



”Then catastrophe strikes” : lire le désastre dans l’œuvre romanesque et autobiographique de Paul Auster

Priyanka Deshmukh

► To cite this version:

Priyanka Deshmukh. ”Then catastrophe strikes” : lire le désastre dans l’œuvre romanesque et autobiographique de Paul Auster. Littératures. Université Paris-Est; Northwestern university, 2014. Français. NNT : 2014PEST0009 . tel-01186124

HAL Id: tel-01186124

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**“THEN CATASTROPHE STRIKES:” READING DISASTER IN PAUL
AUSTER’S NOVELS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

**« THEN CATASTROPHE STRIKES » : LIRE LE DÉSASTRE DANS L’ŒUVRE
ROMANESQUE ET AUTOBIOGRAPHIQUE DE PAUL AUSTER**

Thèse en cotutelle présentée en vue de l’obtention du grade de Docteur de l’Université de Paris-
Est, et de Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature de Northwestern University, par

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Sous la direction de

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In memory of Matt

Acknowledgements

I wish I had a more gracious thank-you for:

Mme Isabelle Alfandary, who, over the years has allowed me to experience untold academic privileges; whose constant and consistently nurturing presence, intellectual rigor, patience, enthusiasm and invaluable advice are the *sine qua non* of my growth and, as a consequence, of this work.

M. Samuel Weber, whose intellectual generosity, patience and understanding are unparalleled, whose Paris Program in Critical Theory was critical in more ways than one, and without whose participation, the co-tutelle would have been impossible.

Northwestern University's Comparative Literary Studies and Department of French and Italian, for warmly opening their doors to me.

Mme Chantal Delourme, whose help in the initial stages of my enterprise made all of the above possible.

Mme Sylvie Bauer whose passion for contemporary American fiction inspired and shaped mine, and who continues to be a source of encouragement.

Mme Michal Ginsburg, for her time, and for teaching two of the best courses I have ever taken.

Mme Christine Froula, Mme Sophie Vallas and M. Jean-Paul Rocchi. It is a privilege to have them serve on my dissertation committee.

My family and friends, especially those who, over the past decade, happened to present me with Paul Auster's novels on various occasions (it had to mean something!); **Frédérique** and **Carla**, who have walked this rocky road, hand-in-hand with me; **Olivier**, to whom I'm forever indebted.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
First part: Time of the disaster	17
<i>Chapter 1 Imminence.....</i>	<i>18</i>
1.1 Imminence as a temporal conflict	18
1.2 Imminence as the starting point of writing.....	20
1.3 Imminence of death	22
1.4 Imminence of loss and symbolic forms of death.....	28
<i>Chapter 2 Experiencing the present</i>	<i>42</i>
2.1 Experiencing the present through distance: wandering and solitude	43
2.2 Grasping the now, grasping the here	54
2.3 Failing to grasp the present through writing and language	57
<i>Chapter 3 Chance and loss.....</i>	<i>63</i>
3.1 Unpredictability within predictability: chance and the quest.....	64
3.2 Chance as a boundary.....	71
3.3 Good fortune, bad fortune: chance and disaster	73
3.4 Potentiality, determinism and fate.....	78
<i>Chapter 4 Coincidence and repetition.....</i>	<i>90</i>
4.1 Modalities of the coincidence: interchangeability and simultaneity	92
4.2 Repetition, trauma and “interpretosis”	99
4.3 Other patterns of repetition: the mirror images of coincidences	110
<i>Chapter 5 Historical time, storytelling and disaster</i>	<i>117</i>
5.1 Auster as a Jewish writer?	117
5.2 Fictionalizing history.....	129
5.3 Storytelling	133
Second part: Space of the disaster.....	143
<i>Chapter 6 The spatial experience of solitude</i>	<i>144</i>
6.1 Solitude: absence vs. presence	144
6.2 Confined spaces or predecessors of the “little room”	153
6.3 The room(s).....	157
<i>Chapter 7 The Space of the Book</i>	<i>167</i>
7.1 Defining the book.....	170
7.2 The book as a space of disaster	178
<i>Chapter 8 “Bodies in space:” Disaster and the Body.....</i>	<i>192</i>
8.1 Motion, or the writing body	193
8.2 Illness, or the ailing body	196
8.3 Violence, or the maimed body	209
<i>Chapter 9 Transcending the Body: Emptiness, Nothingness, In-betweenness.....</i>	<i>220</i>

9.1	“Nowhere:” the body and the world.....	222
9.2	Levitating towards nothingness.....	226
9.3	The fall and the void: emptiness.....	234
Third part: Experience of the disaster – boundaries, limits and poetics		242
<i>Chapter 10 Boundaries.....</i>		<i>243</i>
10.1	Quest and narration, death and life, beginning and end	244
10.2	From melancholia to limit-experience.....	247
10.3	The tearing of the self from itself, and the question of the subject	251
10.4	Paradoxes and the uncanny	259
<i>Chapter 11 Dissociation and Reappropriation</i>		<i>270</i>
11.1	Dissociation	270
11.2	Reappropriation as an instance of disaster or a response to disaster?	275
11.3	The double as a figure of dissociation.....	283
<i>Chapter 12 Remembering: experience of memory</i>		<i>289</i>
12.1	Recollecting and forgetting as a tearing of the self from itself	290
12.2	Reconstructing the past through the Other	295
12.3	Memory as a disastrous process	301
<i>Chapter 13 The disaster of the other</i>		<i>311</i>
13.1	The spectator: seeing the disaster	312
13.2	The listener: experiencing the disaster through narration	323
<i>Chapter 14 “Music of Chance” – The poetics of disaster</i>		<i>330</i>
14.1	Rhyme of events, grammar of existence	331
14.2	The buzz and the rhythm: Storytelling and writing as music	338
14.3	Music of disaster	345
Conclusion		358
Bibliography.....		365

Introduction

Suddenness

If we were to believe what Paul Auster has repeatedly stated in interviews as well as in his autobiographies, his career as a novelist sprang from a sudden event.¹ After the disintegration of his first marriage, his initial work as a poet, a translator of (mostly) French poetry, and a critic, came to a grinding halt. Not having written a poem in over a year caused him to lose faith in his ability to write again. However, just as the absence of poetic production – and consequently, the rapidly dwindling means – started to infuse his world with despair, and the death of his career seemed imminent, his luck changed. He happened to attend a dance rehearsal that reversed his poetic infertility:

There were moments when I thought I was finished, when I thought I would never write another word. Then, in December of 1978, I happened to go to an open rehearsal of a dance piece choreographed by the friend of a friend, and something happened to me. A revelation, an epiphany – I don't know what to call it. Something happened, and a whole world of possibilities suddenly opened up to me. I think it was the absolute fluidity of what I was seeing, the continual motion of the dancers as they moved around the floor. It filled me with immense happiness. The simple fact of watching men and women moving through space filled me with something close to euphoria. The very next day, I sat down and started writing *White Spaces*, a little work of no identifiable genre – which was an attempt on my part to translate the experience of that dance performance into words. It was a liberation for me, a tremendous letting go, and I look back on it now as the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose. That was the piece

1 His interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory published (among other places) in *The Red Notebook* (p. 131), and his autobiography *Winter Journal* (pp 220-221) provide two of the clearest articulations of this fact.

that convinced me I still had it in me to be a writer. But everything was going to be different now. A whole new period of my life was about to begin.¹

An unexpected experience of watching dancers rehearse turns the poet into a writer of prose. Auster's emphasis on its suddenness gestures towards the force – perhaps even the violence – of the event, and his passivity when faced with it. “Something” beyond his control occurred, something happened *to* him – something that impacted time, ruptured it into a before and after, into the period of poetry and the period of prose, and the text of *White Spaces* served as the “bridge” (as he puts it) between the two periods and the two modes of writing. In short, everything changed, “everything was going to be different now.” The experience was a fortuitous event, in every sense of the term: it was at once, sudden, unexpected, and fortunate, advantageous.

If a sudden occurrence can bring good fortune, it can also have other less fortunate consequences. While the dance rehearsal resulted in Paul Auster's unexpected experience of “euphoria” and creative force, and eventually in his rebirth as a writer, it also coincided with an unfortunate event. Re-describing the episode of the birth of *White Spaces* in *Winter Journal*, Auster writes: “the terrible thing about that night, the thing that continues to haunt you, is that just as you were finishing your piece, which you eventually called *White Spaces*, your father was dying in the arms of his girlfriend. The ghoulish trigonometry of fate. Just as you were coming back to life, your father's life was coming to an end.”² Thus (re)birth and death *coincide* in that fateful December night in 1978. A distinction should be made: Auster's rebirth and his father's death are not the dual consequence of his experience of the dancers' performance. The two events – one fortunate, and the other unfortunate – merely coincide or occur simultaneously.

1 *The Red Notebook*, pp. 131-132.

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 224.

If Paul Auster's rebirth is sudden, so is his father's death, and this suddenness also becomes the starting point of a piece of writing. The first half of Auster's first work in prose, *The Invention of Solitude*, is centered around his father:

One day there is life. A man, for example, in the best of health, not even old, with no history of illness. Everything is as it was, as it will always be. He goes from one day to the next, minding his own business, dreaming only of the life that lies before him. And then, suddenly, it happens there is death. [...] The suddenness of it leaves no room for thought, gives the mind no chance to seek out a word that might comfort it.¹

Two pieces of writing born out of a sudden event. Two pieces of writing marking a new start in Auster's career. Two pieces of writing which, in their incipit, explicitly mention a sudden, fortuitous (chance) event. The opening lines of *White Spaces* read "Something happens, and from the moment it begins to happen, nothing can ever be the same again," while the epigraph that precedes the "Portrait of an Invisible Man" – the first section of *The Invention of Solitude* – is the following quote from Heraclitus: "In searching out the truth be ready for the unexpected, for it is difficult to find and puzzling when you find it." What is striking here is how, for Auster, life and writing are more than related to each other: they permeate each other. In choosing to place suddenness at the beginning of *White Spaces* and *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster tells his reader that the sudden events did not simply impact his life, but also played a significant role in defining his writing. His writing is born of suddenness and will be articulated around suddenness.

One question arises: what exactly is this suddenness? What to call these sudden events that defined Auster's life, stepped into and shaped his work? It is interesting to note that Auster himself struggles with the problem of naming the occurrence of the sudden event. In the excerpt from his interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory quoted

¹ *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 5.

above, he says “[...] something happened to me. A revelation, an epiphany – I don’t know what to call it.” If “revelation” and “epiphany” describe the sudden, but fortunate event, what to call the event that is sudden but unfortunate? In this study, let us name that event a “disaster.”

“Then catastrophe strikes.”¹

By definition, and synonymous with “catastrophe” or “calamity,” a disaster is “[a]nything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure; a calamity.”² As that which befalls, disaster can take the shape of death, illness, accident, war, natural phenomena (floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, to name but a few), or even disintegration of identities and inter-subjective relationships.³ Disaster can therefore be natural or man-made, strike the material or the immaterial, and be experienced individually or collectively. In all of these cases, the particularity of disaster is that it strikes. It is a forceful, violent, accidental, and in most cases, a sudden occurrence. This definition of disaster is consistent with Auster’s own conception of it in his autobiographies and novels.

“Then catastrophe strikes,” says the narrator of one of Auster’s novels, *Oracle Night*, as if to underscore the temporal dimension of catastrophe or disaster – the sudden, violent, ruinous, event or occurrence. The temporal adverb “then” implies that disaster strikes in time, within a sequence of events. “Then” also reinforces the suddenness of the striking (occurrence) of disaster, without entirely ruling out the possibility of its being the unavoidable logical consequence of previous events. But if disaster strikes *in* time (within

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 184.

2 "disaster, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 31 August 2014.

3 This list of manifestations of disaster in no way claims to be exhaustive. These are some of the most common forms of disaster, most of which are of interest to Paul Auster.

time), it also strikes time. Disaster ruptures time, splitting it into a before and after. As the narrator of *Leviathan* says of the character Benjamin Sachs's accident (his fall from the fourth floor fire escape of a building): "Perhaps Ben's life did break in two that night, dividing into a distinct before and after [...]." ¹

The instance of the split, divide, rupture, break, in the temporal dimension of disaster is further echoed in its spatial definition. A synonym for disaster is an "ill-starred" event. Etymologically, disaster signifies, as Blanchot puts it, "being separated from the star" ² ("être séparé de l'étoile" ³) – the prefix *dis* in *dis*-aster implying removal, ⁴ and therefore suggesting, among other things, a spatial rupture. Disaster could therefore be understood as being at once a spatial and temporal phenomenon.

Why disaster?

Why approach Auster's works through the lens of disaster? What is its relevance in his writings? As seen in *The Invention of Solitude*, disaster – in the shape of the death of his father – is the starting point of his narrative, as well as of his career as a writer of prose. There are, however, two other reasons that make the question of disaster relevant to the study of his works, and these reasons have to do, mostly, with the critical reception of his texts.

Paul Auster's having emerged as a writer in the post-World War II period, most critics tend to place his writings in the category of postmodernism. A large number of

1 *Leviathan*, p. 119.

2 Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. p. 2.

