaces of stability which offer shelter, refuge and even renewal.<sup>8</sup> These spaces are the apartment of a fellow object hunter, Isabel; in the library with Samuel Farr, who becomes her lover; and the utopian calm of Woburn House, where Victoria Woburn helps the city's dispossessed. In these spaces of sanctuary Anna finds companionship with Isabel, love with Sam, and friendship with Victoria. Through these episodes of relative stillness Auster illustrates how small and local experiences of calm can provide the metropolitan subject with a degree of stability and even the chance to establish some equilibrium with stable points of reference in other people. The time Anna spends in these places gives her a sense of identity that is relational, but not necessarily situated. That is to say, she can identify her sense of self with the social coordinates of others close by, but does not locate herself in the wider world beyond the boundaries of this geographical experience with any degree of fixity. In effect, the writer retreats again to the sanctuary of the room.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Walker notes that Anna 'seeks out traditional institutions of stability and meaning to provide herself with sanctuary and identity' in the roles of 'daughter', 'wife' and 'nurse/employee' (408). 'Criminality and (Self) Discipline: The Case of Paul Auster'. *Modern Fiction Studies*. 48.2 (Spring 2002): 389-422.

For a while Anna shares a room and is initiated in the ways of the city by Isabel. But she dies after an illness that robs her of speech and Anna returns to the streets.<sup>9</sup> Once evicted from the stillness and security of the room, Anna's life is once again fear, confusion and instability. But when she takes shelter in the National Library during a food riot, she finds scholarly and religious communities studying and praying. There, Anna meets Samuel Farr, a journalist sent by the newspaper with the objective of finding her brother. He lives in a garret room on the ninth floor of the library collecting material for a book that will explain the city's condition. It is an immense and probably futile task; the 'story is so big ... it's impossible for any one person to tell it', he acknowledges (102). In other words, the city is so vast and complex that its totality is beyond the experience or understanding of a single point of view, consciousness, or intellect.

Through the figure of Sam, Auster demonstrates how even in the same environment, alternative metropolitan perspectives are available. Sam's view of the city contrasts with Anna's experience of it, and the unfolding of the narrative illustrates the weaknesses of both. Thus, Sam's presence in Anna's narrative not only provides her with a point of stability and love (again by retreating to a room), but also represents an alternative perspective on the city. Where Anna's everyday view of city life is local and immediate (the streets, the decay and the fear), Sam's analytical position is a 'systemic' one, attempting to gain an overview of the city through its political-economy, history and

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<sup>9</sup> Isabel's deterioration reflects that of the city, even down to the erosion of language. For Auster, a person's presence in the world is clearly composed, at least in part, by their language and speech. This episode parallels the end of Kafka's life which Auster describes in the essay, 'Kafka's Letters'. As Kafka was dying of tuberculosis of the larynx he, like Isabel, was unable to speak, eat or drink. To communicate he wrote 'conversation slips', and these were published along with his collected letters (*Hunger* 138-9).

geography. However, as Jameson points out, it is impossible for the individual to grasp any metropolis in its 'unimaginable' totality. So while Anna's contingent strategies for survival allow her flexibility in dealing with the city at an intuitive level, Sam is steadily consuming his reserves of strength and money in the pursuit of a futile, and ultimately impossible project. Sam's relationship to the city is encoded in the physical characteristics of his garret room. Anna describes how an intricate window from which the limits of the city are visible occupies the whole of one wall of the room (101). From this panoptic perspective, Sam is able to view the larger processes at work in the city, such as the constant remaking of the urban fabric. He is not, however, able to apprehend and interpret the micro-processes at work at street level that are implicated in the changes, because of their indistinctness below the 'threshold of visibility'.

However, the happiness and stability Anna finds in Sam proves to be ephemeral, as the horror of the city once again undermines permanence and destroys certainty. Anna's security breeds complacency, and she is soon catastrophically ambushed by the overwhelming incomprehensibility of the city. Auster told Joseph Malia that 'the pivotal scene in which Anna is lured into a human slaughterhouse is based on ... the siege of Leningrad ... in many cases, reality is far more terrible than anything we can imagine' (285). The scene Anna witnesses there undermines her ontological stability, and her physical well-being is destroyed in her escape. She describes 'three or four human bodies hanging naked from meat-hooks, and another man with a hatchet leaning over a table and lopping off the limbs of another corpse' (125). Despite being several floors above street level, Anna escapes by 'crashing through the window' (ibid).

Anna survives and is taken to Woburn House; a utopia embedded in the dystopia of the city, and a sanctuary from the turmoil of the streets. Here she is cared for, and in turn becomes a carer to the city's indigents who are given temporary refuge there. Woburn House proves to be an 'other-worldly' place. The people who work there form a bizarre but supportive family constituted of a partial aphasic, and the charitable Victoria. The house, in contrast to the decay and disintegration of the city, is an elegant mansion in a private park (130) that Anna calls 'a haven, an idyllic refuge from the misery and squalor around it' (139). The experience of place that Woburn House engenders is at odds with the city because of its utopian, unreal qualities. Anna experiences time, for example, differently to the way that she experienced it on the streets because the social relationships inside are a stark contrast with those outside. When this is the case it is likely, as David Harvey observes, that subjective experience of time and space will differ. The city outside undergoes rapid and overwhelming change, constantly destabilising Anna's sense of space and time, and eroding language through differential experiences. At the same time Woburn House represents a stability that grounds and stabilises the permanent inhabitants. In early drafts of the novel Auster signalled this more directly by naming it 'The House of Calm' (n.pag.).<sup>10</sup>

Victoria's charitable actions have correspondences with Rose Hawthorne, the daughter of Nathaniel, and we can speculate that Victoria is based on Rose.<sup>11</sup> According to *The Dictionary of American Biography*, Rose founded a religious sisterhood known as

<sup>10</sup> Holograph story outline, then called 'City of Words'. The Berg Collection.

<sup>11</sup> Auster has discussed with the author his interest in the figure of Rose Hawthorne (13<sup>th</sup> December 2001, travelling in a New York cab over the East River on the Manhattan Bridge).

the Servants for Relief of Incurable Cancer, then thought to be a communicable disease. As Mother Alphonsa she opened a home called St. Roses on the banks of the East River in Manhattan dedicated to help those victims of cancer who were without friends or resources (226). Metropolitan features of Auster's literature, such as this, demonstrate to what extent New York City, its history and geography, influence his work. In time, intimacy with Victoria and the house form them into referential and situated points of stillness for Anna. Upon these foundations she begins to rebuild her shattered physical and inner self. She and Victoria build a 'bond' that expresses itself as an obligation to each other. Consequently, Victoria becomes a 'permanent place' for Anna to 'anchor [her] feelings' (*Last Things* 158).

The calm of Woburn House is eventually destroyed when the nightmare of the streets penetrates the utopian space, and the values that support it are undermined. Once the trivial rules and corruption of institutional control, in the shape of the police, trespass on the ideals of the utopian project, the 'illusion' of Woburn House becomes apparent, and its 'foundation of clouds' is revealed (187). Thus Auster once again represents how the construction of a sanctuary from the turmoil of the urban process must ultimately be fragile and contingent. Walker notes how each of the institutions of stability that Anna seeks out (daughter, lover, nurse) are vulnerable from attack from both within and without (409). Under less extreme social conditions these institutions are able to provide certainty and discipline. But once the forces of chaos and contingency have disrupted the delicately balanced order of these environments, their ability to persist is catastrophically undermined.

The Woburn House utopian project echoes the ungrounded and constantly deferred meanings of words and identity that Auster represents in many of his novels. For socially exchangeable meanings to emerge from language, it is necessary for users to call a halt to the endless process of deferral, and to adopt an 'adequate' and provisional sense for words. Equally, Auster's characters stumble upon places where a similarly provisional and temporary halt is possible in the constant deferral of self and identity. Here they find, for a time, their inner terrain engages with their outer physical and social environment more fully. When this happens they are able to establish a fragile and fleeting stability. Anna's brief spells of happiness with Isabel, Sam and at Woburn House all exemplify this process. In other novels, in 'The Locked Room', for example, the Narrator begins to find a similar stability with Sophie. Of the greatest importance to Anna, though, is that Woburn House represents a halt in the processes of deferral in a relatively stable, familiar and comprehensible place. In this place she finds the stability to tell her story and to find the language to convey her experiences. The problem with spaces of utopian process, when they are embedded in environments of antithetical or antagonistic processes, is that they will always be at risk of attack, erosion or degradation by the forces that surround it. In *Last Things*, Auster shows how the occupants of places such as Woburn House need to be sensitive to shifts in that environment and be flexible enough in their routines to accommodate them. While the anonymous 'systemic' forces are able to invade locally constructed spaces, the same processes seem to be untranslatable onto a larger geographical scale. Auster demonstrates that life on the streets can be survived by employing Anna's restricted local strategy of an infinitely flexible and sensitive approach to the rhythms of the city. But Sam's model of panoptic

and 'systemic' observation proves insensitive to the nature of the processes at work in the city, and he comes close to being destroyed. Sam lives the destructive triple injunction (like Fogg), to 'want nothing, ... to have nothing, to be nothing' (163), leaving him 'drifting inside himself, ... utterly lost' (161). In short, this city does not permit any strategies of reading to interpret the metropolitan text. Its volatility and complexity consistently resist description and recording.

Instead of comprehending the city, the inhabitants of Woburn House choose to escape it. They form a magic show to tour the countryside beyond the city. In early drafts this forms a further episode to Anna's adventures that is only hinted at in the published version.<sup>12</sup> The tricks that they perform will be an ironic comment on the illusory nature of life in the city, not least the cults that emerge from such a damaged society. In the 'grande finale' Anna, as the glamorous assistant, will be sawn in half: '[a] long delirious pause will follow, and then, at the precise moment when all hope has been lost, I will emerge from the box with my limbs intact' (187). However, these illusions are also a diversion from the alienation of everyday life in this dystopic city. Here, as in the texts considered in Chapter 6, illusory devices – magic and storytelling – operate to take the characters out of themselves, to separate their consciousness from their bodies, and to provide respite from the extreme condition of modern living.