3 Blanchot, Maurice, *L'Écriture du désastre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980. p. 9.

4 "dis-, prefix." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 31 August 2014.

works deal directly with Auster as a postmodernist writer¹. For this reason, and in order to avoid redundancy in relation to the existing postmodernist criticism of his work, our aim in this study will not be to focus on Auster's postmodernist tendencies. In other words, we will not attempt to establish – or conversely, refute – Auster's writing as belonging to the postmodernist aesthetic. However, it would nevertheless be important to invoke postmodernism, and consequently the Austerian criticism that focuses on it, to contextualize our interest in the notion of disaster in Auster's works.

In his introduction to *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, entitled "Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel," Dennis Barone discusses Auster's works through the lens of various postmodernist literary concerns such as irony, parody, pastiche, the notion of subjectivity, the critique of realism, the blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction (which he refers to as "historiographic metafiction," borrowing the nomenclature from Linda Hutcheon), to name a few. For Barone, Auster is a major novelist because "he has synthesized interrogations of postmodern subjectivities, explications of premodern moral causality, and a sufficient realism."² Furthermore, he goes on to add that "[i]n postmodern investigations of human subjectivities the self can be split into selves to probe the peculiarities of self,"³ alluding to the idea of fragmentation of subjectivity and identity that is at work in Auster's narratives.

Like Barone, Ilana Shiloh takes up the notion of fragmented subjectivity central to Auster's writings from the very first chapter of her critical text entitled *Paul Auster and*

1 Cf. Bibliography: Ilana Shiloh's *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (2002), and Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (2007; Studies in Major Literary Authors) are two of the most important and comprehensive references on the topic of Auster's postmodernity and postmodernism.

2 Barone, Dennis. "Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern Novel." *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 1995. pp. 5-6.

3 Barone, p. 15.

Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere. In his review of Shiloh's work, François Gavillon rightly notes:

Le premier chapitre de l'étude de I. Shiloh [donne à *The Invention of Solitude*] la place qui lui revient. Elle en souligne le caractère programmatique et suggère les liens thématiques et formels avec l'œuvre d'Auster dans son entier. L'essai autobiographique prend la forme d'une quête en deux temps. Quête du père dans la première partie, quête de soi dans la seconde. Cette poursuite s'affronte à la fragmentation de l'être, à l'invisibilité de l'identité.¹

Thus, in Shiloh's discussion of the postmodern quest in Auster's work, the fragmentation of the self becomes a central concern. The importance given to fragmentation of the self echoes Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodern narratives. In her seminal work, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon writes:

Postmodern works [...] contest art's right to claim to inscribe timeless universal values, and they do so by thematizing and even formally enacting the context-dependent nature of all values. They also challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity. Through narrative, they offer fictive corporality instead of abstractions, but at the same time, they do tend to fragment or at least to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character.²

For Hutcheon, fragmentation of identity or subjectivity is at the heart of postmodernist narratives. But fragmented subjectivity is not the only modality of fragmentation in postmodernist literature, and at the same time, fragmentation is not specific to the postmodernist aesthetic. Indeed, it is rooted in and continues from the modernist aesthetic. Susan Stanford Friedman provides a clear and concise account of the question of fragmentation central to modernism in her work on H.D.³ Whereas modernism

1 Gavillon, François, "Ilana Shiloh. *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest : On the Road to Nowhere*." *Transatlantica*. 2005. Web. 01 septembre 2014. <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/842>>.

2 Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988. p. 90.

3 As Susan Stanford Friedman observes in her work *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*: "The starting point of modernism is the crisis of belief that pervades twentieth-century culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and shattering of cultural symbols and norms. At the center of this

sees fragmentation as the starting point for a “search for order and pattern” (as Friedman puts it), postmodernism revels in it, and Paul Auster’s narratives show us how the characters move towards – rather than away from – fragmentation or fracture. Dennis Barone writes: “Quinn is a ‘triad of selves’ and this fractured subjectivity is a sad thing. [...] Quinn [...] speaks of himself as other, but not to find himself [...]. Rather, Quinn speaks of himself as other to lose himself.”¹ Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, is not in search of order or unity of his identity. Rather, he celebrates his fractured subjectivity.

If a significant part of Auster’s being a postmodernist writer has to do with the presence of fragmentation at the core of his narratives, then one would wonder what initiates this fracture in his works. Indeed, fragmentation in modern and postmodern fiction has been described as the direct result of historical disasters: the two great wars within the first half of the twentieth century, and the September eleven attacks at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We thus posit that disaster, in all its forms, is the root of the fragmentation in Auster’s works.

Auster’s emergence as a writer during the post-war (specifically, post-World War II) period not only invites a number of critics to confer on him the title of a postmodernist writer, but also calls into question his Jewish-American identity. The period following the

crisis were the new technologies and methods of science, the epistemology of logical positivism, and the relativism of functionalist thought—in short, major aspects of the philosophical perspectives that Freud embodied. The rationalism of science and philosophy attacked the validity of traditional religious and artistic symbols while the growing technology of the industrialized world produced the catastrophes of the war on the one hand and the atomization of human beings on the other. Art produced after the First World War recorded the emotional aspect of this crisis: despair, hopelessness, paralysis, angst, and a sense of meaninglessness, chaos, and fragmentation of material reality. In a variety of ways suited to their own religious, literary, mythological, occult, political, or existentialist perspectives, they emerged from the paralysis of absolute despair to an active search for meaning. The search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language, the Word or Logos of the twentieth century.” (Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. p. 97.)

1 Barone, Dennis. *Beyond the Red Notebook*, pp. 15-16.

end of World War II coincided with the flourishing of Jewish-American writing. According to Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury:

American fiction was attempting to express a world which brought home the urgency of history but offered few confident hopes of its prospects. Some of the best writing came from those who felt their kinship to the victims of the recent past – above all the Jewish-American writers, whose postwar work can often be read as an indirect version of the war novel, a fiction of shaken survivors hunting for the recovery of moral truths, speaking indirectly for the six million victims of a totalitarian age which had not fully disappeared. From the 1890s Jewish-American writing had been an important part of American expression, but it reached a remarkable flowering after 1945.¹

Thus, after 1945, owing to the Jewish-American writers, disaster began to increasingly influence American literature. Although Paul Auster himself, in his interviews, tends not to identify himself as a Jewish writer, his being a Jew and a writer in the post-war period, has nonetheless tempted many critics to read in his writings, representations of the greatest historical disaster of the mid-twentieth century: the Shoah. Among the most recent Austerian criticism, it is François Hugonnier's thesis entitled "Les Interdits de la représentation dans les œuvres de Paul Auster et de Jerome Rothenberg"² that deals most thoroughly with Auster's problematic Jewish-American identity, by first looking at the ambiguous definitions of the categories "Jewish" and "American." Hugonnier's work offers, among other things a pertinent and comprehensive study of the problem of saying the unsayable in Auster's (and Rothenberg's) work – the difficulty in representing the Shoah and September eleven attacks and the resulting trauma in Auster's work. Hugonnier's thesis, however, is not the first work dealing with trauma in Auster's texts. Marc Amfreville discusses Paul Auster's *Invention of Solitude* (among works of other North American authors) in his highly rigorous investigation of the figures of trauma

1 Bradbury, M. and Ruland, R. "Strange Realities, Adequate Fictions." *From Puritanism to Modernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 375.

2 Defended in November 2012.

in North American literature entitled *Écrits en souffrance*. Although we will briefly address the question of Paul Auster's Jewish-American identity, and fleetingly touch upon the notion of trauma in Auster's work, it should be noted that these two aspects are not the focus of our study, but rather motifs hinting at the presence of disaster in his work.

Reading disaster in Auster's novels and autobiographies

As seen earlier, disaster is the driving force of Auster's writing that inaugurates his career as a novelist. Disaster is also a latent theme in what critics have shown to be the two prominent categories under which Auster's writings are classified. Besides, the term "disaster," and to a lesser extent, its variant "catastrophe," is recurrent in nearly every Austerian narrative. More than a theme in itself, disaster is indeed the mechanism that underlies most of the tropes that are dear to Auster, and that are explored repetitively throughout his work: chance, coincidence, solitude, the space of "the room," storytelling, to name the most common.

Thus, in order to question the notion of disaster in Auster's works, this study will be articulated not around historical disasters experienced collectively by a people, nor any form of disaster in particular, but around the disasters that pervade Auster's novels and autobiographies and affect the narrative time, narrative form, as well as the lives of his characters. We will look at how disaster is orchestrated thematically and formally in Auster's works. Our choice of title – "Reading Disaster" – reflects our methodology. Invoking Nabokov, and his passionate instruction to "caress the details,"¹ our study will be a tribute to the creative, sensuous, detective-work of reading. The starting point of our analyses will predominantly be the text itself – rather than a pre-existing theoretical

1 Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. Orlando: Mariner Books, 1982.

framework (such as that of postmodern literature) – from which we will attempt to unveil the narrative tools used by Auster to convey disaster, and what they reveal about Auster's thinking of the notion. Disaster's being common to Auster's entire body of work demands a significant corpus within which to study it. A large corpus will enable us to observe patterns and posit valid reading hypotheses. However, despite the frequently perceived universalities in Auster's literary concerns, and despite the generalizations that result from these universalities, each Austerian text remains singular. This will inevitably lead to our encountering exceptions to the hypotheses we may posit, in which case, we will focus on the singularity of those texts, and dive, if necessary, into their particularities. In other words, if we indulge in the similarities that Auster's writings present, we will also attempt to revel in their differences. While Auster the poet may chronologically precede Auster the novelist, the novelist, by the sheer number of texts produced, overshadows the poet. Besides, disaster, as we will see, becomes all the more interesting when it comes into contact with storytelling. For this reason, our corpus is organized around Auster's novels and autobiographies where storytelling is at stake.

Conceived as three main parts, the structure of this study will attempt to follow the disaster, as it unfolds in time, strikes a space, impacts the lives of Austerian characters, and ultimately summons us or reaches us – the readers of Auster.

With suddenness as our starting point, we saw how disaster is foremost a temporal notion, characterized by the unexpectedness of its occurrence. Disaster arrives in time and impacts time – be it the discourse time or story time, to use Genette's terminology. In Auster's works, disaster operates within a system of interrelated temporal notions: imminence, presence, chance and coincidence, to each of which we have dedicated a

chapter in our first part. These notions are linked to each other and made to cohere through the practice of storytelling.

With an idea of removal inherent in its etymology, disaster can also be seen as a form of separation or a dislocation of space: while primarily being a temporal notion, disaster also implies and demands spatiality. Disaster tears away the space in which it occurs. In the second part of this study, we will look at the prominent and recurring spaces in Auster's texts – the space of the room that operates in his work as the embodiment of solitude, the space of the book, and the space of the body – and show how disaster underlies all of these typically Austerian tropes. We will also consider how disaster can destroy the very fabric of space and leave characters in a state in which they no longer belong to space – through the notions of nowhere, nothingness and emptiness.

In affecting the time and space of Auster's narratives, disaster also impacts the lives of the characters and shapes their experience. If disaster by definition implies separation, this separation is echoed in the trajectories and identities of his characters who experience the world through the prism of time and space. Therefore, the notions of limit-experience, dissociation and reappropriation experienced by the self (the Austerian subject), as well as the function of memory will enable us to understand how disaster is experienced by Auster's characters. While Auster's corpus prominently features disasters directly striking the foremost subject of the narrative – the homodiegetic narrator, or a figure of the author-narrator – it is also sometimes articulated around indirect experiences of the disaster, through the figure of the character witnessing, or being narrated a disaster. This particularity, and its connection to the question of reception, are the subject of our penultimate chapter. This will draw our attention back to the fact that the true “story-listener” of the disaster is ultimately us, the reader of his fiction. Through this shift in

focus, and because of this newfound awareness of the very process of story-listening in which Auster has involved us, we will start reading disaster *aloud* in his novels and autobiographies, tuning our ears to his poetics and the musicality deployed in his writing.

As a nod to Blanchot's *Writing of the disaster*, we conclude by showing how Auster could be said to be the quintessential "Writer of the disaster" not because he writes *about* the disaster – something which would merely put him on par with the numerous postmodern authors who have explored this theme – but because he writes, and more importantly narrates, at once *through* disaster and *in spite of* disaster.

FIRST PART:
TIME OF THE DISASTER

Chapter 1

Imminence

“[E]ven as he stood in the present, he felt compelled to hunt out the future, to track down the death that lives in each one of us.”¹

1.1 Imminence as a temporal conflict

Imminence, or the “fact or the condition of being imminent or impending” (*OED*) is, foremost, a complex temporal condition. Its complexity is to be seen in its relating simultaneously to two periods of time: the present and the future. Imminence suggests the continuity or extension of the present, while pointing to that which is yet to come. In other words, imminence is the experience of what is to come in an ongoing present (although this to come is not actualized in the present); in imminence, the future can only be experienced through the lens of the present. The present and the future thus become fused and confused in the notion of imminence. As John Trause the writer friend of the narrator of Auster’s *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr, puts it: “We live in the present, but the future is inside us at every moment.”² Imminence could thus be conceived of as the future-as-present. Imminence also points to a contrast, a temporal imbalance: the present is a volatile, always shifting point in time; while the future can span an arbitrarily long stretch of time. Imminence is rooted in this imbalance, which makes the present vulnerable, threatened by the future.

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 92.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 189.

Like John Trause, for A., the narrator of “The Book of Memory,” the future is latent in the present, as the above quote in the epigraph from *The Invention of Solitude* suggests:

His life no longer seemed to dwell in the present. Each time he saw a child, he would try to imagine what it would look like as a grown-up. [...] It was worst with women, especially if the woman was young and beautiful. [...] And the more lovely the face, the more ardent his attempt to seek it in the encroaching signs of the future: the incipient wrinkles, the later-to-be-sagging chin, the glaze of disappointment in the eyes.¹

For A., a child is not a child, but a latent old man or woman. The future engulfs the present and takes its place. The Austerian present thus seems to be the experience of that which is imminent. Imminence, for Auster, could therefore be seen as the loss of the present to the future.

The complexity of the notion of imminence is not limited to its being a compound temporal condition. A further complexity appears within its temporality – within the relationship between the present and the future. Indeed, imminence does not consist in placing just any future within the present. The future – that is to come – is an ominous one. In its primary definition, the term “imminent” qualifying an event “almost always of evil or danger,” is indeed that which is “impending threateningly, hanging over one’s head; ready to befall or overtake one; close at hand in its incidence; coming on shortly.”² Imminence is thus the foreshadowing in the present of a disastrous event that is yet to come. The notion of disaster is inherent to that of imminence. In imminence, the future threatens or disrupts the present – a present already made weak by its transience.

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 91-92.

2 “imminent, adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 6 September 2014.

1.2 Imminence as the starting point of writing

Imminence appears as one of the distinctly Austerian concerns.¹ In fact, subordinate to the occurrence of the unexpected events discussed in the introduction to this study, it even marks the beginning of Auster's career as a writer. In his interviews with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, collected in *Conversations with Paul Auster*, Auster says:

There were long stretches of time when I had nothing, when I was literally on the brink of catastrophe. The year before my father died was a particularly bad period. I had a small child, a crumbling marriage, and a minuscule income that amounted to no more than a fraction of what we needed. I became desperate, and for more than a year I wrote almost nothing. I couldn't think about anything but money. Half-crazed by the pressure of it all, I began devising various get-rich-quick schemes. I invented a game (a card baseball game – which was actually quite good) and spent close to six months trying to sell it. When that failed, I sat down and wrote a pseudonymous detective novel in record time, about three months.²

It is the threat of imminent loss caused by catastrophe that pushes Auster to write. Writing is a means of survival for him, and its absence spells disaster. The imminent catastrophe of starvation, homelessness, in other words, abject poverty, thus prompts the literary career of Paul Auster. But imminent disaster is not merely the (subordinate) starting point of Auster's career: it will trigger nearly every work – be it novels or autobiographies – that Auster has ever written. By examining the relationship between imminence and writing, we will discuss in this chapter how the notion of imminence is at work in Auster's texts, and how imminent disaster or imminent loss will wind up being the very condition of possibility of most Austerian narratives.

1 In the introduction to *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, Dennis Barone, taking up Auster's "postmodern themes", points out to imminence as a recurrent theme, that Auster shares with his contemporaries (i.e. other "postmodernist" writers) like Don DeLillo: "An interest in coincidence, frequent portrayals of an ascetic life, a sense of imminent disaster, obsessive characters, a loss of the ability to understand combined with depictions of the importance of daily life and ordinary moments – these are all concerns that Auster and DeLillo share." (p. 11)

2 *Paul Auster: Collected Prose*, p. 548.

In *Winter Journal*, the figure of the author-narrator, on the brink of turning sixty-four and contemplating his impending death, urges himself to “speak now before it is too late.”¹ But this tendency to link up writing or narrating and death, dates back to his first autobiography, which also happens to be his first published book. Auster’s very first work in prose, *The Invention of Solitude*, is born of his father’s death. While one loss has occurred, that of his father’s biological life, another is imminent: the loss of an account of his father’s life: “I knew that I would have to write about my father. I had no plan, had no precise idea of what this meant. I cannot even remember making a decision about it. It was simply there, a certainty, an obligation that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news. I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him.”² This instance in *The Invention of Solitude* goes to show that writing is not the product of a purely conscious decision for Auster. Rather, it emerges as an impulse, a reflex – as a force beyond the author’s control. It becomes imminent from the moment a loss occurs, and at the same time, it is a means to prevent a further loss. Moreover, what is striking in the passage quoted above is the difference in the degree of the two losses. The loss of the deceased person’s recorded life seems to be far greater than the loss of the actual person. As if the loss of the narrative of a person outweighed his death. The author-narrator of *The Invention of Solitude* clearly articulates this idea: “In some strange way, I was remarkably prepared to accept his death, in spite of its suddenness. What disturbed me was something unrelated to death or my response to it: the realization that my father had left no traces.”³ Auster seems to be saying, that death occurs not when a person’s body completely fails him and he stops breathing – that is to say, when he dies – but rather when it becomes impossible to notice a trace of that person’s life.

1 *Winter Journal*, p. 1.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

3 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

In other words, death is not the end of life; it is the absence or disappearance of the traces of that person's life. This redefinition of the concept of death creates a possibility for action: if dying cannot be reversed, the traces can be (re-)written. In pushing himself to write about his father, Auster appears to equate fiction with life: as long as there exists a written account, or a narrative or a fiction of a person's life, that person will continue to live. This phenomenon, which is commonplace, is especially true and highly resonant in Auster's writing, and serves as the basis of all writing to him. For Auster, writing begins not only when death has occurred, but especially when death is imminent.

1.3 Imminence of death

Imminent death as the origin of a literary enterprise is not limited to Auster's autobiographies. It is also to be found in many of his novels, sometimes as early as in their opening lines. For instance, *Timbuktu* opens with the narrator's announcing the imminent death of Willy, the ailing, vagrant master of Mr. Bones – the dog who is the protagonist of the story: "Mr. Bones knew that Willy wasn't long for this world."¹ Willy, aware of his condition and his impending death, sets out to take care of two things. The first consists in finding a new owner for Mr. Bones, and the second, in finding Bea Swanson, his high school English teacher, and entrusting her with his manuscripts,² because "Willy had written the last sentence he would ever write, and there were no more than a few ticks left in the clock. The words in the locker were all he had to show for himself. If the words vanished, it would be as if he had never lived."³ For Willy (like for the narrator of the first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, "Portrait of an Invisible Man," who fears losing the

1 *Timbuktu*, p. 3.

2 Manuscripts of Willy's work: "Willy had filled the pages of seventy-four notebooks with his writings. These included poems, stories, essays, diary entries, epigrams, autobiographical musings, and the first eighteen hundred lines of an epic-in-progress, *Vagabond Days*." (p. 9)

3 *Timbuktu*, p. 9.

chance to document his father's life), his imminent death threatens to take away from him the written trace of his life, and this trace of his life seems to be far more precious than life itself – the actuality of living. Despite the similarity in how the narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" and Willy both relate to the written record of a person's life, there appears a difference. While the imminent loss of the account of his father's life triggers the author-narrator's writing of "Portrait of an Invisible Man," writing has already taken place in *Timbuktu*, and Willy makes his way to Baltimore on foot, with his dog, Mr. Bones, in order to find Mrs. Swanson. It should be noted here that, while there already exists, among other things, a written record of Willy's life, the writings are as good as non-existent if they do not have a reader. In order for a book, or any piece of writing to exist, there needs to be a reader to read it – a reader who *has* read it. Thus, Willy's search for Mrs. Swanson is an attempt to find a reader to bring his work into existence by its being read. While imminent loss provokes the act of writing in Auster's autobiographies, as seen in *The Invention of Solitude* or *Winter Journal*, it sets in motion a physical quest for the character in his novel, *Timbuktu*, a physical quest that is also a quest to bring his writing into existence.

Like *Timbuktu*, *Brooklyn Follies* also opens with the announcement of the narrator Nathan Glass's imminent death: "I was looking for a quiet place to die."¹ Despite his lung cancer's being in remission, Glass is aware that his days are numbered, and moves to Brooklyn to await the impending moment of death. Like the narrators of *Invention of Solitude* and *Winter Journal*, Nathan Glass's imminent loss of life (as opposed to the imminent loss of *documented* life, as in the case of *Invention of Solitude*) gives rise to a writing project. However, his project differs significantly from theirs in that it sets out to challenge the very concept of an autobiography:

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 1.

Humble as the project was, I decided to give it a grandiose, somewhat pompous title – in order to delude myself into thinking that I was engaged in important work. I called it *The Book of Human Folly*, and in it I was planning to set down in the simplest, clearest language possible an account of every blunder, every pratfall, every embarrassment, every idiocy, every foible, and every inane act I had committed during my long and checkered career as a man.¹

Glass appears to undertake the project of writing what seems like an autobiography of sorts. In *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiography as a “récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité.”² In other words, for Lejeune, an autobiography is a means to make sense of one’s life – to make the various events spanning one’s life cohere as a totality. In *Brooklyn Follies*, however, the object of writing is not Glass’s life lived as a totality. His goal is to record only certain fragments of his life, and it is interesting to note that those fragments, incidents or events that interest Glass are ones that do not make sense and ones that resist cohesion. Glass even goes so far as to call his book a “hodgepodge of unrelated anecdotes.”³ Not only does Glass not desire to make sense of his life, but he actively insists on recording non(-)sense in his fictional *Book of Human Follies*. However, the fact remains: the character’s imminent death, once again, links up writing and disaster.

It is through imminence that Auster creates a link between writing and disaster or death – death being a form of disaster. A possible justification for this mechanism is to be found in the novella, *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Mr. Blank, the protagonist of the story wakes up one morning locked in a room, unable to remember anything. On his desk, he finds stacks of photographs and a typescript – a first person narrative of a character named Graf – which he starts to read. After having reached the end of the typescript of Graf’s

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 5.

2 Lejeune, Philippe. *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, new ed. 1996, p. 14.

3 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 5.

story, Mr. Blank, dissatisfied with its being incomplete,¹ improvises and continues to (audibly) tell himself the story of Graf. Then, trying to explain Graf's motivation to write his story, Mr. Blank resorts to evoking the character's imminent death: "And when a man thinks he's about to die, he's going to spill his guts on paper the moment he's allowed to write."² This moment in Mr. Blank's improvisation of Graf's story echoes Graf's own narrative: "If I keep [the Colonel] sufficiently entertained, perhaps he'll let me go on writing forever, and bit by bit I'll be turning into his personal clown, his own jester-scribe scribbling forth my pratfalls in endless streams of ink. And even if he should tire of my stories and have me killed, the manuscript will remain, won't it?"³ Graf's fairly obvious resemblance to Scheherazade in this excerpt has already been noted by previous readers.⁴ However, there is more to it than the Scheherazadian mechanism of delaying death, which reveals the fundamental difference between these two fictional entities.

Like Scheherazade, Graf seems to stall time, to extend the present in order to keep the deadly future from actualizing itself. However, unlike his female counterpart, Graf submits to the possibility of his death ("And even if he should tire of my stories and have me killed, the manuscript will remain, won't it?"). The difference between Scheherazade's telling (orally) and Graf's writing becomes important. The readers of *Thousand and One Nights* know that, at the end of the thousand and one nights of storytelling, King Shahryar does not kill Scheherazade but instead makes her his Queen. But, had she been killed by

1 Here, Mr. Blank embodies the reader who rejects an incomplete story: "Mr. Blank tosses the typescript onto the desk, snorting with dissatisfaction and contempt, furious that he has been compelled to read a story that has no ending, an unfinished work that has barely even begun, a mere bloody fragment." (p. 75) Later, he reveals to Farr that he has an Aristotelian approach to a story, and that all stories are "supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end." (p. 79)

2 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 114.

3 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, pp. 32-33.

4 In her dissertation entitled "Les 'avatars du moi' chez Paul Auster : autofiction et métafiction dans les romans de la maturité," Marie Thévenon rightly observes that "Graf prend la place de Shéhérazade, qui sait que sa seule chance de survie est de réussir à continuer à divertir le sultan, lorsqu'il écrit : 'If I keep him sufficiently entertained, perhaps he'll let me go on writing forever'" (p. 396)

the King, her death would have been final, as there would have been no trace of her existence. And although, in Mr. Blank's improvisation of Graf's narrative, his (Graf's) life is spared by Joubert, and he is offered "a promotion with a large increase in salary,"¹ Graf declines it, resigns, and finally "fires a bullet through his skull,"² taking his own life. If the reader is to believe Mr. Blank and assume the certainty of Graf's death, then the reason for Graf's according such importance to his manuscript becomes clear. Graf, like his name suggests, through its being homophonous with "graph," embodies writing. His manuscript will be the trace he leaves behind after his death, and in so doing, will continue to live on through it. Writing in this case is not merely a means to delay time and defer the end (death), but functions as an instrument to resist disaster and defy death. Writing for Graf is an act that makes death impossible.