### **Illusion**

Walt escapes from the reality of his adolescent body through levitation, Mr. Bones speaks to the dead Willy through dreams, and David Zimmer and Hector escape the trauma of

<sup>12</sup> 'City of Words'. The Berg Collection.

loss through watching and making films (respectively). These dream-like states have about them the characteristics of a utopian place – and characters will themselves there, to escape the reality of here. These ‘places’ have the quality of an illusion that separates an event into its corporeal experience and its impression on the imagination, and emphasises the imaginary element. By bringing the imaginary content of life to the fore, the individual is able to distort reality by wishing, dreaming and speaking of a better life. The inhabitants of the city attempt to escape their lives by using the opacity of language as a veil to conceal their misery. Anna refers to this use of language to alter material reality as entering ‘the arena of the sustaining nimbus’ (*Last Things* 10). City inhabitants use this linguistic space in order to conquer their feelings of hunger when they do not have enough food. Conversations take place when a group gathers and describes the sensations of a meal in intricate detail. A rigid structure and protocol binds the participants. ‘For best results’, Anna insists:

you must allow your mind to leap into the words coming from the mouths of others. If the words can consume you, you will be able to forget your present hunger and enter what people call the “arena of the sustaining nimbus.” There are even those who say there is nutritional value in these food talks – given the proper concentration and an equal desire to believe in the words among those who take part.

(9-10)



The inhabitants indulge in storytelling to alleviate the symptoms of their suffering – here hunger. This invests storytelling with considerable powers. But, as earlier chapters have shown and Chapter 8 goes on to discuss, Auster believes the telling of stories to be a powerful practice, through which we can start to make sense of a complex world. Indeed, Auster has said he thinks of himself primarily as a storyteller, and it is apparent that storytelling is a way of locating yourself in the world for him. (see also Chapter 2 and Chapter 8). However, he shows how in this city, storytelling is unable to impose any kind of order on the chaos. Consequently, in *Last Things*, the inhabitants are only able to use it to create an intangible, insubstantial and unsustainable social practice, indicating that it is no longer possible to locate the self in relation to this city. However, ultimately it is Anna's story that survives, and in other texts, particularly the much later films, stories are shown to be both a powerful social force in the metropolis and an essential aspect of Auster's own practice and commitment as an author.

Levitation has a similar significance for Walt. Through it he can escape his body, and at the same time it gives him an artificial identity as 'Walt the Wonder Boy'. Walt describes his technique for flight as a combination of loft and locomotion. First he must rise from the ground, and then proceed forward 'the way an aerialist advances along a high wire' (81), like following 'the shape of an imaginary bridge' (130). Auster's inspiration and basis for Walt and his levitation act is Philippe Petit, a French high-wire walker and street entertainer whose exploits and book Auster celebrates in the essay, 'On the High Wire' (reprinted in *Hunger*). There are striking affinities between Walt's levitation act and Petit's guerrilla acts of urban spectacle. Auster writes of how he continues to see in his mind the newspaper picture of Petit walking between the towers of

Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. He describes 'an almost invisible wire stretched between the enormous towers of the cathedral, and there, right in the middle, as if suspended magically in space, the tiniest of human figures, a dot of life against the sky' (251). This event and its magical quality have the power to alter Auster's perception of Paris forever. In a pamphlet that influenced Auster's thinking, *Two Towers I Walk*, Petit writes of his walk between the towers of the World Trade Center in New York. He describes how the city stops to look up and gasp, and he feels 'the breath of the city that has changed its rhythm' (17-18). Auster considers high-wire walking as an art, comparable to other physical arts like dancing (*Hunger* 251-2), and Petit's writing emphasises this quality to his work. Auster observes that (like poetry): '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' (257). During his initiation, Walt too is forced to explore his most intimate inner spaces. In a showdown with himself, Walt learns to separate his mind from his earthly body (*Vertigo* 49), so that he is able to achieve 'the ascension into actual flight, the dream of dreams' (89).

Equally Mr. Bones in *Timbuktu* uses dreams as a way to escape the reality of life without Willy, and to re-establish the equilibrium he had known with his old master. Once suburbia has proved to be nothing more than a fantasy, Mr. Bones longs to be at Willie's side again. Willie comes to the dog in dreams, offering advice and encouragement on finding a new family. He also offers him the hope of a reunion in Timbuktu. For Mr. Bones, Willy's ethereal presence is a comfort. 'Mr. Bones was ill-equipped to parse the subtleties of dreams, visions, and other mental phenomena,' Auster tells us:

but he did know for certain that Willie was in Timbuktu, and if he himself had just been with Willy, perhaps that meant the dream had taken him to Timbuktu as well. ... And if he had been to Timbuktu once, was it too much to think that he might not be able to go there again – simply by closing his eyes and chancing upon the right dream? It was impossible to say. But there was comfort in that thought, just as there had been comfort in spending that time with his old friend ...

(123-4)

Mr. Bones wills himself to a place which is at once a 'no-place' and 'the good place', where he can again be Willy's disciple.

A dream or reverie also constitutes the dominant and central part of Auster's mostly unseen and virtually uncommented upon film, *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998).<sup>13</sup> The central dream sequence in the film is framed by the shooting of jazz saxophonist, Izzy Maurer (Harvey Keitel), and his trip to hospital in an ambulance. This short spell of 'real' time encompasses a number of days of dream-time in both New York and Dublin (one of Auster's favourite cities). The story includes a glowing stone with magical properties, and the now ever-present emotional relationship upon which the artist (here a musician) is able to reconstruct some sense of self after a catastrophic loss – here Izzy's ability to play. Izzy endures kidnapping and danger to be with the woman in his dream, Celia (Mira Sorvino). She helps him to come to terms with life without music, and to

<sup>13</sup> The only critical comment is in Brooker, *Modernity and the Metropolis* (131).

investigate the mystery of the stone. Once again, dream represents an escape from corporeal reality, a shift in the experience of time and space, and the reestablishment of a stable focus and coordinates. The film ends, however, on a nihilistic note, making it clear that the things Izzy sought in his dream are intangible and ephemeral. He dies in the ambulance as it passes Celia on the street in New York.

The projection of the image and the audiences' desires onto the screen, make film an ideal form to explore the nature of illusion. In *The Book of Illusions*, both Zimmer and Hector use film to suspend the reality of loss. The slapstick of Hector's early silents draws laughter from Zimmer for the first time in months, and triggers a release from his misery (9-10). In the 1920s film making created a 'delirium' and was 'exhilarating' for Hector (147). Thus, by forcing himself to abandon the happiness of making films, Hector punishes himself for his part in Bridget's death and its concealment (see Chapter 6). By returning to film making at the Blue Stone Ranch – itself a reference to an illusion – after the death of his son, Hector rescues his marriage and saves himself from a nervous breakdown (207). *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* demonstrates that film can present the inside of a man's head – the space of dream and illusion. In his imagination, Martin Frost conjures the image and person of Claire to appear in Tierra del Sueño (which is, of course, the land of dreams). Like Celia in *Lulu*, she is able to break his solitude and provide focus for his work as 'a spirit, a figure born of the man's imagination, an ephemeral being sent to become his muse' (243). But to keep Claire alive, Martin Frost must destroy his work. The role that the insubstantial person of Claire plays in Frost's survival exemplifies the powerful forces at work in dream, imagination and illusion.

Dreams of flying, dreams of a better place, the creation of flickering images; these are ways of creating a space in which a balance – an equilibrium with another person – can be sought, and the construction of a stable sense of self embarked upon. In dreams and under the conditions of illusion, the points of reference upon which self can be built remain stable and constant in a world that is typified by change and uncertainty. The logical extension, then, is the creation in material space and social process of the same practices that are available through dream, imagination and illusion. By grounding them in real space and real practice, there is the hope of generating a robust sense of a relational and situated self – with others as a focus and a secure way to locate oneself in the world. These are to be found in community, and community is to be found, predominantly in Auster's work, in the culture of baseball.

## CHAPTER 8

### BASEBALL AND COMMUNITY – or the ‘disquieting familiarity’ of Brooklyn

The magic isn't just simply a dream. It's real, and it carries all the emotions of reality. (Paul Auster, interview, *Lulu on the Bridge* 145)

The notion that illusion can provide stable points of reference for identity, as secure coordinates on which to anchor self-formation, emerges as a central theme in Auster's film work. In the companion films *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* (1995), he embraces practices with poetic or mythical dimensions through which his characters are able to locate themselves in the world. Auster presents storytelling and baseball here as ways for characters to re-connect to their metropolitan environment and so begin the process of establishing stable personal references, where their experience of the city has become distant and abstract. These practices overlay the material reality of the metropolis and offer the inhabitants the chance to 're-enchant' (as Robins would term it 321) their relationship with their environment. Storytelling functions here as a way for characters to forge connections with supportive networks of friends, their neighbourhood, and the wider community. Auster has said himself that stories help us to make sense of the world we live in and, as earlier chapters have shown, metropolitan stories help us to make sense of the metropolis. Here storytelling initiates and perpetuates a sense of community which is more than an introverted mode of metropolitan living. Instead, by acknowledging and

negotiating the larger social processes that surround individual experience, Auster's characters are better able to comprehend their place in the world, and so locate themselves more securely than characters in his earlier fictions. The incomprehensible New York, typified by the experience of characters in the earlier books, is represented here by the 'systemic' determinism of Manhattan, which stands in contrast to the human warmth of Brooklyn. However, as earlier chapters demonstrated, an exclusive adherence to a local understanding of metropolitan forces is seen as limiting and potentially dangerous (particularly in the cases of Fogg and Anna). Equally though, a singularly 'systemic' or totalising metropolitan experience (like that of Quinn or Samuel Farr) is unable to take account of the human scale of urban endeavour and can drive the individual into an alienated solitude that engenders ontological instability and confusion. In short, Auster's work identifies that 'the monstrous sum / of particulars' is too vast to contemplate, while the solitude of the singular is too lonely to bear. This suggests that, for Auster, the individual needs to be able to both relate him or herself to the social and physical landmarks of their own metropolitan experience, but also meaningfully to situate themselves in relation to the processes at work beyond those boundaries. In these films, both in their representation of the metropolis and as a consequence of the mode of their production, Auster proposes friendship and community as a way to connect to the wider social world.

The central space of the films is the Brooklyn Cigar Company store, where baseball is the central subject of discussion. Baseball in Brooklyn will always mean the Brooklyn Dodgers, who were moved to Los Angeles by the club's owners in 1957 in search of higher revenues. Auster demonstrates how the history and memory of the

Brooklyn Dodgers provides his characters with a resource for communal identification, powerful enough to establish community identity and action. As a consequence, the films present the Dodgers and the store as the foci of a sense of community able to extend from the store to neighbourhood, and beyond. Earlier chapters have shown how successful social relationships are essential for characters to form a coherent relationship with their physical environment. In Auster's film work, community also enables characters to engage with a matrix of social contacts at once stable enough to provide secure coordinates, while at the same time connected enough to encompass a range of social relationships on a number of geographical scales. Individual characters are then able to achieve a degree of stability by situating their existence in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of their everyday experience while establishing a relational sense with a wider social world. So a situated and relational identity becomes possible. Consequently, in some ways, the focus of Auster's work contracts to the scale of a small community of people in and around the store and neighbourhood. But in other ways the focus also expands so as to embrace the larger processes beyond the boundaries of neighbourhood, which impact on the daily lives of those individuals.

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, there is a dichotomy in urban theory between the exploration of the quotidian experience of the metropolis, and the discursive study of urban process. Fredric Jameson has attempted to 'disalienate' the metropolis (itself another way of describing 're-enchantment'), by extending the discoveries of 'local positioning' to the unimaginable and 'absent totality' of social relations. Not unlike Auster, Jameson is attempting to locate the individual and her or his geographically limited experience in the broader networks of social relations that extend beyond the local



into 'multinational space'. However, Jameson's project is hampered by its reliance on the abstractions of mapping, constantly requiring the translation of experience into the codes and conventions of cartography. In short, the ambitions of 'cognitive mapping' to translate the comprehension of local experience to a global understanding is problematised by over-abstraction at all geographical scales. As Davis points out ('Urban Renaissance' 84-7), Jameson's project is also over-determined by his class position, which extends his findings in the Bonaventure Hotel (a 'large vivarium ... for the upper middle classes', Davis called it), to the totality of global economic activity.

David Harvey re-articulates the relationships within Jameson's economic equation, investigating the place of the body ('the geography closest in') in the processes of globalisation. He is concerned to integrate 'body talk' with 'globalisation talk' (*Spaces* 15); to comprehend how the metropolitan, national and regional forces at work today are shaping the metropolitan environments and experiences of individuals, and how those personal experiences are, in turn, related to the larger (global) processes. In short, Harvey seeks to comprehend the relationship between micro and macro discourses. Within the terms of the framework informing the present work, the body operates at the 'local' level in the metropolis, where it is subject to the immediate and sensual experiences of the metropolis. Harvey encapsulates the larger forces as the 'beyond local' (199) and they are the 'systemic' processes that shape contemporary metropolitan lives.

Doreen Massey also adopts the term 'local' to emphasise the everyday experience of metropolitan subjects and the term 'global' to designate the context in which that takes place. She re-imagines how we might understand the relationship of the personal and

immediate with larger temporal and geographical forces in a discussion of the global in the local, and identifies their interpenetrating 'composite nature' ('Cities in the World' 102). In the context of metropolitan cultures, this translates as a 'geographical imagination which can look both within and beyond the city and hold the two ... in tension' ('Space and City' 161)

In Auster's films community emerges as a way to comprehend the relationship of the personal, the particular and the local with the metropolitan, the general and the universal. At the same time, friendship, storytelling and baseball are aspects of the characters' lives from which communal feeling emerges. Raymond Williams, as discussed earlier, connects a number of useful concepts to illustrate his understanding of community: amongst these the ideas of 'militant particularisms' and 'structures of feeling'. In this way he proposes that local obligations and solidarities, can be experienced at a larger geographical and social scale, and can subsequently be incorporated into 'the establishment of higher relations' for 'the total relations of a society' ('Community' 115). As such, 'militant particularisms' are fugitive and clandestine social actions that secrete themselves in the interstitial spaces beyond the vision and command of the dominant order. For Williams, small acts of 'militant particularism' accumulate and coalesce into 'structures of feeling' (*Marxism and Literature* 132, *The Country and the City* 158) that are themselves informal and barely tangible senses of community and neighbourly relations. Auster adopts the Brooklyn Cigar Company store as just such an interstitial space in *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, where the non-conformist practices of storytelling and discussion that go on there stand in direct contrast to the dominant order of Manhattan's 'money relations'. However, as

Chapter 1 demonstrated, the translation of 'militant particularisms' beyond the place-bound action of their origin is often frustrated by 'systematic obstacles' ('Community' 115). We need then to reconsider the nature and function of community in the context of the contemporary metropolis, and in particular, New York City.

### Community

The meaning of community is an important theme in Auster's work, though it only takes on the conventional sense of place-bound neighbourhood in the films. Previously Auster had acknowledged his debt to a 'community' of writers and a literary heritage that begins with Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. Nathaniel West,<sup>1</sup> the New York Language poets, and European modernists such as Mallarmé and Kafka have all been influential figures. Also, communal practices have emerged in Auster's work recently in the form of the film-making itself, which promoted a strong sense of collaborative production. Prior to these works Auster also collaborated on a number of projects: with his friend Art Spiegelman on an illustrated version of 'City of Glass'; on a film-script of 'City of Glass'; he collaborated with Sophie Calle on *Double Game* (1999); with his assistant Nelly Reifler (credited as Associate Editor), National Public Radio and the contributors on *True Tales of American Life*; on an introduction to Terry Leach's baseball autobiography *Things Happen for a Reason* (2000); and most recently on a story in Art Spiegelman's illustrated children's book, *Strange Stories for Strange Kids*.

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<sup>1</sup> Mentioned in discussion between Auster and the author (13<sup>th</sup> December 2001).

All of these projects are about connecting with others in the production of literature and art. However, Auster's strongest influence is the historical connection he feels to other writers. Speaking about 'The Book of Memory', but true of many of his works, Auster said:

I felt as though I were looking down to the bottom of myself, and what I found there was more than just myself – I found the world. That's why the book is filled with so many references and quotations, in order to pay homage to all the others inside me. On the one hand, it's a book about being alone; on the other hand, it's about community. That book has dozens of authors, and I wanted them all to speak through me. In the final analysis, 'The Book of Memory' is a collective work.

(*Hunger* 316-7)

In the stories of *The New York Trilogy*, the voices of Poe, Melville and Hawthorne are constantly present, as well as a cacophony of detective writers implied in the form (see Chapter 3 and 4). In *Moon Palace* Fogg's predicament is haunted by echoes of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* and Kafka's 'The Hunger Artist'. In the latest novel, *The Book of Illusions*, the writings of Chateaubriand dominate the text as an influence that shapes and drives the narrative.

This 'community of collaboration', as we might term it, can take many forms. Auster has 'collaborated', for example, with the artist<sup>2</sup> Sophie Calle on two projects. In *Leviathan*, he takes Calle as the inspiration for Maria Turner, appropriating a number of Calle's pieces for his character. These include the stranger's diary that is central to the story, but also a chromatic diet, and an 'archaeology of the present' recording spells as a chambermaid and a stripper (*Leviathan* 63-7). In *Double Game*, Calle inverts this process, and lives out her life according to the rules imposed on Maria by Auster – '[t]he life of Maria, and how it influenced the life of Sophie', as Calle puts it (10-11). Part II of *Double Game* records those pieces that influenced Auster. But Part III, 'Gotham Handbook', is the photographic and written record of a true collaboration between artists, working in different mediums to co-operate in a communal project. In a four-part manifesto for improved metropolitan living entitled 'Personal Instructions to SC on How to Improve Life in New York City (Because she asked...)', Auster reveals what is wrong with the contemporary New York environment and what can be done to put it right (234-5). If Auster's failed urban characters (from Quinn to Mr. Bones) had been armed with this model for urban engagement they may have fared considerably better. Under the instruction 'Smiling', Auster encourages Calle to '[s]mile at strangers in the street' to 'see if it makes any difference' (239). He instructs her to talk to strangers. 'It doesn't matter what you talk about', he tells her:

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<sup>2</sup> Sophie Calle's art is difficult to classify. *Double Game* exhibits the full range of her expression. Most often her pieces consist of a photographic record of a series of events, but could be broadly categorised as 'conceptual'.

The important thing is to give of yourself and see to it that some form of genuine contact is made ... it is good to remember the things that bring us together. The more we insist on them in our dealings with strangers, the better morale in the city will be.

(240)

Under the category of 'Beggars and Homeless People', the marginal and dispossessed of New York once again inhabit Auster's thinking, and he directs Calle to give away sandwiches, cigarettes and MacDonald's meal coupons to 'the miserable ones' (241-2). Finally, he encourages her to impose some sense of her own identity on the anonymous city by 'cultivating a spot' (242-3). In an echo of Stillman Sr., Auster suggests she does this because 'nearly everything is falling apart' (242). However, unlike Stillman, Auster suggests that this space can help to nurture some sense of self. 'Pick one spot in the city and begin to think of it as yours ...', he instructs,

Take on this place as your responsibility. Keep it clean. Beautify it. Think of it as an extension of who you are, as part of your identity. ... Make a record of ... daily observations and see if you learn anything about the people or the place or yourself.

(ibid)

The place that Calle chooses is a phone booth on the corner of Greenwich and Harrison in Tribeca. She cleans it and equips it with a pen and paper, flowers, chairs, magazines, and

a sheet for comments. In a gesture that encapsulates the idea of 're-enchanting' the city by overlaying the rational and taken-for-granted with the poetic and re-imagined, she covers the phone company's logos with her own messages. By adding signs exhorting New York to 'HAVE A NICE DAY' and 'ENJOY' (246) Calle adds a personal, lyrical and positive communal dimension to the experience of the city. She also uses the comments left to adapt her booth, deploying a flexibility in her task which allows her project to correspond with the needs and desires of the city's inhabitants. The experiment is brought to an end after seven days when AT and T's engineers tear down the decorations (288-9).