If in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Graf's writing is a way to defeat death and the finality it brings, a similar, yet different mechanism is at work in *Moon Palace*, in the case of Thomas Effing's narration of his stories to Fogg. As a character, Thomas Effing could be seen as falling between Scheherazade and Graf. Effing's narration combines telling and writing. Like Scheherazade, he orally narrates stories to Fogg (but unlike Scheherazade's, Effing's stories are those of his own life – they are a product of lived experiences), and like Graf, he attempts to record them in writing. When Thomas Effing realizes his death is on the horizon,³ he asks Fogg to write his obituary: "We're running out of time, you fool, that's why. If we don't start writing the damned obituary now, it will never get done."⁴ But what starts out as an obituary winds up being an autobiography: "I didn't know what use

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 115.

2 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 115.

3 "That's right, I know. A hundred little signs have told me. I'm running out of time, and we've got to get started before it's too late." p. 124.

4 *Moon Palace*, p. 187.

Effing was intending to make of this autobiography (in the strictest sense, it was no longer an obituary).”¹

While an obituary and an autobiography bear certain similarities, they are seen as two distinct categories of texts. Like an autobiography, an obituary tends to present an account of an individual’s life. However, while the autobiography attempts to present a longer account of its author’s life, the obituary remains brief. Furthermore, as M.S. Fogg himself points out in *Moon Palace*,² conventionally, an obituary is not written by the dying, let alone the deceased, whereas an autobiography is written by its own subject. The greatest difference between these two modes of writing a personal account is the fact that an obituary is written – and more importantly published – after the death of the individual, whereas an autobiography may but rarely appear posthumously. The instance of death is therefore critical in distinguishing an obituary from an autobiography. Nonetheless, it should be noted that when writing an autobiography, an individual must deal with the question of the end, of closure. To occupy the bounded space of a text, a life must be considered as bounded, with a starting and an ending point. There is no longer any possibility for change or evolution. Thus, an obituary and an autobiography share this common characteristic in that they are both rooted in the past. In a way, an author of an autobiography may be seen as already being dead.³

In allowing Thomas Effing’s obituary to transform into an autobiography, Auster seems to suggest that an autobiography is itself a death notice – an obituary. Thus, Thomas

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 187.

2 “I’ve never heard of someone writing his own obituary. Other people are supposed to do it for you – after you’re dead.” (*Moon Palace*, p. 124)

3 Paul de Man takes up this idea in detail in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement,” (in which he also argues that “Autobiography [...] is a figure of reading or of understanding” *MLN*, p. 921) alongside another form of writing that resembles an obituary – the epitaph – commenting on Wordsworth’s “Essay upon Epitaphs.”

Effing to a certain extent is already dead. What is most striking in Effing's case is the fact that an obituary had already been printed for him "fifty-two years ago,"¹ and the one he has Fogg write for him is the second: "I was dead. They don't print obituaries of living people, do they? I was dead, or at least they thought I was dead."² In the case of the first obituary, it is the obituary that performs his death by announcing it. His first obituary functions as a speech act of death. And while the second obituary-turned-autobiography, is written in anticipation of death, it presents Effing as being doubly dead, by blurring the boundary between an obituary and an autobiography.

All of the above instances of imminent death engendering writing go to suggest first that Auster's characters seem to have in common the desire for immortality mediated by writing, and secondly, that writing itself is time. Writing constitutes the ongoing present upon which the future casts its ominous shadow. As long as the present continues, disaster will only remain imminent – it will not actualize. As long as there is writing, the characters will not die. This idea seems to be reinforced by the fact that in *Timbuktu*, Willy will never find Mrs. Swanson, the only possible reader of his life. He dies before he finds her, and with it dies his writing. Additionally, if imminence links up the present and the future, indeed, if imminence is the future-as-present, as suggested in the first section of this chapter, then writing is also the means by which the author-narrators and the characters strive to separate the one from the other.

1.4 Imminence of loss and symbolic forms of death

Death is not the only disaster whose imminence manifests itself in Auster's works. Other forms of loss – which may or may not culminate in death – are present in his writing.

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 125.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 125.

One such instance of loss is the recurring theme of poverty and depleting resources. This theme is not entirely foreign to the question of death: money can be seen as an embodiment of transience.

Auster's relationship with money has been an important aspect of his writing in his autobiographies as well as his novels. While the *The Invention of Solitude* alludes to his meager resources, amplifying the impact of his inheritance, it is in *Hand to Mouth* – which among other things, opens as a discourse on money – that the author elaborates his adopting the titular “hand-to-mouth” lifestyle, from its opening lines:

In my late twenties and early thirties, I went through a period of several years when everything I touched turned to failure. My marriage ended in divorce, my work as a writer foundered, and I was overwhelmed by money problems. I'm not just talking about an occasional shortfall or some periodic belt tightenings – but a constant, grinding, almost suffocating lack of money that poisoned my soul and kept me in a state of never-ending panic.

There was no one to blame but myself. My relationship to money had always been flawed, enigmatic, full of contradictory impulses, and now I was paying the price for refusing to take a clear-cut stand on the matter. All along, my only ambition had been to write. I had known that as early as sixteen or seventeen years old, and I had never deluded myself into thinking I could make a living at it. [...] I didn't particularly want anything in the way of material goods, and the prospect of being poor didn't frighten me. All I wanted was a chance to do the work I felt I had it in me to do.¹

As this passage from *Hand to Mouth* best illustrates, Auster, in his autobiographies tends to present the situation of imminent poverty on a mode of description. That is to say, he exposes his dire situation by describing it, and then goes on to explain or give justification for it. The author-narrator himself admits to this mode of narrating, a few paragraphs later: “It's not difficult for me to describe these things and to remember how I

¹ *Hand to Mouth*, p. 3.

felt about them.”¹ Although his imminent poverty is alluded to in the above quoted passage, through the use of the term prospect (“the prospect of being poor didn’t frighten me”), the focus does not seem to be on the imminence of the situation. The reader is offered a narrative that consists in stating facts – about presenting lived experiences in a factual manner:

All of my savings went into that trip. Birthday money, graduation money, bar mitzvah money, the little bits I’d hoarded from summer jobs – fifteen hundred dollars or so, I can’t remember the exact amount. That was the era of Europe on Five Dollars a Day, and if you watched your funds carefully, it was actually possible to do it. I spent over a month in Paris, living in a hotel that cost seven francs a night (\$1.40); I traveled to Italy, to Spain, to Ireland. In two and a half months, I lost more than twenty pounds. Everywhere I went, I worked on the novel I had started writing that spring.²

Such a factual description, however, comes as no surprise to the reader. The author prepares the reader for this by titling the narrative “A Chronicle of Early Failure.” True to its subtitle, *Hand to Mouth* indeed reads as a chronicle,³ as opposed to a story. In our chapter on the notion of imminence, it would be pertinent to evoke the definition of a story given by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*:

We are all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else – there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity, and consequently our other literary judgments are ludicrous. And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence – dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on. Qua story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely, it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next.⁴

1 *Hand to Mouth*, p. 6.

2 *Hand to Mouth*, p. 19.

3 “A detailed and continuous register of events in order of time; a historical record, *esp.* one in which the facts are narrated without philosophic treatment, or any attempt at literary style.” (*OED*)

4 Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. pp. 27-28

For E.M. Forster, imminence seems to be the very essence of a story. A story must be able to produce curiosity in the minds of the readers or the audience by creating a sense of imminence. Whereas a chronicle focuses on the past (that which has occurred, happened), a story's central concern must be the future (that which is yet to come). As a chronicle, *Hand to Mouth* seems to hold no place for imminence, and as a consequence, neither for the future. The imminence of his disastrous situation of poverty is lost to the technique of description in the chronicle. Although this mechanism of chronicling past events is made explicit in *Hand to Mouth* as early as its (sub)title, it is not limited to this text. Indeed, it should be noted that all of Auster's autobiographical writings, from *The Invention of Solitude* to *Report from the Interior*,¹ that unfailingly mention his imminent poverty, function as chronicles in that the reader is offered a factual account or record of the events occurring in his life, in place of a story (according to Forster's definition). These autobiographies do not appeal to the reader's curiosity – they do not make him want to know what happens next. For the most part, they do not build towards a future (that which is yet to come), as a story should, but are concerned with the past, and by virtue of invariably being self-referential texts – a trademark of the author's formal concerns – which, among other things, present writers in the act of writing, are also equally concerned with the present – the present of narration, the present of writing. And while the possibility for a disastrous future (imminent poverty) is acknowledged (for instance, “the prospect of being poor didn't frighten me”), it does not threaten the narrated past nor the present of narration.

Thus, dressed in the trappings of a chronicle, imminent poverty in Auster's autobiographical texts becomes a dead-end fact as opposed to being a dynamic, compound

1 The terms “journal” in *Winter Journal*, and “report” in *Report from the Interior* are both synonymous with chronicle and thus give the reader and idea of the nature of Auster's autobiographies, from their very titles.

temporal condition of imminence that gestures towards a future and opens up possibilities for the development of the narrative. Whereas the notion of imminence, in the case of imminent poverty, is lost to the technique of description in his autobiographies, Auster's novels dynamize it, by thematizing it, by weaving it into the story.

A striking instance of this is to be found in *The Music of Chance*. While one of the central concerns of this novel is the notion of chance, as its title suggests, another equally significant one is the question of money, or the loss of money to be precise. At its most basic level, the story could be summarized as being articulated around its protagonist's (Nashe) taking chance with money, which itself is acquired by chance. Following his father's unexpected death and at a time when his marriage is crumbling, Nashe, out of the blue, inherits from his deceased father a sum of money that changes the course of his life, like that of Auster himself.¹ After a bout of careless spending, when the money starts to run out, Nashe lays the remainder of the sum on the line in a game of chance (poker). It is interesting to observe that the money acquired by him is a direct result of a disaster: the sudden, accidental event of his father's death. Money in this case appears to counter a loss. It fills the void of the loss of Nashe's estranged² father, and in so doing, takes his place, and serves as the only tangible link between father and son – a link that is, in essence, a precarious one.

While money in *the Music of Chance* is born of a loss, it is subjected to loss as soon as it comes into the picture, and this is made explicit from the very opening lines of the

1 As best summarized by Auster in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory published in *Paul Auster: Collected Prose*: "Then, out of nowhere, with absolutely no warning at all, my father dropped dead of a heart attack and I inherited some money. That money changed everything for me; it set my life on an entirely different course." (p. 548)

2 "He had not seen his father in over thirty years. The last time had been when he was two, and since then there had been no contact between them – not one letter, not one phone call, nothing." (*The Music of Chance*, p. 2.)

novel: “For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out. He hadn’t expected it to go on that long, but one thing kept leading to another, and by the time Nashe understood what was happening to him, he was past the point of wanting it to end.”¹ The novel opens with a double instance of imminence, the one more explicit than the other. First, it announces the imminent depletion of the money (“he waited for the money to run out”), and then, by referring to a series of unidentified events (“but one thing kept leading to another;” “by the time Nashe understood what was happening to him”), it creates a sense of imminence in the mind of the reader who is thus caught up, from the very beginning, in the anticipation of the future of the story: “what happens next?”

As the story unfolds, the imminent depletion of money becomes the driving force of the narrative. In an effort to curb the actualization of the imminent disaster of pennilessness, Nashe, through the agency of Jack Pozzi, arranges a game of poker with the chance millionaires, Flower and Stone, and stakes all of his money. Victory or gain is conceivable only by subjecting the money to the possibility of disaster: the loss of the game, or the defeat. When Pozzi, playing on behalf of Nashe, appears to be playing well towards the beginning of the game and victory seems likely, Nashe contemplates the possibility of disaster:

He knew that Pozzi stood a good chance of winning, that the odds were in fact better than good, but the thought of winning struck him as too easy, as something that would happen too quickly and naturally to bear any permanent consequences. He therefore kept the possibility of defeat uppermost in his thoughts, telling himself it was always better to prepare for the worst than to be caught by surprise. What would he do if things went badly? How would he act if the money were lost? The strange thing was not that he was able to imagine this possibility but that he could do so with such indifference and detachment, with so little inner pain. It was as if he finally had no part in what was about to happen to him. And if he was no

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 1.

longer involved in his own fate, where was he, then, and what had become of him? Perhaps he had been living in limbo for too long, he thought, and now that he needed to find himself again, there was nothing to catch hold of anymore. Nashe suddenly felt dead inside, as if all his feelings had been used up. He wanted to feel afraid, but not even disaster could terrify him.¹

This passage is a key moment in the story. In addition to once again succeeding in making the reader wonder “what happens next,” it serves as an instance of prolepsis that announces Nashe’s disastrous fate: his eventual defeat and loss of every last penny – not to mention his car, and finally, his life – in the game of poker against Flower and Stone. What seems to be an imminent victory at first, soon makes way for imminent disaster. But disaster is imminent only because it is made to become imminent. It is a pure construct – a product of Nashe’s thoughts. In what appears to be a sovereign maneuver, Nashe wills disaster into existence, and at the same time, in a fatalistic manner, he resigns himself to the imminent disaster (“It was as if he finally had no part in what was about to happen to him;” “he was no longer involved in his own fate”). What is most striking at this point is the fact that disaster manifests itself in its imminence. Before the defeat that will eventually culminate in his death even occurs, Nashe “suddenly [feels] dead inside.” In this case, disaster becomes synonymous with indifference – the inability to feel anything – and Nashe’s death occurs at the very moment that it becomes possible, as soon as it becomes imminent. This further complicates the notion of imminence, especially that of imminent disaster. As discussed towards the beginning of this chapter, imminence implies disaster – disaster is inherent to the notion of imminence. At the same time, disaster is characterized by its suddenness. As a result, imminence (that which is expected to come) appears to be incompatible with disaster (that which is unexpected).

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 54.

Thus, the above excerpt from *The Music of Chance* goes to show that the already complex notion of imminence is further riddled with complexities: it is at once interchangeable and incompatible with disaster. “Preparing for the worst” coincides with being “caught by surprise.” As a result, what is a proleptic moment announcing the fate of the protagonist, also winds up announcing the fate of the story. While the rhetorical questions in the passage (“What would he do if things went badly? How would he act if the money were lost?”) create a sense of imminence by making the reader want to know what is about to happen, the following sentence hints overtly at the end of the story, stopping it dead in its track: “he was able to imagine this possibility.” In sum, this passage not only announces, but performs, in a way, the (imminent) death of the protagonist as well as that of the story.

It is the story in *The Music of Chance* – unlike the event or the fact in and of itself in Auster’s autobiographies – that wins the upper hand in the narrative. Money is intimately tied with disaster, in that it is born of disaster (death), and the protagonist’s acquiring it subjects it to disaster: its own loss, as well as the loss of the life of the character. As a consequence, money is linked with time as well: running out of money, is running out of time.¹ Ultimately, the imminent depletion of money becomes the driving force of the story in *The Music of Chance*. A somewhat similar, yet entirely different mechanism seems to be at work in *Moon Palace* as well.

¹ Another instance of the link between time and money deserves to be mentioned in passing. In *Moon Palace*, when Effing is running out of time and his death draws closer, he decides to give away money to random strangers in the street. He explains to Fogg: “It’s like this, young man. My time is almost up, and because of that I’ve spent these past few months taking care of business. [...] There’s only one thing that still bothers me – an outstanding debt, you might call it – and now that I’ve had a couple of weeks to think about it, I’ve finally hit on a solution. Fifty-two years ago [...] I found a bag of money. I took that money and used it to make more money, money that’s kept me alive ever since. Now that I’ve come to the end, I don’t need that bag of money anymore. So what am I supposed to do with it? The only thing that makes any sense is to give it back.” (*Moon Palace*, pp. 198-199) And thus, he gives away twenty thousand dollars. Giving away money therefore becomes a symbolic gesture of dying. Money is no longer equated with time alone – it also stands for life.

As seen earlier, in *The Music of Chance*, the inherited money replaces the protagonist's absent father. In *Moon Palace*, the protagonist, M.S. Fogg, acquires money from his uncle, Victor, in the form of books:

I had lived in that apartment with over a thousand books. They had originally belonged to my Uncle Victor, and he had collected them slowly over the course of about thirty years. Just before I went off to college, he impulsively offered them to me as a going-away present. I did my best to refuse, but Uncle Victor was a sentimental and generous man, and he would not let me turn him down. "I have no money to give you," he said, "and not one word of advice. Take the books to make me happy." I took the books, but for the next year and a half I did not open any of the boxes they were stored in. My plan was to persuade my uncle to take the books back, and in the meantime I did not want anything to happen to them.¹

In Uncle Victor's gesture of giving Fogg his books instead of money, the books come to replace money. Once again, like the inheritance of the money in *The Music of Chance*, the transfer of these books to Fogg subjects them to their depletion. Indeed, their loss becomes imminent when Fogg willingly puts himself in a situation where money starts to run out² and actualizes – materializes – their transformation into money by selling them: "now that I was so short of money, it seemed only logical that I should take the next step and convert the books into cash."³ As a result, the books are no longer a mere replacement for money. They become money, and for a while, afford Fogg a life of meager but sure means: "The books kept me in food, and I managed to squeeze through April and May with my head above water, finishing up my schoolwork with a flurry of candlelight cramming and typing."⁴ Fogg, whose name is rooted in a work of literature – *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*) – in other words, whose

1 *Moon Palace*, pp. 1-2.

2 "All kinds of options were available to people in my situation – scholarships, loans, work-study programs – but once I began to think about them, I found myself stricken with disgust. [...] I wanted no part of those things, I realized, and therefore I rejected them all, stubbornly, contemptuously, knowing full well that I had just sabotaged my only hope of surviving the crisis. From that point on, in fact, I did nothing to help myself, refused even to lift a finger." (*Moon Palace*, p. 20)

3 *Moon Palace*, p. 22.

4 *Moon Palace*, p. 27.

identity is tied to a book, now lives off of books, literally. Therefore, if his survival depends on these books inherited from Uncle Victor, then their exhaustion spells disaster, it implies the death of M.S. Fogg, and as we will see in the third part of this study, Fogg winds up in a situation where life and death coincide – indeed, he experiences a life that verges on death.

Like money, the books that Fogg receives from his uncle are bound up in a disastrous temporality: in the hands of Fogg, they become the materialization of imminence. The dwindling of money coincides with the dwindling of the boxes of books: “I had come to my last hundred dollars, and the books dwindled to three boxes.”¹ But their intimate relationship to time is established before they become the possession of M.S. Fogg. For Uncle Victor himself, the books serve as a marker of time:

Uncle Victor had never organized his library in any systematic way. Each time he had bought a book, he had put it on the shelf next to the one he had bought before it, and little by little the rows had expanded, filling more and more space as the years went by. That was precisely how the books had entered the boxes. If nothing else, the chronology was intact, the sequence had been preserved by default. I considered this to be an ideal arrangement. Each time I opened a box, I was able to enter another segment of my uncle’s life, a fixed period of days or weeks or months, and it consoled me to feel that I was occupying the same mental space that Victor had once occupied – reading the same words, living in the same stories, perhaps thinking the same thoughts.²

In linking money to imminence, money becomes a figure of time, and as the above passage indicates, the books too become a figure of time in *Moon Palace*. Reading is thus presented, among other things, as being an experience of time. The books are organized around the temporality of Uncle Victor’s life, and they in turn play a role in organizing his life by marking its chronology. For Fogg, reading them seems to be a way of making sense

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 27.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 21.

of his uncle's life. In reading them, M.S. Fogg, the homodiegetic narrator of *Moon Palace*, is experiencing his uncle's life, and to a certain extent, even living it temporally. In other words, in reading Victor's books, Fogg seems to reconstruct the life of his uncle.

It would be interesting to note at this point that Uncle Victor dies suddenly. Unlike the other Austerian characters mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, Victor's death had not been lurking on the horizon before coming upon him.¹ Perhaps, like Glass from *Brooklyn Follies*, or Willy from *Timbuktu*, or Graf from *Travels in the Scriptorium*, or even Effing, his co-character from *Moon Palace*, Uncle Victor too might have resorted to writing an account of his life, had his death been imminent rather than sudden – in order to preserve his life, in order to dispel the finality of death. But the fact remains that he undertakes no such endeavor. Instead, what he leaves behind – what remains of him – are the “one thousand four hundred and ninety-two volumes”² of books. In reading these 1492 books, M.S. Fogg seems not so much to be interested or invested in their content as he seems to be in reading – or rather, reconstructing or (re)writing through the act of reading – his uncle's life. In other words, Fogg could be seen as writing (through reading) an account of Uncle Victor's life. The books, written by a multitude of authors, and covering a multitude of centuries, could then be considered to be an elaborate epitaph of sorts, in the Wordsworthian sense (as detailed in his *Essays Upon Epitaphs*), if not a sort of “memoir from beyond the grave,” since Fogg only reads these books after the death of his uncle. In fact, reading them is his way of mourning the death of Uncle Victor: “That was how I chose to mourn my uncle Victor. One by one, I would open every box, and one by one I

1 Fogg, in fact, admits to lamenting the unexpected nature of his uncle's death, saying he would have preferred its being imminent: “If I had been prepared for his death somehow, it might have been easier for me to contend with. But how does one prepare for the death of a fifty-two-year-old man whose health has always been good? My uncle simply dropped dead one fine afternoon in the middle of April, and at that point my life began to change, I began to vanish into another world.” (pp. 2-3)

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 12.

would read every book. That was the task I set for myself, and I stuck with it to the bitter end.”¹ If Fogg’s reading is a reconstruction or rewriting of the life of Uncle Victor, and if the gesture of reading the books amounts to the reading of a memoir, then reading coincides with writing, it becomes a figure of writing.

The idea of reading coinciding with (re)writing has been taken up by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, in his definition of “texte scriptible” (“writerly text”). In making the distinction between the “texte lisible” (“readerly text”) and “texte scriptible” (“writerly text”) by placing them in opposition to one another, he suggests that while the “texte lisible” is a text that the reader consumes passively and a text where meaning is fixed, the “texte scriptible” is one where meaning is open, and it is up to the reader to make sense of it and create meaning, and in so doing, participate in the rewriting of the text. Marco Stanley Fogg’s reading of Uncle Victor’s books can thus be seen as his reading a “texte scriptible.” He makes sense of his uncle’s life (“I was able to enter another segment of my uncle’s life, a fixed period of days or weeks or months, and it consoled me to feel that I was occupying the same mental space that Victor had once occupied – reading the same words, living the same stories, perhaps thinking the same thoughts”). Fogg writes the text of his uncle’s life as he reads it, or to be more precise, it is possible for him to write the text of his uncle’s life only through the act of reading. Reading in this case is not merely a figure of writing, but also the condition of possibility of writing. For Fogg, his uncle’s life remains engraved in 1492 literary works – the 1492 volumes continue to bear the trace of Victor’s life, even after they gradually become depleted as a result of their being sold. If writing could be seen as a means for Auster’s characters to counter disaster, preserve life or reverse death, and become immortal, then so, too, could reading. Thus, unlike money,

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 21.

books stand the test of time, despite their being subjected to imminent depletion and prevent the complete loss of Uncle Victor's life.

As we have seen through the two most significant manifestations of imminent disasters (death, depletion of resources) and the various figures of time (money, books, writing and reading), time becomes of utmost importance in Auster's texts, precisely because it is always running out. Depletion, or the running out of money or time gestures towards an imminent end. In the notion of imminent disaster, the future consists in the end, yet at the same time, the end also implies a lack of future. This idea seems to be best thematized in *Moon Palace*.¹ Narrating the story of Effing's time spent painting in a cave, Fogg says:

From the very first moment, therefore, the end was already in sight. Even as he painted his pictures, it was as though he could feel the landscape vanishing before his eyes. This gave a particular poignancy to everything he did during those months. Each time he completed another canvas, the dimensions of the future shrank for him, steadily drawing him closer to the moment when there would be no future at all."²

In the notion of imminent disaster, the end is always in the future, and when disaster strikes and the end arrives, it puts a stop to any possible future. Imminent disaster is thus the impossibility of an end: so long as disaster remains imminent, the end cannot arrive – it cannot actualize. As Anna Blume in *In the Country of Last Things* puts it: "The closer you come to the end, the more there is to say. *The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going, but a point comes when you realize you will never get there.* You might have to stop, but that is only because you have run out of time.

1 In fact, *Moon Palace* even opens with the announcement of the potential absence of a future: "It was the summer that men first walked on the moon. I was very young back then, but I did not believe there would ever be a future." (p. 1)

2 *Moon Palace*, pp. 166-167.

You stop, but that does not mean you have come to the end.”¹ If and when there is no end, imminence becomes important. Imminence is the possibility of an end. At the same time, as mentioned towards the beginning of this chapter, imminence is also the present that has the potential to be the future – the present as the latent future. As such, imminence is pure potentiality, and thus can never be actualized. And in being pure potentiality, imminence amounts to nothingness. In Anna Blume’s words, again, “Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing, almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed before.”² Thus, as pure potentiality, imminence is at once possibility and impossibility. But, as seen earlier, imminence is what makes Auster’s stories possible, it is what allows his characters to experience situations, and calls upon the reader to wonder “what happens next.”

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 183. (emphasis is ours)

2 *In the Country of Last things*, p. 188.

Chapter 2

Experiencing the present

“[N]o matter how hard I tried to imagine the future, I could not see it, I could not see anything at all. The only future that had ever belonged to me was the present I was living in now, and the struggle to remain in that present gradually overwhelmed the rest.”¹

The previous chapter has introduced a common pattern in Auster’s writing: that of an imminent disaster, that of a future about to actualize. Characters may decide to act upon this imminence, and try to defer disaster through writing. When this becomes the focus of the narrative, the fragility of the present in the face of the future is magnified. At the same time, keeping the future at a distance becomes a necessity. The present stretches itself as the future becomes problematic, if not impossible. Auster’s characters are then left with no choice but to experience the present, as expressed by M.S. Fogg in the epigraph above from *Moon Palace*. The present is an always shifting, always moving phenomenon. The experience of being trapped in the present can thus be linked to a sense of displacement. M.S. Fogg’s condition is representative of that of other Austerian characters: they are always caught up in trying to find their position in time. Their struggle to position themselves temporally makes them susceptible to the displacement of the present itself, enabling their movement from one temporal category to another. Our aim, in this chapter,

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 40.

is thus to analyze the condition of Austerian characters trapped (willingly or otherwise) in the present and facing the imminence of a disaster.