This last act goes some way to justifying Auster's insistence on a degree of metropolitan nihilism. He warns that the sort of social contact he proposes can be dangerous in New York, and Calle should be wary at all times (239). Although never personally threatened, Calle's exploration of New York's 'local' human scale, experienced at street level, is cut short by the distant, dehumanised and inflexible forces of the city; here represented by the phone company. Calle's reward for her improvised and clandestine acts of kindness and generosity is destruction, and a return to the uniform, controlled and rational city space.

The related 'community' of filmmaking has also had enormous impact upon Auster. His first significant experience of this came when Wayne Wang asked to direct a film based on Auster's short story, 'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story', which had been published in *The New York Times* on Christmas Day in 1990. The story became the film *Smoke*, and the core team of scriptwriter, director and editor proved so creative they went on to

produce *Blue in the Face* immediately afterwards as an improvised companion piece with Auster as co-director. Later, Auster would go on to script and direct the little seen *Lulu on the Bridge*. Despite the film receiving bad reviews (leading to abandonment by its distributors) Auster gained a good deal of support and encouragement from the collaborative process of its production, and formed a particularly close working relationship with the director of photography, Alik Sakharov. In an indication of how these artistic understandings can develop, Auster told Rebecca Prime:

We worked for weeks, just the two of us ... That was the foundation of the film. ... Not only did we develop a plan that we both believed in, but we learned to trust each other, to depend on each other's insights and judgements. By the time filming began, we were comrades, partners in a single enterprise. We worked together in a state of tremendous harmony ... He was my closest collaborator on the film, the one person who was with me all the way.

(*Lulu* 162)

In a wider sense of collaboration, and in a remarkable re-interpretation of his connection to a literary heritage, Auster found 'standing there on the set every day with the crew, I somehow felt that they were creating the story with me – with me and for me. It was as if they were all inside my head with me' (165). Where Poe and the others provided Auster with some of the voices and materials that comprise his books, most notably in the



*Trilogy*, the working community constituted by the actors and crew of *Lulu* did the same for the film.

Of the production of *Smoke*, Auster has said 'I was the writer, Wayne was the director, ... it was *our* film, and all along we had considered ourselves equal partners in the project' (*Smoke and Blue in the Face* 8, original emphasis). In a statement that reflects the ethos of the films and their inner workings, Wang has added; 'I thank Paul Auster for the inspiration, for being my friend, my brother, and my partner' (viii). To this core team of writer and director were added the actors, none of whom 'made a lot of money, but they all seemed enthusiastic about being in the film. That made for a good working atmosphere all round' (9). Although Auster did not get particularly involved on the set with the shooting, he contributed significantly to the editing. He, Wang and the editor Maysie Hoy formed 'an excellent three way relationship' where opinions were shared in an atmosphere 'of respect and equality' (11).

Place operates in *Smoke* on a number of important levels. New York, Brooklyn, Park Slope, the store – all these places form the basis of some kind of identification for the characters. Auster has said that he focused on his own neighbourhood because it 'has to be one of the most democratic and tolerant places on the planet' (14). *Smoke*, he says, is also a way of challenging some of the stereotypes that present New York as a hellhole, showing how people from all races and classes can get along (ibid). Harvey Wang (no relation to Wayne), who shot video footage for *Blue in the Face*, fully understood Auster's sense of Brooklyn. He has written of 'this one-of-a-kind place' being a cacophony of voices and accents (200). This cacophony is in part responsible for Brooklyn's very particular character in Auster's films, as the individual voices join in

'militant particularisms', which in turn accumulate into 'structures of feeling', and ultimately into a unique sense of place and community. Writing about the community represented in *Blue in the Face*, Auster has said: '[t]he characters are embattled, highly opinionated, relentless in their anger. And yet . . . the film is genuinely amusing, and one walks away from it with a feeling of great human warmth' (161).

The multitude of voices that inhabit Brooklyn operates in two ways in these films. Firstly, it emphasises the fact that New York is at the intersection of large and distant geo-political processes, highlighted by the borough's diversity. Secondly, it gives Brooklyn some of the peculiar characteristics that construct it as a knowable and warm place for Auster. The way that a multitude of voices combine in these texts is further indicated by Auster's use of a story about Bakhtin, first used in 'The Locked Room' and repeated in *Smoke* (101-102). In an interview Auster states that Bakhtin's dialogic theory of the novel and a concept such as heteroglossia, 'comes closest to understanding the complexity and the magic' of the form (*Hunger* 304). Where the focus is tight and limited, the novel is able to express some of the competing and contrasting voices within its fictional communities. But film is able to broaden that focus to incorporate the voices of contestation, contradiction and conflict that inhabit communities, both central and peripheral. It is through the contestation of urban voices in the films, particularly *Blue in the Face*, that Auster expresses his most optimistic vision of community in the contemporary metropolis. Heteroglossia, and Foucault's idea of heterotopia (of which the store is an example<sup>3</sup>), express a conception of place which emerges from a multitude of potential identifications. As such, these ideas contribute to the conception and strategy

<sup>3</sup> On 'heterotopias' see also Soja (*Thirdspace* 157-163) and Harvey (*Spaces* 183-5).

of a provisional and temporary stability emerging from the deferrals of identity and meaning in the complex text of the metropolis. As the present chapter goes on to consider, it is through the construction of such flexible communities that he demonstrates how his characters might achieve a temporary, but nonetheless stable and coherent identity. The implication being that it is only in simultaneously supportive and outward looking communities that the array of personal and social coordinates is available.

### **Baseball**

Baseball has performed a number of significant roles in the lives of Auster's characters, and functioned on a number of symbolic levels. From *The New York Trilogy* to *Blue in the Face* it has been a pastime, part of a social strategy, a form of community, and a trope for both metropolitan living and the metropolis itself. And like social relations in general, baseball can also be thought about at a number of different geographical scales. In terms of the structures of rules, leagues, and championships the game operates at a national and international level. It has a history and a culture that can be shared between people anywhere, but like language itself, there are conventions and codes that make the sharing of baseball possible which also exclude the uninitiated. At the same time, it also operates at a very local level, expressing team loyalties, local rivalries, and the experience of 'being there'. At this scale the game becomes personal, immediate and emotional. Because of these multiple scales it is possible to think of baseball in the same terms that Massey applies to the city. Baseball, after all, is a predominantly metropolitan activity, and impacts on the culture of American cities, and even the global mythologised view of

them, through a universal lexicon of club symbols and popular idiom (talk of 'left-field', 'curve-ball', 'back-stop', 'three strikes and you're out', and so on), while continuing to provide a point of identification at a local, neighbourhood level. Thus, where Massey argues that the contemporary metropolis promotes a feeling of 'the outside as part of the inside' ('A Place Called Home' 5), we can also see the global scale of baseball, including both its regulatory structures and its extra-national culture, influencing attitudes at the local level. Simultaneously, the global content of baseball is formed by an accumulation of games and results that emerge locally. That is, the global is formed by the local, while the local is constantly informed and constrained by the global.

The operation of rule and chance in Auster's urban environments generally, and in baseball specifically, emphasises the metaphorical relationship between the game and metropolitan living. Earlier chapters have demonstrated how chance operates as a causal device in Auster's metropolitan fiction. Fogg, Maria Turner and Nashe all paradoxically rely on chance as an organising principle in life and art, and deploy it in metropolitan or allegorically metropolitan settings. There is also an historical association between games, chance and the metropolis, noted by the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert. He observes that the Greeks applied the word 'polis' to both the city and to a 'dice-and-board game that ... depends on the interplay of chance and rule' (*Seduction* 5). The association Rykwert draws out between the game and the city applies closely to baseball and the way Auster represents New York. Thus, in Auster's work the analogy between baseball and the metropolis is dependent upon the unfolding of a series of chance events operating within a tightly regulated set of structures or rules. In games, as in cities, it is this interplay of chance (the roll of dice, the pitch of the ball, the strike or out) within the

limits of rule (the constraints of the board, the diamond, and complex rules) that shapes outcomes and lives. Rykwert recognises that a balance between rule and chance in the city is desirable. He sees that urban living is not entirely imposed from above by rule, nor quite determined from below by chance (5). As in games, the contingent event is as vital as the rule that contains and allows it, and a satisfactory outcome is dependant on an equilibrium between the two. Auster demonstrates this in the cases of Maria Turner and Lillian Stern in *Leviathan*. Because Maria is attuned to her metropolitan environment, she is able to take account of the boundaries and rules in which her aleatorical art is formed. Lillian, however, is 'out of control' and unstable, over-determined by the unbounded actions of contingency. Equally, in many of Auster's texts prior to the films, rule and chance inhabit the fragmented and disorientated lives of his characters, and are symbolised by baseball which offers them some sort of structure and focus. In complex and isolating metropolitan environments, baseball is therefore able to offer isolated characters some small degree of order as well as connections to a world beyond their solitude.

Auster's adherence to the concept of chance having infinite interplay within a set of regulated boundaries – as expressed in baseball – is recreated in a card game he devised before he became a renowned novelist. Before *The Invention of Solitude* and *The New York Trilogy* had propelled Auster to literary success, he attempted to make some money with a card-based baseball game of his own design. 'Action Baseball', as he called it, clearly demonstrates how rule and chance, structure and contingency, operate in baseball for Auster (see *Hand to Mouth* 209-30). The game uses the turn of the cards as

itches within the structure of plays and innings to create a game which, Auster insists, 'unfolds with all the excitement of a flesh-and-blood game' (212).

Baseball then, permeates Auster's life on many levels. On a personal level, he maintains a keen interest in all matters to do with the game. In the Berg collection is a postcard from Don DeLillo to Auster dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1987. The hand-written message on the card amounts to just this:

Paul: Pay attention. This is serious.

NL East

NL West

Cardinals

Reds

AL East

AL West

Indians

Who cares?

DeLillo<sup>4</sup>

Baseball, though, has also had an originating role in Auster's literary career. In the brief autobiographical fragments, 'Why Write?' (first published in *Granta* in 1995, reprinted in *Hunger*), Auster relates his career as a writer to a formative moment at the Polo Grounds, and how for him writing and baseball are intrinsically linked. As an eight year old at his

<sup>4</sup> Berg Collection. DeLillo's powers of prediction proved to be rather poor. Only the St. Louis Cardinals for the National League East was correct. The American League West ('who cares?') was won by Minnesota Twins, who went on to beat the Cardinals in the World Series.

first major-league game, Auster asked Willie Mays ('none was greater, none more perfect nor more deserving of worship than Willie Mays, the incandescent Say-Hey kid' [393]) for his autograph. However, nobody in the party had a pencil and the young Auster was bitterly disappointed as the great Willie Mays 'walked out of the ballpark and into the night' (394). As a direct consequence of this incident Auster started carrying a pencil with him at all times. 'If nothing else,' he records, 'the years have taught me this: if there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it ... that's how I became a writer' (395).

This association between writing and baseball is echoed in an unpublished article entitled 'Spring Fever'.<sup>5</sup> Here Auster insists that '[m]ore easily than any other sport, baseball lends itself to the written word' (8). Much of this article was incorporated into a section recollecting Auster's grandfather in *The Invention of Solitude*. Here Auster develops both the intensely personal aspects of baseball and its wider appeal, particularly as these things apply to his own life. As his grandfather lies dying in hospital Auster records how baseball provided a connection between them. It was his grandfather 'who had taken him to his first game, had talked to him about all the old players, had shown him that baseball was as much about talk as it was about watching' (*Solitude* 117). It is this oral constituent of baseball culture that functions in *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* to emphasise the importance of face-to-face relations in a community. But, as with community generally in these films, there is far more to baseball and collective identity in the modern metropolis. As well as the here-and-now contact and dialogue between individuals, there is also the discursive component of baseball's histories, both personal

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<sup>5</sup> Typescript, Berg Collection.

and 'official', and its place in a wider culture. Thus, baseball is shown in the films as both the 'introverted' constituent of community and as comprising the discourses of a wider social and organisational network. In 'Spring Fever' Auster identifies how baseball and its culture inhabits a national collective consciousness, making it simultaneously a national concern and 'part of our inner landscape' ('Fever' 3). On a personal level he insists that old baseball photographs have the power to be as evocative as the Madelaines were to Proust (1). At the same time, on a 'systemic' and institutional level, the archival aspect of the game has given it 'a vast and compelling tradition' created from a record of every play in every game since the late nineteenth century (2). It is from this statistical legacy – along with the rules, the league frameworks, and the conventions of reports and figures – that the structural nature of baseball emerges. The contingent and chance events on the field become formalised and rationalised within these highly regulated structures.<sup>6</sup> In a sentiment that prefigures his use of baseball in the films some years later, Auster also claims baseball as a national language which is able to cut across class, colour and ethnic origins because of its universal appeal as a 'male inheritance' (3). It is through these structural elements that Auster connects baseball to wider social and historical discourses in his work. In 'The Book of Memory', he explores the ways that baseball has affected his inner and outer lives. For A., when he was a child, baseball 'had been the thing that drew him out from the solitary enclosures of his early childhood. It had initiated him into the world of the other, but at the same time it was something he could also keep within himself' (*Solitude* 115). Baseball continues to

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<sup>6</sup> Walker notes that for Auster 'baseball is seen as symbolic of human existence ... a continual confrontation between order and chaos' (399-400).



connect A. to his grandfather in adulthood, even as that life slips away. To maintain his grandfather's presence in the material world, A. reads him the baseball reports from the newspaper. 'It was his last contact with the outside world', Auster writes, 'and it was painless, a series of coded messages he could understand with his eyes closed' (118). A. comes to realise that baseball has become a comfort to him at a distressing and incomprehensible time – a point of stillness in a changing world. Staying in his grandfather's apartment, he is able to watch baseball on cable TV at almost any time of the day. Like Fogg who found sitting in a bar watching baseball after his ordeal a time of serenity and stillness, A. discovers watching baseball 'was to feel his mind striving to enter a place of pure form'. He goes on:

Despite the agitation on the field, baseball offered itself to him as an image of that which does not move, and therefore a place where his mind could be at rest, secure in its refuge against the mutabilities of the world.

(115)

Beyond the personal experience of individual games, baseball can function to order past events along its own trajectory of landmark events. As with Proust's *Madelaines*, baseball can trigger recollections across time. For example, Auster describes how for A., 'the power of baseball was for him the power of memory ... as a catalyst for remembering his own life and as an artificial structure for ordering the historical past' (116). Through this process 1960 is memorable as the year Bill Mazerowski won the

World Series for the Yankees rather than the year Kennedy was elected or the year of A.'s Bar Mitzvah (ibid).

The continuity of baseball in American national consciousness is, according to Auster, the result of the stability of its symbolism. As well as the style of the uniforms, which look much the same at the turn of the twentieth century as they did at the turn of the nineteenth, Auster identifies the diamond (unchanged since 1893) as an 'icon as familiar as the stars and stripes' (116). In 'Spring Fever' Auster comes even closer to comparing baseball to a religion, describing the diamond as 'democracy's answer to the spritual icon' ('Fever' 1). The diamond, of course, also represents a set of uniform and universal structures and boundaries within which the contingent events of each game are contained.

From personal experience to the national consciousness, then, Auster demonstrates that baseball is a means of connection with both the historical and the social. For A. in *Solitude* it provides a connection to others in childhood, a connection to his own development into the adult world (symbolised in Jewish culture by Bar Mitzvah), and a connection to the discursive world of politics and history, as well as a here-and-now contact with his grandfather.

Baseball first appeared in Auster's literature in the pseudonymous detective novel, *Squeeze Play* (first published in 1982, and reprinted as an addendum to *Hand to Mouth*). The title derives from a play in baseball, and the novel follows the investigation into the death of former baseball star George Chapman. The solution of the case reveals that, in a reverse of the traditional detective story, Chapman's death is a suicide staged to look like

a murder. As well as the 'crime' of the 'murder', Chapman has also transgressed the principles of baseball by betting on his own performance. He has attempted to impose an organising principle on the game and life that is contradictory to the principles of the game and Auster's adherence to the rule of chance, and is punished by his gangster bookmakers and his author (Auster) for doing so. The novel is more conventional in its form than the later novels, but does, according to Walker, contain the genesis of many of the themes that emerge and are problematised by later texts, particularly in the *Trilogy* (395-6).<sup>7</sup>

Auster's subsequent fiction has demonstrated how even the most alienated metropolitan individual can be reconnected to the social realm by baseball, if only temporarily. In *The New York Trilogy* both Quinn and Blue are baseball fans. Quinn's lonely life is punctuated by his anonymous chats with the counterman at the Heights Luncheonette. Blue escapes the solitude of his observation of Black for the crowds of Ebbetts Field. For the first time in months he experiences the multitudes of a crowd as he rubs shoulders with the other fans on the subway. At the ballpark, Blue is fascinated by Jackie Robinson, and he is reminded that Robinson's unique achievement as the first African-American to play in the major-leagues is as much about race as it is about baseball. Blue is quickly caught up in the atmosphere and the spectacle of the game, 'cheering whatever Robinson does, and when the black man steals a base in the third inning he rises to his feet, and later, in the seventh ... he actually pounds the back of the man sitting next to him' (159). Baseball temporarily liberates Blue from the binary

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<sup>7</sup> Walker provides the only critical treatment of the novel to date (393-401).

relationship with Black that the case has imposed on him, and for a while afterwards he visits a local bar where he strikes up a short-lived friendship with Violet (ibid).

In *Moon Palace* baseball plays a large part in the lives of M. S. Fogg and his Uncle Victor. As discussed in Chapter 5, Victor thinks our lives have a potentially infinite number of coincidences and intersections calculated from the nine innings of a baseball game (14). Auster also encapsulates the unpredictable nature of modern metropolitan living and of baseball in the parallels between Fogg's condition and two baseball teams. As Fogg descends into the abyss, his team, the Chicago Cubs begin a 'spectacular fall', while simultaneously New York's Mets started an 'improbable surge from the depths' (62). All of which prompts Fogg to speculate that '[c]ausality was no longer the hidden demiurge of the universe: down was up, the last was the first, the end was the beginning' (ibid). For the disorientated and confused Fogg, the descent of the Cubs and his own misfortune appear to be connected. Thus Auster shows that in the overwhelming metropolis it is impossible for Fogg to follow causal connections between events and outcomes, making his condition progressively more confused.

Elsewhere, in *The Music of Chance* Auster presents baseball as analogous to Nashe's organising principle, while Pozzi's worldview does not admit the intersection of a multitude of potential outcomes, each delicately balanced. Instead, he persists in seeing their misfortune as the result of Nashe stealing the figures from the model and violating a universal law. In *Leviathan* Aaron returns from Paris because he misses baseball (151). This text also displays the power of baseball to inhabit tangential narratives. Sachs uses Dwight's softball bat to kill his victim Dimaggio, who carries the name of one of the most famous baseball players ever. In *Mr. Vertigo*, Walt follows the St. Louis Cardinals

through his many lives, with pennants, World Series and inaugural radio broadcasts having a greater impact on Walt's narrative than world events such as the Wall Street Crash, the Depression and the War (50-1, 242-8, 244). The gangster section involving Dizzy Dean is a reworking of the plot of *Squeeze Play* (255). Mr. Bones encounters baseball in *Timbuktu*, but the game and its culture presents an impenetrable lexicon (or code) to the uninitiated dog (110).

One of the common themes that runs through all of the above, in Auster's representations of baseball, in his own life and the lives of his characters, is the capacity of the game to overlay everyday metropolitan life with magical and mythical qualities. And best of all, it seems, this lyrical sporting discourse can be shared through the common vocabularies of histories and experiences that promote and nurture a feeling of belonging. Friendship provides the entry to one such community of belonging.