First, it would be important to briefly address an ambiguity that could be read in the very idea of displacement, and in that of distance – to which we will also allude. The notions of “displacement” and “distance” both seem to fall within the realm of spatiality. Displacement essentially consists in a shift of position of an object in space – the movement of an object from one locus to another. Distance suggests the amount of space between two objects or two loci. While the notion of “distance” might entail a physical or spatial separation, it could nevertheless also be seen as a temporal separation. As revealed by Auster’s own words in *The Invention of Solitude* (p. 6), “Looking back on it now, even from so short a distance as three weeks, I find this a rather curious reaction.” Here, the distance is measured not in kilometers or miles, but in weeks. That the experience of time can borrow from the language and categories of spatiality has been theorized by Bergson¹. It is thus perfectly legitimate to consider displacement or distance as relevant concepts for discussing temporal phenomena.

2.1 Experiencing the present through distance: wandering and solitude

At the heart of each Austerian narrative, and throughout its course, wanders a lone protagonist often indifferent to the world that surrounds him. He appears to inscribe his own sense of space and time on this world that is exterior to him, that lies outside of him,

1 “Quand nous écoutons une mélodie, nous avons la plus pure impression de succession que nous puissions avoir – une impression aussi éloignée que possible de celle de la simultanéité - et pourtant c’est la continuité même de la mélodie et l’impossibilité de la décomposer qui font sur nous cette impression. Si nous la découpons en notes distinctes, en autant d’ “avant”, et d’ “après” qu’il nous plaît, c’est que nous y mêlons des images spatiales et que nous imprégnons la succession de simultanéité : dans l’espace, et dans l’espace seulement, il y a distinction nette de parties extérieures les unes aux autres. Je reconnais d’ailleurs que c’est dans le temps spatialisé que nous nous plaçons d’ordinaire.” Bergson, Henri. *La pensée et le mouvant*. Paris : PUF, 1962. p. 166.

of which he at once is and is not a part. In other words, his identity is defined not by where he finds himself in the world, but rather by how he voluntarily positions himself with respect to the world. Doing so earns him, in each of Auster's narratives, such epithets as "distant," "detached," or "solitary."

Starting with his own father, Samuel Auster, who is the central figure of "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" – the section of *The Invention of Solitude* dedicated to him – Paul Auster presents characters who evoke the image of a recluse: "Solitary. But not in the sense of being alone. Not solitary in the way Thoreau was, for example, exiling himself in order to find out where he was; not solitary in the way Jonah was, praying for deliverance in the belly of the whale. Solitary in the sense of retreat. In the sense of not having to see himself, of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else."¹ In drawing a comparison with Thoreau and Jonah, Auster seems to suggest a solitude, a state of being, that is defined by temporality. In *Walden*, Thoreau introduces his solitude as being temporary, lasting for a little over two years: "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself (...). I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again."² Like Thoreau's stay in the cabin in the woods, Jonah's stay in the belly of the whale is not permanent: "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."³ It is known in the second chapter of *Jonah* that at the end of the three days and three nights, as a result of his prayers, Jonah is finally expelled from the belly of the whale.

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 17.

2 Thoreau, H.D. *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods*. New York: Dover, 1995. p. 1.

3 *Book of Jonah*, Chapter 1: p. 17.

In the case of Thoreau and Jonah, as suggested by Auster, solitude is a transitory state, bound in a fixed temporality, with a beginning and an end. It is the time spent between two states, a time of reflection and self-awareness. Samuel Auster's solitude, on the other hand, is permanent. While Thoreau's and Jonah's solitude eventually comes to an end, Samuel Auster's solitude is his way of life, his constant state of being: "Devoid of passion, either for a thing, a person, or an idea, incapable or unwilling to reveal himself under any circumstances, he had managed to keep himself at a distance from life, to avoid immersion in the quick of things."¹ Such a presentation of his father evokes the image of a character in a constant state of withdrawal – a perpetual displacement from the center of the world to its circumference or its margins. This is highlighted by Auster's use of the term "retreat" ("Solitude in the sense of retreat"), or his use of the word "distance" ("he had managed to keep himself at a distance from life"). It would be important, here, to distinguish between solitary and retreating characters, although the two are intimately linked: retreating is the process by which a character may become solitary. While solitary protagonists and subordinate characters have become a trademark of Auster's writing, the focus in this chapter will be on characters that are not only solitary, but are actively involved in the process of retreating. It must also be noted that retreating characters are not unique to his autobiographical works.

Going beyond his first autobiographical work (*The Invention of Solitude*), which also happens to be his first ever work in prose, the retreating character appears in the avatar of M.S. Fogg in *Moon Palace*. Renouncing his material possessions, he withdraws from the trappings of everyday life to go live in Central Park: "the park offered me the possibility of solitude, or separating myself from the rest of the world."² Eventually, he

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 55.

further removes himself from the world by crawling into a “cave” in the park.¹ Separating himself from the rest of the world could already be seen as a symptom of a strained relationship with the present of ordinary, daily life – as if he were looking to experience the extraordinary. His separating, retreating, or extracting himself from the rest of the world, will indeed coincide with an extra-ordinary experience that will change his life.²

A similar figure of the wanderer is to be found in *The Music of Chance*. Nashe, the protagonist of *The Music of Chance*, starts his retreat in a similar fashion to Fogg’s: he renounces almost all of his material possessions. The exception is his car, which he purchases with the money he inherits, and which becomes the place of retreat in which he starts a year-long journey on the road:

Speed was of the essence, the joy of sitting in the car and hurtling himself forward through space. That became a good beyond all others, a hunger to be fed at any price. Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment, and as one moment followed another, it was as though he alone continued to exist. He was a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared. The car became a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore.³

Nashe’s retreat suggests multiple paradoxes. First of all, the choice of the car as a place of retreat simultaneously evokes wandering and immobility. The car is moving through space, and is actually covering great distances as Nashe’s journey takes him throughout the United States. Yet, from his point of view, Nashe, the “fixed point in a whirl of change,” is immobile, “sitting” and “in utter stillness” in the vehicle – day after day he resides in the same space, not unlike Fogg in the “cave.” Caught between motion and immobility, one would wonder where Nashe truly wants to go – which space he is

1 “... [A]t a certain point I found a cluster of large rocks surrounded by overgrown foliage and trees. The rocks formed a natural cave, and without stopping to consider the matter any further, I crawled into this shallow indentation...” (*Moon Palace*, p. 67)

2 This experience will be discussed in detail in the third part of this study.

3 *The Music of Chance*, pp. 10-11.

moving towards. Nashe's experience is largely different from that of the characters of novels in which the *road* is a trope (the most prominent instance of which in twentieth-century American literature, would be, arguably, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*), in that the space outside the car only exists as something meant to be erased: the vehicle appears as a device allowing Nashe to go nowhere, rather than anywhere. Besides affecting the perception of space, the car transforms the perception of time. By creating a constant stream of scenery around him in which nothing "lasted for more than a moment," Nashe's self becomes the only constant. Solitude is not achieved in sameness, but through the meaninglessness of a permanent change. It is not a removal from the world, but a rapid blurring of the world. What allows this permanent change is speed – speed which links the dissolution of space to the dissolution of time. Nashe's retreat in the car can be seen as summarizing the experience of the present in the imminence of the disaster – the car serving as a metaphor, if not the embodiment, of the present. The now always appears to surround us – yet it constantly moves forward. Nashe's pleasure in driving the car could be the illusion of being in control of time – his foot on the gas pedal sets time into motion around him.

This ever-present image of a retreating character is also apparent in Auster's most recent work of fiction: the novel *Sunset Park*. Miles Heller, the protagonist of *Sunset Park* is described as retreating or engaging in an inward displacement – as having "closed in on himself."¹ Unlike Central Park and the cave in *Moon Palace*, or the car in *The Music of Chance*, it is the self that becomes the site of retreat for Miles in *Sunset Park*. Miles's retreat is born of his inability to come to terms with his past, and turning inwards thus becomes his way of freeing – or perhaps, displacing – himself from the past:

1 *Sunset Park*, p. 176.

Morris held fast to the theory that Miles had vanished on purpose, but after three or four months both Willa and Korngold began to waver, gradually coming to the conclusion that Miles was dead. (...) He could have been dead, yes, but on the other hand, the kid had *issues*, the thing with Bobby had been an absolute devastation, Miles had closed in on himself since then, and it was clear that he had *a lot of stuff to work out*. Running away was a stupid thing to do, of course, but maybe some good would come of it in the end, maybe being on his own for a while would give him a chance to straighten himself out.¹

Auster's distant, ever-distancing or fleeing characters, like M.S. Fogg, Nashe or Miles, not only widen the space between themselves and other elements (living or non-living, tangible or intangible) of their surroundings, but in so doing, display their complex relationship to time. In other words, Auster's characters not only displace themselves in order to create or erase a separation between themselves and a certain object or point in space, but also to create or erase a separation with a fixed point in time.

One of the most challenging tasks for any reader of Auster's is to keep up with the perpetually displacing characters, as they wander from place to place. The complex geographical trajectories of these characters are made even more complex by the narrative's often shifting from one point in time to another. In *The Invention of Solitude*, the author-narrator writes about his father: "Often, he seemed to lose his concentration, to forget where he was, as if he had lost the sense of his own continuity."² However, this is also true of Auster's narratives. Auster's claim about his father therefore serves as a metaphorical reference to the effect that his narratives have on his reader: often, the reader too seems to experience difficulty in navigating the stories, which leaves him with a feeling of being disoriented. The constant temporal errancy leads to a certain discontinuity – a loss of a fixed temporal point of reference. But how is the loss of continuity that

1 *Sunset Park*, p. 176.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 31.

characterizes Samuel Auster, his father, reduplicated in most of Auster's protagonists, while also being projected onto the reader?

From his corpus of nearly twenty narrative works emerges a pattern that can be seen as outlining the order that all of his narratives follow with little to no variation. A discernible main story or frame tale is exposed fairly early – as early as the opening lines or pages of his narratives. True to their function, the frame tales pave the way for other stories that almost always take the shape of analepses or flashbacks. This technique of analeptic narration can be found as early as his very first narrative work, *The Invention of Solitude* – the narrative that is unanimously considered by his readers as being quintessentially Austerian. The first section of this memoir, “Portrait of an Invisible Man” presents, first and foremost, the story of the author-narrator (Paul Auster himself) writing the book in the wake of his father's death, which occurred three weeks prior to the time of narration. The story of his writing the book while packing up and emptying out his father's house to eventually sell it is what comprises the frame tale – it is the “now” of the narration. This frame tale allows Paul Auster, narrating in the first person singular “I,” to launch into stories about his father's bleak and tragic past, as well as his own past in the form of his memories as a little boy with his father, and at times, the lack of them. The tale of the present of the narrative is interwoven with tales of the past. This forms a repetitive temporal displacement in the first section. The reader, along with the narrator, finds himself caught in a constant movement into the past and back to the “present.”

This back and forth time traveling also continues into the second section of Auster's memoir. It should be noted, however, that the two sections are structurally independent of each other, and tell two different stories. The second section “The Book of Memory,” also follows a narrative pattern similar to that of its antecedent. We learn from

the first two pages that the frame tale can be situated at a precise point in time and space: “Christmas Eve, 1979;”¹ “Christmas Eve, 1979. He is in New York, alone in his little room at 6 Varick Street.”² As the narrative progresses, we realize that the frame tale consists in the author-narrator’s (again, Paul Auster himself) writing the present section, and that this process of writing is punctuated with his pacing about the room, lying down for a few moments, looking out of the window down at the street or up at the sky, etc. Mostly, we learn that these pauses in his writing serve as portals for him to delve into the past. This is when the frame tale enters into flashbacks and we are told a multitude of stories: about his disintegrating marriage on the brink of divorce, about his grandfather’s death, about his life as a translator of some of Mallarmé’s works, about his travels to Europe and the friends he makes there, about the past of those friends, to name but a few. Similar to the first section, the reader finds himself traveling back and forth between parts of the frame tale and anecdotes from the past. But this fluctuating temporality is not surprising when taken to be a symptom of the problem of memory inherent to the writing of a (auto-)biography – the problem of narrating the past of an individual through the lens of the present (of writing, of narration). However, this precarious temporal condition affects both, Auster’s autobiographies as well as novels.