### **Friendship**

*Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* explore the development of friendship and community in New York through the practices of storytelling and baseball. Auster's earliest literary creations, A. and Quinn (in *The Invention of Solitude* and *The New York Trilogy*), struggle against overwhelming isolation, only to fail and be erased from the urban text (in Quinn's case). But here we find similarly alienated characters establishing connections back into the society of people, and back to the 'language of men' (*Hunger* 33),

The friendship at the centre of *Smoke* is between Paul Benjamin (the pseudonym Auster used for *Squeeze Play*), a novelist; Auggie Wren, the manager of the Brooklyn

Cigar Company store; and Rashid Cole, a black kid from the Boreum Heights projects. Their friendship develops from the kind of metropolitan contingencies and chance events we have seen emerging across Auster's work. Paul buys his cigars from Auggie, and uses the store to escape the loneliness and isolation caused by the death of his pregnant wife during a bank-robbery. Rashid meets Paul when he pulls him from in front of a truck in the street. The bond between them develops from Paul's insistence that he must 'put the scales in balance' (*Smoke and Blue in the Face* 30); an image that is invoked a number of times in the film. As the film progresses the friendships between these three men develop into a series of solidarities and mutual obligations.

One of the ways Auster chooses to express this solidarity is through the use of money. On the face of it this seems like a re-statement of the values and ethos of the system of international finance capital, as encoded in the Manhattan skyline. However, here Auster treats the circulation of money as an act that contradicts the 'money relations' of New York's global finance centre, by suspending the accrual of profit. Rashid is hiding out in bourgeois Park Slope<sup>8</sup> because he has come into the possession of the proceeds of an armed robbery carried out by a notorious Boreum criminal known as the Creeper. While staying with Paul he hides it on a bookshelf, but it is discovered when Paul goes to retrieve a copy of Bakhtin to illustrate one of his stories. With Paul's encouragement Rashid passes the money to Auggie to compensate for ruining five thousand dollars worth of illegal Cuban cigars. Subsequently, despite being severely beaten by the Creeper and his accomplice, Paul's attachment to Rashid remains true and

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<sup>8</sup> In an interview with Lewis Jones, Auster described how he and his wife Siri live like a 'bourgeois king and queen' in Park Slope (n.pag.), a contrast to the penury he describes in *Hand to Mouth*.

sincere and he protects Rashid by keeping his whereabouts secret. Finally, the money passes out of the group to Ruby, Auggie's one-eyed former lover, for the rehabilitation of her drug addict daughter. Thus, the money traces the development of obligations within the group of friends, but it does not generate a profit for any of them, suggesting that within the small community the dominant capitalist organisation of social relations can be evaded for a time.

The different narrative strategies and visual codes adopted by Auster and Wang subtly reinforce the social and spatial emphases of the films. The representations of community in *Smoke* are tightly focused, emphasising the core friendship between Paul, Auggie and Rashid through the shooting regime devised by Wang. Auster describes how the 'visual language' of the film reflects the narrative, adopting more close shots of the three men as the friendship grows closer (12-13). The structure of the film also suggests a conventional and linear mode of artistic creation, with the participants working from a script and to a story line. The friendship in the film develops within structured sections, reflecting the organised and stable core relationship between key artists at the centre of the film making process.

The establishment of a community, and the identification of connections to it, in the form of solidarities and obligations, then, is a primary concern of these films. Auster demonstrates how the familiarity of neighbourhood provides comfort and stability for his Park Slope characters in *Smoke*. *Blue in the Face*, meanwhile, broadens the scope of Auster's vision by encompassing the concerns of a wider Brooklyn community, and engaging its members in the film making process. He thus simultaneously expresses his

belief in the community of place and the community of artistic practice. This vision of community is able to incorporate the local and personal experience of family and friendship, like that illustrated by 'Paul Auster' and the Narrator in *The New York Trilogy*, Fogg in *Moon Palace*, and Aaron in *Leviathan*. At the same time though, the characters in *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* are able to turn outwards, and experience the networks that extend beyond their own place-bound experience.

The support and comfort Auster has drawn from the communal process of film making is recorded above, and the collaborative aesthetic practices of a community of artists are illustrated by the combined activity of Auster and Calle to produce *Leviathan* and *Double Game*. In *Smoke*, Auster presents this same artistic community coexisting alongside and within the community of place. The bond between Rashid and Paul is strengthened by Rashid's status as a painter. Similarly, the solidarities between Paul and Auggie are reinforced when Auggie shows Paul his photo-project. The relationship here between the writer and the photographer parallels that of Auster and Calle, and that between Maria and Aaron in *Leviathan*. In *Smoke*, Auster once again demonstrates the power of art to add a mythical dimension to the metropolitan experience, and in a small way to make the city a better place on some personal level. The project consists of photographs of the cigar store taken from the same place at the same time everyday for thirteen years. The images are arranged chronologically in albums, one for each year from 1977 to 1990 (42). In its aleatorical openness to the admission of unplanned content within a highly regulated structure of routine, Auggie's project mirrors the work of Sophie Calle and Maria. The project also illustrates Auster's understanding of the interplay of rule and chance in the metropolis. The balance described by Rykwert,



between the determination of rule and the un-determined nature of urban chaos, emerges in the project to create a significant contemporary urban record. Consequently we can also trace parallels between the project, the metropolis and baseball as Auster represents urban lives constituted from random events constrained by structures and limits. The overall project seeks to be a totalising vision, while individual pictures and groups of pictures exemplify almost undetectable shifts in the rhythms of the metropolis. Together, the photographs represent, as Brooker suggests, 'a modernist sensibility keen to order the randomness of the everyday' ('The Brooklyn Cigar Co. as Dialogic Public Sphere' 112).

In an exchange between Paul and Auggie, Auster's dialogue illustrates how the project and the metropolis display constraining practices, while simultaneously allowing an almost limitless array of variations and interplays. Paul is flicking through the second album of photographs when Auggie tells him to slow down:

AUGGIE: You'll never get it if you don't slow down, my friend. ...  
you're going too fast. You're hardly even looking at the pictures.

PAUL: But they're all the same.

AUGGIE: They're all the same, but each one is different from every other one. You've got your bright mornings and your dark mornings. You've got your summer light and your autumn light. You've got your weekdays and your weekends. You've got your people in overcoats and galoshes, and you've got your people in shorts and T-shirts. Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones. And sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear. The earth revolves around

the sun, and every day the light from the sun hits the earth at a different angle.

PAUL ... Slow down, huh?

*(Smoke and Blue 44-45)*

The image of the sun hitting the earth at a different angle very day captures the essence of metropolitan life in Auster's work: each day, week, or season is the same, but also contains subtle changes that are the personal and particular elements of metropolitan life. Here is the analogy for the concept of community which entertains, indeed rejoices in, difference. Within each photograph personal and immediate narratives are captured, while across the years whole processes of change are detectable. However, these urban nuances are only apparent to the urban observer who has the freedom to take his time.

In *Blue in the Face* Auster widens the focus to include the community of place. This extends from the shop to the neighbourhood of Park Slope and beyond that to the community of Brooklyn. This Austerian vision of community thus builds on the certainties of place to extend into wider geographical and social networks. In a scene that encapsulates the 'precartographic' (to use Jameson's term 51) nature of local spatial knowledge, Lily Tomlin, playing the part of a street vagrant, searches for number 209 and a half where she has an important appointment. One of the store boys, Tommy, tells her: 'this is Brooklyn. We don't go by numbers' (230-233). His statement illustrates the way in which people navigate their own personal city, negotiating spaces that are too familiar to require the rational cartographic practice of numbering. Tommy's 'local' sense of his place in the world is relatively secure; secure enough, at least, not to need the empiricism

and rational 'systemic' classification of mapping. This immediate and sensual experience is what de Certeau refers to as the 'disquieting familiarity' (96) of the personal city, identifiable as the genesis of a contingent stable 'local' experience for Auster's characters.

The store remains the focus of the community spirit for those who use it, and it becomes the location for sharing historical and present day mythologies for Park Slope residents. Auggie is conscious of this and invokes the importance of community in an attempt to dissuade the owner, Vinny, from selling the store to a corporation with no connections to the area. 'Sure, it's a dinky little nothing neighborhood store', he tells Vinny:

But everyone comes in here. I mean, not just the smokers. The kids come in ... for their candy ... old Mrs. McKenna comes in for the soap opera magazines ... fat Mr. Chen for his crossword puzzles. I mean the whole neighborhood comes in here. It's a hangout, and it helps to keep the neighborhood together. Go twenty blocks from here, twelve-year-old kids are shooting each other for their sneakers. I mean, you close this store, and it's one more nail in the coffin. You'll be helping to kill off this neighborhood.

(254-5)

The battle for ownership makes the store itself a contested site, fulfilling Lefebvre's prediction that space would become 'the principal stake' of 'goal-directed struggle' in the

battle to establish a new politics of place (410). The contest here is clearly between the communal and particular practices of Auggie's store and the place-less and monotonous practices of multi-national capital. It is apparent that Auster sees the outcome of such battles shaping community politics in New York.

The value of the store to the neighbourhood cannot necessarily be measured in financial terms, but in social terms it is obvious, at least to Auggie. Its role at the heart of the community is reinforced by its openness and diversity – a multiculturalism that refers to the wider Brooklyn population. By acknowledging the racial reality of contemporary Brooklyn life and adapting to its material social conditions, the community is able to avoid the introversion and nostalgia that Massey identifies as characteristic of a reactionary sense of place. Instead it exhibits an outward vision and cosmopolitanism that is both progressive and inclusive.

Echoing Massey, the intervention of the global in the local, in a way that enhances and renews local experience, is illustrated by a video montage of neighbourhood stores near the end of the film. The sequence includes Molloy's bar and restaurant, the Hong Kong supermarket, adjacent Polish and Chinese restaurants, a Kosher dairy, a Vietnamese restaurant and an Indian grocery. Together, the video montage sequences of the film and the other non-narrative interventions, along with the improvised scenes, constitute a visual code. Like the shooting regime adopted for *Smoke*, the 'visual language' of *Blue in the Face* expresses something of the production practices and the ethos of the film. The impression that the viewer gets, which is supported by Auster's comments about the film, is of a loose, informal and personal approach by all involved. The film was made in six days without a script, and achieves its particular visual

impression because Auster and Wang decided that all the scenes were to be shot in masters, without the singles and close-ups that fill in the gaps in editing (183). The transition between each scene is made instead using the non-narrative material. As a consequence, the narrative path through the film seems chaotic, especially when compared with *Smoke*. Auster describes *Blue in the Face* as a 'puzzle' with the different formats fitting together to form a relatively coherent whole (199). By 'layering' their presentation of Brooklyn in this way, Auster and Wang also suggest that, like the urban environment itself, communal artistic production is a palimpsest of layered groups contributing to the community of neighbourhood and artistic production.

However, as earlier chapters have demonstrated, a mode of metropolitan living that adheres to just the local in these times of geographical, social and political extension is subject to erosion by the rapid pace of urban spatial change and reproduction. As Williams notes, relationships in the metropolis become 'distant and dehumanised', 'the apparent opposites of community' ('Community' 116). The Auster characters who insist upon an introverted and confined urban existence often find their sense of identity undermined by their unstable environment, and the anonymous or overwhelming forces that drive new social and spatial formations. Consequently, for the characters in *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* to establish a coherent but open sense of self, they need to turn their attention to the outside world as well as their own inner terrain and the personal space of the geographically bounded neighbourhood. Each film has an event to symbolise how a character has acquired the vision to both look inwards to community while simultaneously looking outwards to understand the world. In *Smoke*, Paul recovers his capacity to write, while in *Blue* Auggie is able to save the store. Auster demonstrates

how larger forces, such as multi-national business and the discursive nature of New York race relations, shape personal and everyday metropolitan experiences, but also extend well beyond the geographical experiences of the individual. In this respect they conform to Jameson's description of the unimaginable and unrepresentable totality of social relations. The essential point here is that individual experience is embedded in vast and unknowable processes, and Auster is seeking to represent a mode of urban living able to account for both. In *Smoke* he demonstrates the way that his characters' particular Brooklyn lives are embedded in the networks of international finance markets, such as those driving the privatisation of space for profit or which move baseball clubs in secretive conspiracies. The opening of *Smoke* illustrates how the skyline of Manhattan, symbolic of New York's place at the centre of global capital, is a presence in the lives unfolding on the streets and in the stores of Park Slope. In his film-script Auster describes the scene:

Against the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, we see an elevated subway train heading toward Brooklyn,

After a moment, we begin to hear voices. An animated discussion is taking place in the Brooklyn Cigar Company.

(19)

Here, Auster is clearly setting up the homeliness of Brooklyn in contrast to the worldliness of Manhattan. The lives of the men in the cigar store in Brooklyn are, in

some part, shaped by the forces flowing through the institutions on the other side of the East River. The story of Paul, Auggie and Rashid is concerned with how these men challenge or evade the social relationships formed through the intersection identified by Harvey of 'money, time and space' (*Postmodernity* 226). If they succeed in doing so, they may be in a position to challenge capital's 'superior command over time and space', and generate a series of social relations particular to their own place and time (238).

*Blue in the Face* also emphasises how local and personal experience is embedded in the larger geographical scales of the metropolis and beyond. The opening sequence of the film expresses Auster's desire to locate his characters in the world. In this scene, a series of shots shifts the perspective from the global to the particular, via a map of the US, then to the northeast region, then to a map of Brooklyn. Finally the legend 'YOU ARE HERE' restates the specificity of the location at 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Prospect Park West, but also gives a context to the local on a national scale (204).

Writing in *Dissent* magazine at the end of the 1980s, Jan Rosenberg sketches out the racial geography around Brooklyn's Prospect Park. 'The southern and eastern sides of the park, bordered by predominantly black neighbourhoods, seem a distant land', she observes, uncannily echoing Rashid's presence in *Smoke*. She continues:

The park serves as more of a barrier than a meeting ground between white upper-middle-class and black and Hispanic Brooklyn. ... [F]or even the most apolitical of Slopers, there is a nagging doubt that their good fortune can endure in a Brooklyn increasingly overwhelmed by an underclass as cut off from prosperity as they are connected.

(‘Park Slope: Notes on a Middle-Class Utopia’ 160)

Auster is acutely aware of the racial complexion of his own neighbourhood and addresses it in *Smoke* through the figure of Rashid. In the film, Paul attempts to engage with the discourses of race and is surprised that it is such a source of social disharmony between them. Indeed, in one scene they discuss the geography of racial inequality of Brooklyn. Although their neighbourhoods are separated by only a metropolitan mile, Rashid observes: ‘It might not be far, but it’s another galaxy. Black is black and white is white, and never the twain shall meet’. Attempting to emphasise the connection he and Rashid have made, Paul optimistically suggests that black and white have met in his apartment. To which Rashid responds: ‘Let’s not get too idealistic’ (82-3). Here Auster acknowledges the scale and complexity of the issue of race in New York. He also demonstrates how Paul as a writer is drawn to a liberal interpretation of his own role as a member of the white middle-class, while at the same time his position and isolation make him blind to the urban realities of life in the projects. As such, Auster does not suggest any special social or political insight on the part of his writer-character, and does not propose that artists can advance much beyond an idealistic optimism. This is graphically illustrated when Paul and Auggie inadvertently intervene to reveal Rashid’s identity to his estranged father, Cyrus. There is a violent confrontation between father and son, followed by an uneasy reconciliation and the acceptance of Rashid into his father’s new family (a young wife and a child). However, Auster does not present this episode as a conflict resolved by Paul’s involvement. Instead there is an uncomfortable silence as the black family share a picnic with the two white men. The only communication is between



Paul and Rashid as they exchange cigars. Consequently, the conflicts of race (and paternity, which is also a significant form of troubled connection in Auster's work) are not resolved in *Smoke*, but they do find an uneasy accommodation.

Here again Auster indicates that the 'resolution' of social tensions and contestations can not be deferred endlessly, but that an adequate and provisional halt must be called to allow the participants to move on. The racial and paternal tensions that inhabit the relationships in this scene could be deferred, left unresolved or resolved along unrealistic lines of liberal paternalism. Instead Auster chooses to adopt a moral relativism which results in an attainable and 'good enough' outcome. These films display a moral relativism in a number of other ways too. The utility of the Creeper's hold-up money, the purchase of illegal Cuban cigars, Auggie's stolen camera, and the bag-snatch scene at the beginning of *Blue* all combine to demonstrate that the metaphysical bases for the measure of right and wrong are elusive, and the distribution of personal responsibility in the metropolis is a delicate balance. The constant deferral of judgement by or of these characters again reflects and reinforces the way in which Auster understands and constantly represents the deferral of language and the postponement of a permanent and stable identity in his work.

### **Storytelling**

As the opening scene of *Smoke* suggests, the cigar store stands in contrast to the dominant order of New York's money ethos. Here, Manhattan represents the 'perceived' space that Lefebvre identified in his 'representations of space' which encode the rational and institutional nature of urban living, including the grand symbolic gestures of, for

example, the skyline. The store, however, displays the characteristics of 'representational', or lived, spaces. These spaces are inhabited by the dream-like qualities of art and literature, and once again operate below the threshold of visibility. They are associated too with the practices that de Certeau names as 'the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity' (95), and David Harvey sees as embodying liberatory and emancipatory possibilities in the interstitial spaces between capitalism's panoptic powers (*Justice, Nature* 420).

An early scene in *Smoke* sets the tone for the rest of the films. Before he has been accepted into the society of the shop Paul contributes to a discussion on women and cigars. He tells Auggie and the store boys the story of a bet between Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth I. Raleigh bet that he could weigh smoke, which Paul compares to weighing someone's soul. Raleigh weighed the smoke, Paul tells them, by tapping the ash from a cigar into the pan of a balance, adding the butt and subtracting the combined weight from the weight of the un-smoked cigar, the difference being the weight of the smoke (24-26). From this point on, smoke becomes an important image in the film. Visitors to the store, for example, take time to share a cigarette with Auggie – creating a community of smokers. But this scene, in particular, reinforces the idea of an amorphous, transient and insubstantial quality at the centre of the store community, to which storytelling significantly contributes. However, like smoke itself, the elusive constituents of community are also present, detectable and effective. Auster clearly associates weighing a soul with the soul of his fictional community.

The penultimate scene of the film takes place in a diner decorated with baseball memorabilia, where Auggie gifts Paul the story of how he came to acquire the camera

now used in his project. The closing shots of this scene are the closest and tightest of the film; Wang fills the screen with smiles of friendship wreathed in smoke. At the end of the scene the screen is filled with a close-up of Auggie's mouth that highlights the orality of story telling in this relationship. This is the story that becomes 'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story' and breaks Paul's writer's block. The close relationship between real and narrative events in Auster's work is reinforced in the final sequence of the film, a black and white 'retelling' of Auggie's story, without diegetic sound, accompanied by Tom Waite's 'You're Innocent When You Dream'. For Auster, the metropolitan nightmare of Quinn's existence has been replaced by an illusory and dream-like quality. The city becomes a place made tolerable, even exciting, by the myriad opportunities to discover, tell and share stories. Thus, storytelling itself becomes an urban strategy – a way of placing oneself in the world and 're-enchanting' the metropolitan environment.

Baseball is also a central theme of discussion in the store. The store guys debate the relative merits of current players, and the chances of their teams. They also reflect upon past glories, and the history of their very own Dodgers. This practice exemplifies Auster's earlier assertion that baseball 'is as much about talk as it is about watching' (above).