As suggested previously in this chapter, Paul Auster presents characters that are constantly trying to escape their past. However, the endless displacement from the present to the past, and back to the present only to return to the past, also hints at the fact that there is a certain amount of tension in the way his characters relate to the present. The past is problematic, but so is the present. The characters flee from their past, but they also seem to

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 79.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 80.

get away from their present. This problematic relationship with the present is best illustrated in, once again, *The Invention of Solitude*:

Christmas Eve, 1979. His life no longer seemed to dwell in the present. Whenever he turned on his radio and listened to the news of the world, he would find himself imagining the words to be describing things that had happened long ago. Even as he stood in the present, he felt himself to be looking at it from the future, and this present-as-past was so antiquated that even the horrors of the day, which ordinarily would have filled him with outrage, seemed remote to him, as if the voice in the radio were reading from a chronicle of some lost civilization. Later, in a time of greater clarity, he would refer to this sensation as ‘nostalgia for the present.’¹

The key idea made apparent in this passage is that, for Auster, the present is elusive – it is defined by its impossibility to be grasped or captured. It cannot be recorded. It would be nearer the truth to say that A., the author-narrator of “The Book of Memory,” mourns the loss of the present. Of this loss is born his “nostalgia for the present.” In other words, the present is always already the past – a condition or a state to which the narrator desires to return. One question arises: under what circumstances does the present become the past? The answer that emerges from between the lines in the passage quoted above seems to be that it is in recording – in narrating, in writing – that the present becomes the past. The narrator thus mourns his incapacity to write about the present as it occurs. Indeed, he mourns the impossibility to write the present – to narrate it. Auster seems to reinforce the universal struggle of writers – the idea that there is always a lapse of time between the present moment and the moment of its narration. As soon as writing appears on the horizon, the present moment is lost by the time it is written.

The notion of the present as a precarious temporal category subjected to the force of the past does not only concern Auster the author-narrator of his autobiographies; it also concerns Auster the novelist. As the figure of the novelist, Sidney Orr, in Auster’s *Oracle*

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 79.

Night says of his fictional character Nick Bowen, through the narrator of his work-in-progress: “He has to train himself not to think about the past.”¹ The past that insists and imposes itself on the present can be mastered, and the fictional Sidney Orr, in his story, hints at this possibility. Orr sends his character, Nick Bowen, who has abandoned his former wife and life in New York (and who is overtly based on Dashiell Hammett’s character Flitcraft from *The Maltese Falcon*: “Bowen was Flitcraft, and Flitcraft had done the same thing to his own wife in Hammett’s novel”²), to Kansas City, and has him try to forget his past in order to focus on the present. Bowen’s mechanism to resist succumbing to the force or the allure of the past consists in reading a book (the fictional Sylvia Maxwell’s *Oracle Night*):

[W]henever he finds himself drifting into thoughts about his old life in New York – which has been erased, which is nothing more than illusion now – he does everything in his power to turn his mind from the past and concentrate on the present. That is why he reads the book. That is why he keeps reading the book. He must lure himself away from the false memories of a life that no longer belongs to him, and because the manuscript demands total surrender in order to be read, an unremitting attentiveness of both body and mind, he can forget who he was when he is lost in the pages of the novel.³

In this passage, reading is presented as a means to stay in the present. It is interesting to observe that reading is not a randomly chosen solution to the problem of returning to the past, and in so doing, losing the present. The experience of reading consists in the displacement of temporality. In reading, the reader tends to enter into and align himself with the temporality internal to the story or the narrative. This displacement allows the reader to be “lost in the pages of the novel.” However, such a displacement is possible only in the reading of fiction. Thus the choice of the novel is also not arbitrary. The shift

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 56.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 51. Sidney Orr’s project is in fact born of Hammett’s novel – an idea given to him by his friend John Trause, in the first few pages of *Oracle Night*.

3 *Oracle Night*, pp. 56-57.

from the “real” time (time of experience) to the fictional or narrative time (time of the story/novel) ensures the full experience of the present. In other words, it is in becoming oblivious to time, if not indifferent to it, that Bowen is able to stay in the present.

A slightly different mechanism of experiencing the present seems to be at work in the closing lines of *Sunset Park*. As the narrator says of Miles Heller: “from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.”¹ The narrator of *Sunset Park* thus defines the present as “this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.” First of all, it would be interesting to underline the fact that these are the closing words of *Sunset Park* – the novel indeed ends on that note. In the blank space that remains past these final words and that extends to the bottom of the page and beyond the material boundaries of the text, can be found a present that is not lost to narration. A now that is not interrupted by the words that form the text – the very fabric – of this novel. Because language and writing unfold in time – words are uttered, heard, written, read in a sequence, one after the other – language itself carries the traces of the passage of time. The first word in a sentence is already a thing of the past once the end of the sentence is reached. The end of the story is thus a point at which the passage of time is halted. No chronology is left, besides the present, in this literary equivalent of a musical *fermata*.

In the case of Miles Heller, the present is not lost to the past through the possibility of writing, but to “hope” (“he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now”). Hope, like imminence, hints at a future. Additionally, hope, like nostalgia, articulates a desire for a time that lies outside the realm of the present – nostalgia implying a desire for the past,

1 *Sunset Park*, p. 308.

and hope suggesting a desire for the future, for what is to come. Whereas for the narrator, A., in “The Book of Memory,” the present is already lost to the past and its loss is lamented, for Miles Heller, the present can be salvaged from the threat of the future, and this is possible by ceasing to desire it. The experience of the present is thus linked to desire. Desire interrupts the ephemeral, fleeting present, and takes an individual away from the now, away from himself.

2.2 Grasping the now, grasping the here

If the present is ephemeral, and, as seen earlier, cannot be written at the moment at which it occurs but can only be narrated retrospectively, the autobiographer and the novelist are faced with a problem: how to reverse this impossibility? How to capture the present? How to write it, to narrate it? We will therefore first examine how this capture and reversal of the present are at work in Auster’s novels *Sunset Park* and *The City of Glass*, before discussing their stake in his very first autobiography, *The Invention of Solitude*.

As seen in the closing lines of *Sunset Park* quoted above, one way of achieving this would be to bring the narration to a halt: the present resides there where narration falls silent. Additionally, the definition of the present as “the now that is here and then not here” could be read as implying that the present has (or could have) a spatial embodiment – a now that can be *here*, “here” being, first and foremost, a deictic of place or space. In describing the present as the “now” that is – or at least has the ability to be – “here,” Auster seems to juxtapose two deictics: that of time and space: “now,” “here.” The now and the here thus seem to become the essence of the present.

Studying this particular juxtaposition could perhaps be another way in which we might look at how Auster’s characters try to grasp the present and “live only for now.” It

could be posited that Auster's characters experience the present by going nowhere, or rather, by *being* nowhere. And the only way in which they can be nowhere is by being lost.

This idea is best demonstrated by the character Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass*:

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. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again.¹

In Daniel Quinn the reader may find a character who insists on separating himself from the world around him in order to find himself. For Auster, it seems that losing oneself in the city entails finding oneself *within* oneself. In addition to that, another paradox seems to be at work in this passage: for Daniel Quinn, being at one with himself, or being at peace, coincides with an “emptiness within.” In being “empty,” Daniel Quinn feels whole. For that reason, he desires to be “nowhere.” On the one hand, *being nowhere* implies an absence – as if Daniel Quinn were to cut himself loose (physically, materially) from space, as if he were to vanish, and therefore be nowhere. This further points to a wish for a separation of himself from space, from the world around him or *outside* of him. On the other hand, “being nowhere” suggests that “nowhere” is his essence. He seems to long to exist *as* nowhere, renouncing all elements of spatiality and reducing himself to time, more

1 *City of Glass*, pp. 3-4.

precisely to the present. Daniel Quinn may be seen as a character who fantasizes about *being* time, about wholly experiencing the now. Indeed, nowhere could be seen as an agglutination of “now” and “here:” the now and here of the present. The time in which the Austerian character is whole. In other words, Daniel Quinn, the character who experiences the world through the prism of space and time, reduces himself – or elevates himself – to time, and doing so allows him to fully experience the present. The similarity with Nashe’s retreat in his car is striking.

As suggested earlier, the experience of the present is linked negatively to the notion of desire: desire inhibits the present. Consequently, the lack of desire leads to or enables the experience of the present. This could be seen as yet another way in which Auster’s characters grasp the present and stay in it. For instance, the protagonist of *Sunset Park*, Miles Heller, is described as being a character who lacks desire, who wants nothing:

He is twenty-eight years old, and to the best of his knowledge, he has no ambitions. No burning ambitions, in any case, no clear idea of what building a plausible future might entail for him. [...] If he has accomplished anything in the seven and a half years since he quit college and struck out on his own, it is this ability to live in the present, to confine himself to the here and now, and although it might not be the most laudable accomplishment one can think of, it has required considerable discipline and self-control to achieve it. To have no plans, which is to day, to have no longings or hopes, to be satisfied with your lot, to accept what the world doles out to you from one sunrise to the next – in order to live like that you must want very little, as little as humanly possible.¹

Rejecting the future allows Miles Heller to be in the present, in the “here and now.” It could also be construed that instead of a complete lack of desire or want, there seems to be a displacement of desire that reveals a paradox. In his rejection of the future, or, in his having no desire for anything, Miles Heller’s desire for being in the present seems to be

1 *Sunset Park*, p. 6.

reinforced. The only desire is that of the present. But when the present becomes desirable, when it becomes that which is yet to come, it loses its presence.

Miles Heller's wanting "as little as humanly possible" is reminiscent of Paul Auster's father, Samuel Auster, who, being "devoid of passion," in *The Invention of Solitude* is described in a similar manner:

He did not smoke, he did not drink. No hunger for sensual pleasures, no thirst for intellectual pleasures. Books bored him, and it was the rare movie or play that did not put him to sleep. Even at parties you would see him struggling to keep his eyes open, and more often than not he would succumb, falling asleep in a chair as the conversations swirled around him. A man without appetites. You felt that nothing could ever intrude on him, that he had no need of anything the world had to offer.¹

Despite the similarity between Miles Heller and Samuel Auster, there seems to be a difference in their lack of desires. Samuel Auster's lack of desire does not seem to be a means to an end. He does not make a conscious effort to be in the present by failing to desire – the feeling that gestures towards the future. Indeed, the difference between Samuel Auster and Miles Heller is most noticeable in the nature of their existence. While Samuel Auster is *essentially* "absent" (p. 7), Miles Heller *strives* to be (in) the present, to be at one with himself in the present.

2.3 Failing to grasp the present through writing and language

In *The Invention of Solitude*, the first half of which is dedicated to Samuel Auster, the narrating son orchestrates the capturing (rather, the difficulty in the capturing) of the present around himself: in a metafictional maneuver, he reveals himself as struggling to capture the present through narrating. In order to narrate the present as present, rather than

¹ *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 17.

the present as the past (“present-as-past”¹), the time of narration would have to coincide with the time of the story or the narrated event. In addition to that, the closest a writer can get to saying or writing the present is by conveying it, for instance, through the use of the simple present tense in written (as opposed to visual, for instance) narration. This is what Auster seems to attempt in *The Invention of Solitude* when he opens with a narration in the present tense:

He lays out a piece of blank paper on the table before him and writes these words with his pen. It was. It will never be again.

Later that same day he returns to his room. 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. Then he goes out to eat his dinner.

That night he tells himself that tomorrow is another day. New words begin to clamor in his head, but he does not write them down. He decides to refer to himself as A. He walks back and forth between the table and the window. He turns on the radio and then turns it off. He smokes a cigarette.

Then he writes. It was. It will never be again.²

Here the present or the now seems to be expressed through narration in the present tense – similar to a live telecast, or a live broadcast over the radio to which A. claims to listen (“Whenever he turned on his radio and listened to the news of the world, he would find himself imagining the words to be describing things that had happened long ago.”). The reader becomes the spectator: he is given a glimpse of the narrator in action – the narrator in the act of narrating through writing. The time of narration coincides with the time of the narrated event, and this could be seen as the present. However, this present cloaked in the veil of a verbal tense is an illusion, because as soon as writing comes into the picture, the present is lost: as soon as the narrator starts to write, the present is lost, and

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 79.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 79.

this loss is so final, that not even the present verbal tense can undo it. In the repetition of the two written sentences – “It was. It will never be again” – the logical present form (“it is”) is omitted both times. The past (expressed by the preterit “was”) is followed by the future (expressed by the modal “will”). In this instance, the present is always necessarily the past; its presence is impossible, and so is its future (“it will *never* be again”¹). In other words, the present is the impossibility of its realization as such. If the narrative of the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* opens with the loss of the present, this loss returns, in the manner of an epanalepsis, at the very end of “The Book of Memory,” as its closing words: “He lays it out on the table before him and writes these words with his pen. It was. It will never be again. Remember.”² It now becomes imperative for the reader not only to acknowledge the loss of the present – the impossibility of its being written – but also to remember it.