While *Smoke* is concerned mostly with storytelling and friendship, *Blue in the Face* focuses more on baseball and community. The contemporary plight of the store at the hands of anonymous financial institutions is in many ways what befell the Dodgers in 1957. Thus the history of the Dodgers becomes a focus for the community involved in trying to save the store. Auster adds another layer of communal pride in the anti-racist

stance that the Dodgers took in 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play major-league baseball.<sup>9</sup> The film presents how the community in Park Slope adopts Robinson as a point of identification around which to rally. The importance the Dodgers had in Brooklyn life is summarised by a resident who tells his interviewer: 'when they moved the Dodgers out of Brooklyn, I don't believe there ever was a worse day. Maybe when the war was declared' (253). However, the presence of the Dodgers remains so palpable to the residents of Brooklyn that when the ghost of Jackie Robinson then appears to Vinny, Robinson is able to connect the sale of the store to that of the ball club. 'I was the man that changed America', he tells Vinnie.

And I did it all right here: in Brooklyn. Oh, they spat at me, cursed me, made my life a never-ending hell ... and I wasn't allowed to fight back.

Things changed after me. And not just for black people. For white people, too. After me ... well, white people and black people never

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<sup>9</sup> Jackie Robinson was recruited from the 'negro leagues' to the Dodgers farm team, the Montreal Royals, in 1947. After one successful season he was promoted to the senior team. Robinson agreed not to react to racism for the first few years of his professional career. After that he was constantly embroiled in controversy, and was an influential figure in the civil rights movement for the 50s and 60s. Robinson acts in the film as a symbol of potential community action to the members of the neighbourhood. It can be argued that the Dodgers' president (Branch Rickey), in initiating the desegregation of baseball, acted not in the name of racial justice, but in the interests of sporting and financial expediency. It should also be remembered that there was significant resistance to Robinson from within the Dodgers' ranks and from just about every other club. In his first season Robinson led the league in being struck on the body by the pitcher. See Jules Tygel. *The Jackie Robinson Reader* New York: Prime, 1998 (1-8).

looked at each other in the same way anymore. And it happened right here: in Brooklyn.

(256)

He goes on to tell Vinny: 'Dollars and cents, Vinny. Ebbets Field may be gone now, but what happens there lives on in the mind. That's where it counts, Vinnie. Mind over matter' (256). Vinny is won over by the arguments of Auggie and Robinson. He sends a singing telegram, played by Madonna, and the neighbourhood celebrates with an impromptu street party led by the trans-sexual performer, Ru Paul. Auster thus demonstrates how the community's simultaneous historical awareness and outward-looking embracing of diversity have been instrumental in generating a communal consciousness able to save and keep the store. As Peter Brooker notes, '[t]he best of old Brooklyn, its stand against prejudice and profit speaks in the present, not as nostalgic whimsy but as a living and active influence' ('Dialogic Sphere' 106).

However, ultimately the Dodgers did leave Brooklyn, and Auster includes a warning in *Blue in the Face* that is also a call to vigilance. The final shot of one of the video sequences shows a plaque commemorating the demolition of the stadium and the building of the Ebbets Field Apartments, and a sign on the building that says 'NO BALL GAMES' (60). Clearly the panoptic and governing powers of the metropolis are able to intervene to suppress non-conformist and improvised activity where-ever it emerges.

These films, then, present a particular understanding of metropolitan living and community in the contemporary environment. As the above shows, Williams' terms for the emergence of a sense of community and place are appropriate to how Auster

understands the same process. 'Militant particularisms' and 'structures of feeling' are most easily identified in Auggie's photo-project. 'Militant particularisms' are present in the individual photographs. 'Structures of feeling', meanwhile, are identifiable in the wider movement recorded by the photographs, the people who pass by every day, the routines and habits of Auggie's personal metropolitan place and space, and the idea of the sun hitting the earth at a different angle everyday. Elsewhere in the films, individual acts of friendship and sharing, gifts of money and stories, illustrate the capacity of 'militant particularisms' to arise and affect individual lives. These then accumulate into the indistinct and elusive qualities of community that make the city a better place, such as the culture of storytelling centred on the store, and the wider sense of belonging that inhabits Brooklyn. And all of these things become detectable when you are able to slow down and look for them. However, Auster's vision is more extrovert than Williams'. He sees the necessity to acknowledge, and where possible resist, the larger, 'systemic' processes into a metropolitan vision that also operates at the 'local' and personal level. This allows his characters the flexibility to accommodate shifts in material social conditions and the subsequent changes in the spatial formations of the metropolis.

There still remains a suspicion that Auster's view of Park Slope is somewhat nostalgic and reactionary, where the ethnic poor are only admitted to engender a frisson of urban authenticity.<sup>10</sup> However, Auster demonstrates how Paul Benjamin's extension of social relations beyond his place-bound experience is genuine, if not entirely successful. Although *Smoke* is a film that exclusively explores friendships between men,

it demonstrates that openness to racial and class others is a positive social impulse.<sup>11</sup> *Blue in the Face*, meanwhile redresses the gender balance, including women as full participants in all the communal contestations that construct the neighbourhood.

The metropolitan vision that Auster presents coincides with Jan Rosenberg's view. She calls Park Slope a 'middle-class "utopia"', and goes on to describe the neighbourhood's development into its contemporary social and spatial formations in this way:

To the middle class among a generation wary of suburbia's soured promise, places like Park Slope came to be seen as a contemporary alternative, the chance to build a family centred urban life that is distinctly not suburban. The mix of people in public institutions, the subway rides to and from "the City," the architecture, the shared public grandeur of a partially restored Prospect Park – these eddies against the tide of privatization are reminders that one has embraced a post-suburban dream of a vital, complex, dynamic urban life. (161)

To Rosenberg's complex of public social spaces one might add the semi-privatised but wholly open dialogic and social space of the cigar store.

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Rosenburg notes that the gentrification of Park Slope has been underway since the 1950s. The openness that typifies its neighbourhood spirit can be seen as the result of an influx of artists and radicals who have been instrumental in the neighbourhood's community politics (160-161).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the limitations of the female characters in *Smoke* see Hayden Bixby Nichols' film review in *Film Quarterly*, Spring, 1998. 24<sup>th</sup> Jan 2001 [Http://findarticles.com/cf\\_0/m1010/n3\\_v51/20563905.jhtml](http://findarticles.com/cf_0/m1010/n3_v51/20563905.jhtml)

Ultimately, Auster's representation of the Brooklyn community succeeds as an alternative to the reactionary vision of neighbourhood because it is able to simultaneously embrace both the myths of the past and the material social conditions of the present. The capacity of the characters to engage with diverse histories of Brooklyn, and their location at a particular intersection of contemporary networks and flows mark out their associations as the construction of an affirmative community. However, as earlier chapters demonstrated, Auster's literary works suggest social connections are fragile, and it is the multitudinous nature of social intersections that make the contemporary metropolis such an intense and fluid experience. Thus, in Auster's New York, the individual must remain flexible and adaptable to maintain a stable understanding of their place in the city, and a coherent but open sense of identity.

Massey describes a similarly progressive sense of place that breaks free of the stasis of nostalgia, but is flexible enough to acknowledge that people like to have the comfort of things like 'place', which most 'progressive' models would decry as reactionary. (236) Auster strikes just such a balance. Park Slope, the Brooklyn Cigar Co. store, Brooklyn and the Dodgers provide Auster's fictional community with those familiar things that are associated with place, while characters are aware of and engaged with social forces that extend beyond their local geographical experience. Their metropolitan lives provide them with a situated and relational sense of self, constructed from the certainties of local history and shared experience, and at the same time are engaged with the realities of the material social conditions of the here-and-now.



In the context of the theoretical framework of the present work, the films encapsulate all three urban perspectives described in Chapter 1 and explored in subsequent chapters. What Auster demonstrates across his work is that the experience of the metropolis wholly on the terms of the 'systemic' or 'local' perspectives is unable to secure for the individual a stable or coherent relationship with her or his metropolitan environment. On the one hand, the 'systemic' experience over-emphasises the large, anonymous forces of the metropolitan process. On the other, the 'local' experience emphasises the under-determined aspects of metropolitan life, and is unable to take account of the constantly shifting social and material formations of the metropolitan condition. Ultimately, Auster shows that some combination of perspectives is necessary in contemporary New York. Fredric Jameson's 'cognitive mapping' is unable to describe the complexity of this task, adhering as it does to abstractions and considerable extrapolations for comprehending the relationship of the particular to the general. Raymond Williams' vision extends the obligations and solidarities of place-bound community to a greater geographical scale, but he remains resistant to the idea of the material social conditions of metropolitan living, preferring instead to return to the rural and industrial communities of his native Wales for inspiration. Only Massey's conception of 'the local in the global' offers a realistic model for Auster's fictional scenarios of metropolitan experiences – especially as he displays them in the films – placing in tension the specificity of place and personal experience with the processes in which it is embedded. As she points out, places 'can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' that extend beyond how we think of place-bound community, '[a]nd this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the

wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global with the local' ('Global Sense' 239). Auster presents Brooklyn as a locus of intersecting multi-national forces, and its inhabitants as representatives of a complimentary cosmopolitan world-view, where because of their awareness of the forces shaping their lives, the characters are able to occupy capitalism's interstices and resist some of its corrosive practices. However, as Harvey notes, this is unlikely to be a fixed social formation, and can only regulate and order 'material social practices within places for a time' (*Justice, Nature* 330).

Consequently, we can see how Auster demonstrates the necessity of maintaining a social perspective on the metropolis able to incorporate both the near and the far; the particular and the general; the personal and the political; and rule and chance, in order to locate oneself in the world. But he does much more than just this. After all, the theorists have shown us (and common sense suggests) how personal experience is embedded in large and complex social processes. Auster goes beyond these empirical accounts and shows how art, literature and storytelling, invested as they are with the illusory and the imaginary, add to the metropolis a dream-like and mythical quality that 're-enchants' the contemporary experience of New York City, and combine in a 'poetics of place'. However, the present work opened by suggesting how geographers too are beginning to appreciate how stories and the work of the imagination can bridge the chasm between metropolitan consciousness and its material reality, between the rational discipline of social science and the more uncertain world of metropolitan fiction. As I hope the foregoing shows, for Auster, this urban reality lies somewhere between an understanding of the city as a rational polis and the contingent game of polis.

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