Thus, Auster seems to insist on the impossibility to write the present – to capture it through writing. There is always going to be a lapse of time between the moment at which an event occurs and the writing about that event. However, Auster seems to be concerned with another lapse: that between writing (the act of writing) and the product of the writing (what is written). This is to be observed in his claim that the words he has written “do not seem to say what he thought he was saying.” While this could be seen as the experience of displacement constitutive of writing – the discrepancy between what is written and what sense (meaning) can be made out of it – it represents a much larger problem for Auster: the problem of language itself. This problem is not specific to “The Book of Memory” alone, but concerns *The Invention of Solitude* – the text as a whole. The author-narrator grapples with it from the first section of the work:

1 The emphasis is ours.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 185.

Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing. For the past few days, in fact, 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 that when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it.¹

In this metatextual instance, Auster seems to suggest a paradox: language is the condition of possibility of narration or storytelling, and at the same time, the experience of language interrupts narration, makes it impossible for him to tell the story. Thus far, we have seen how the present cannot be said (written) because it is always already the past – that it is lost to the past when writing appears on the horizon. In other words, it is writing that causes the loss of the present. In the above passage, however, Auster seems to suggest that it is the present that makes writing impossible. When the present arrives – and the present is precisely that which arrives, and not that which has arrived or will arrive – it is then that writing becomes impossible (“when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing [...], I will not be able to say it”). The relationship between writing and the present, for Auster, appears to be a disastrous one: the one destroys the other. Writing and the present annihilate each other, cancel each other out, make each other impossible. It could thus be concluded that for Auster, the experience of disaster in writing occurs in the writing of the present. Therefore, for him, the problem of language seems to be the problem of the experience of the present in language: language appears unable to mediate the present, and conversely, the present makes language impossible.

Thus, Auster seems to reinforce, throughout *The Invention of Solitude*, the idea that language is time. In other words, the experience of language is a temporal experience – it is an experience in time, as well as an expression of time. In the attempt to represent time, the narrative voice is constantly split between the moment or time of enunciation or utterance

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 34.

and the product of that enunciation or utterance. This chasm or “rift” – to borrow Auster’s term – takes the author-narrator of his first autobiographical work away from himself.¹ The figure of the author-narrator who shows himself struggling with the task of writing, laments being separated from himself. He prefaces his struggle with writing by saying: “I seem to be afflicted, cursed by some failure of mind to concentrate on what I am doing. [...] I feel I am going to suffocate.”² In claiming to be “afflicted” by his struggle with the project of writing, and verging on having a physical response to it, the experience of writing is presented as an illness – a temporal disease, since it is time that makes the experience of language and writing problematic. This illness – this undesirable physical condition – leads to the double or the split voices of *The Invention of Solitude*: the first-person narration of “Portrait of an Invisible Man” and the third-person narration of “The Book of Memory.”³

As we have seen in this section, Auster’s characters have a problematic relationship with the present. The present is experienced through distance: in solitude, distance from the others; in wandering, distance from a point in time, or space, associated with trauma. Because the now is also the here, this alienation from the present is also experienced spatially: navigating through memories or layers of narration leads to wandering. The only possibility for grasping the present is thus to annihilate the here and the now.

One path explored by Austerian characters is the suppression of desire. Another is to substitute the fabric of space and time with that of a text, through writing.

1 Giorgio Agamben seems to deal with a similar idea in his discussion of “messianic time” in *The Time that Remains*: “[O]ur representation of chronological time, as the time *in which* we are, separates us from ourselves and transforms us into impotent spectators of ourselves – spectators who look at the time that flies without any time left, continually missing themselves [...]” (Agamben, Giorgio. *The Time That Remains*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005. p. 68)

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 34.

3 The recurring problem of split voices in his narratives will be the focus of the third section of this study where they will be discussed in detail.

Ultimately, both approaches fail. In Auster's works, disaster is in the inevitability of loss – the loss of the present can only be mitigated through another loss: that of desire. Disaster is in the failure of writing to capture the experience of the present. Whatever writing captures is destroyed by the distance between the moment itself and the act of writing, by the distance between the act of writing and the act of reading or telling, and by language itself through which everything is mediated. Writing can capture the present but not the experience of the present.

Chapter 3

Chance and loss

“...nothing was real except chance.”¹

Chance may be defined as “a happening or occurrence of things in a particular way; a casual or fortuitous circumstance; a matter which falls out or happens.”² As a “fortuitous circumstance,” chance is what is unforeseen, unexpected. Chance carries a sense of improbability, of singularity – as what is predictable and probable would be perceived as a non-event, and would not be attributed to chance. As far as temporality is concerned, chance firmly belongs in the present. It is indeed another modality through which one can make sense of present events. Chance does not belong in the past since once an event has occurred, it can no longer be said to be unexpected. Chance does not belong to the future either, as what happens by chance cannot be foreseen, cannot be hoped for, or desired. Chance materializes and can be experienced only in the present, as that which comes. Through a reading of two pieces of fiction, *In the Country of Last Things* and *The Music of Chance*, we will see how Auster’s thematization of chance unveils several paradoxes inherent to its very definition.

1 *New York Trilogy*, p. 3.

2 “chance, n., adj., and adv.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 6 September 2014.

3.1 Unpredictability within predictability: chance and the quest

The definition of chance relies on the notion of improbability, or on a failure to perceive causality in the chain of events. If chance is what cannot be predicted (or made to happen through deliberate actions), this definition can only exist in contrast with what can be predicted, with what is deliberate. Chance can only be perceived as something that violates expectations or intentions. In the context of storytelling, chance is what breaks the flow of the story and moves it in a direction not foreseeable by the reader or the characters. A plot device traditionally associated with chance is the *Deus ex machina*, but the Austerian notion of chance is distinct from this concept. What distinguishes Auster's staging of chance with the notion of *Deus ex machina* is the context in which a chance event is made to occur. For chance to be perceived and experienced, it must contrast with a strong sense of causal order, it must occur in a context in which characters' goals and intentions are clearly set. One such matrix in which chance can occur is a quest.

Critics of Auster agree that his work (fictional and autobiographical, if one were to distinguish the one from the other), is centered around the quest.¹ His characters all embark on various quests, the most common forms of which include the physical (spatial), the metaphysical, the literary (textual), the ontological, and the filial quest. And while at times, one quest is carried out in the guise of another, at others, one quest inevitably leads to another. Quests present a fertile background of causality and predictability for chance events to occur, which then allows the story to unfold, and thus propels the narrative forward. Or, perhaps, the reverse could also be said to be true. That is to say, it is because

1 François Gavillon begins his review of Ilana Shiloh's *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest : On the Road to Nowhere*, with the following affirmation: "Ilana Shiloh place l'œuvre de Paul Auster sous le signe de la quête, et plus précisément de la quête de soi." (François Gavillon, "Ilana Shiloh. *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest : On the Road to Nowhere*.", *Transatlantica*. 1, 2005. Web. 16 May 2014. <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/842>>.

Auster is keen on narrating chance events that he needs to resort to the framework of a quest within which to thematize or perform them. In other words, a quest could be seen as the condition of possibility of chance, in Auster's work.

In *In the Country of Last Things*, the protagonist, Anna Blume travels to the titular country of last things – a dystopic country of spatial, corporeal, moral and political deterioration and decay, where “[one] by one things disappear and never come back.”¹ She does not find herself there by chance, but adamantly decides (“I had made up my mind, and nothing was going to force me to change it.”²) to go there in search of her brother, William – a journalist – who “has disappeared.”³ However, the protagonist's will, perhaps even willfulness, is merely a point of departure for the narrative, and before long, chance finds its way into the story. At first, the role of chance in the story is to simply provide the reader with details of Anna's newfound difficult and scarcely-profitable activity of “object-hunting” as a means of survival in the unidentified country away from home: “If I happened to find something, it was always because I had stumbled onto it by accident. Chance was my only approach, the purely gratuitous act of seeing a thing with my own two eyes and then bending down to pick it up.”⁴ Chance in this passage has no influence on the story itself, nor any significant consequences on the life or actions of the protagonist; it merely ensures that Anna does not starve to death. However, the above passage could be seen as a metatext, announcing how Anna Blume will find the other more important things – how she will “stumble onto” the people who will change the course of her life, and consequently, that of the narrative as well.

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 1.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 41.

3 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 2.

4 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 35.

First, Anna meets Isabel, with whom she happens to cross paths and whose life she saves. In being saved by Anna, Isabel is reborn. This could be seen as Anna's finding herself, by chance, in the position of a birthing mother, and indeed, the scene of Isabel's accident could also double as a scene of her birth.¹ In order to thank Anna for saving her life, Isabel "promises" her a "roof over [her] head and food to eat" for as long as Isabel lives.² In so doing, Isabel reverses the roles, and takes on the role of Anna's mother, promising to provide for her. Meeting Isabel changes Anna's life: "Then my luck changed. [...] That is how I met Isabel. For better or worse, my true life in the city began at that moment."³ Chance, in this instance, also marks the rebirth of Anna. It marks the beginning of what Anna calls her "true life." Then, by another stroke of luck⁴, Anna meets the Rabbi at the National Library who leads her to Samuel Farr who becomes her lover and with whom she starts living at the Library: "Ultimately, I did meet up with Sam, but that had nothing to do with me. It was the work of pure chance, one of those bits of luck that fall down on you from the sky."⁵ Through Anna, Auster thus insists on the nature of chance: it is not only that which arrives unexpectedly, but because it arrives in a downward direction from above⁶ – because it *falls* – the individual whom it befalls is blind to it, does not (and cannot) see it coming, and therefore has no mastery over it. Finally, Anna meets Victoria,

1 While this scene describes Anna's and Isabel's response to the shock of the accident, it could also be read as an act of birth, and Isabel's response to her (re)birth, like that of a baby's, is to cry, as she discovers the world around her: "We lay there panting in the gutter, still hanging on to each other. As the last of the Runners disappeared around the corner, Isabel gradually seemed to understand what had happened to her. She sat up, looked around her, looked at me, and then, very slowly, began to cry. It was a moment of terrible recognition for her. Not because she had come so close to being killed, but because she had not known where she was. I felt sorry for her, and also a little afraid. Who was this thin, trembling woman with the long face and hollow eyes – and what was I doing sprawled out next to her in the street?" (p. 45)

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 49.

3 *In the Country of Last Things*, pp. 44-45.

4 Anna meets the Rabbi at the Library, but she finds herself there by pure chance, while trying to escape an angry mob: "I kept on running as fast as I could, darting down one street after another, too afraid even to look back. Finally, after a quarter or an hour, I *found myself* running alongside a large stone building. I couldn't tell if I was being pursued or not, but just then, a door opened a few feet up ahead and I rushed right into it." (*In the Country of Last Things*, p. 93; *is ours*).

5 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 43.

6 Auster dramatizes this verticality of chance in *Oracle Night*, by describing an incident from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*: "One afternoon as [Flitcraft is] walking to lunch, a beam falls from a

who nurses her back to health at the Woburn House where Anna, once again, *finds herself* by chance. In nursing Anna, Victoria takes on the role of her mother, and Anna is reborn, once again.

The starting point of this exploration of the notion of the quest was that chance events can only be staged amidst a narration of predictable events. This sense of predictability can be created through the use of well-established narrative patterns, such as those of the quest, but it can also be achieved through repetition. This is illustrated by Auggie Wren's photographic project in the movie *Smoke*, whose screenplay has been written by Auster. Every morning at 8 AM, Auggie captures a photograph of the corner of the 3rd Street and 7th Avenue¹ in which his tobacco shop is located. Paul Benjamin, browsing through Auggie's collection of more than four thousand photographs, skims through the albums and initially perceives only their sameness and repetition, failing to grasp the essence of Auggie's project. This forms a background of sameness in the midst of which occurs a chance encounter: Auggie discovers that his deceased wife Ellen appears on one of the photographs.

This contrast between the quest (characterized by repetition, and serving as a background to the narration) and chance (the encounter, the unexpected that "falls down on you from the sky," the foreground of the narration) seems to be aligned with Derrida's conception of chance. In a speech delivered at the Washington School of Psychiatry

construction site on the tenth floor of a building and nearly lands on his head. Another inch or two, and Flitcraft would have been crushed, but the beam misses him, and except for the a little chip of sidewalk that flies up and hits him in the face, he walks away unhurt . [...] The world is governed by chance. Randomness stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment – for no reason at all." (*Oracle Night*, pp. 11-12)

- 1 Retold from *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story* at a different point of time and space: "Every morning for the past twelve years, he had stood at the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Clinton Street at precisely seven o'clock and had taken a single color photograph of precisely the same view." (p. 10)

(published as an essay entitled “Mes chances: au rendez-vous de quelques stéréophonies épicuriennes”), Derrida provides a metaphorically rich elucidation of the notion of chance:

Contentons-nous pour l’instant de remarquer cette loi ou cette coïncidence qui associe étrangement le hasard ou la chance avec le mouvement vers le bas, le jet fini (qui donc doit finir par retomber), la chute, l’incident, l’accident ou justement la coïncidence. Tenter de penser le hasard, ce serait d’abord s’intéresser à l’*expérience* (je souligne ce mot) de ce qui arrive imprévisiblement. Et certains seraient enclins à penser que l’imprévisibilité conditionne la structure même de l’événement. Un événement anticipable, et donc appréhensible ou compréhensible, un événement sans rencontre absolue, est-ce un événement au sens plein du mot ? Certains inclineraient à dire qu’un événement digne de ce nom ne s’annonce pas. On ne doit pas le voir venir. Si l’on anticipe ce qui vient et qui dès lors se découpe dans un horizon, à l’horizontale, il n’y a pas d’événement pur. On dira : pas d’horizon pour l’événement ou pour la rencontre, seulement de l’imprévision et à la verticale. L’altérité de l’autre, ce qui ne se réduit pas à l’économie de notre horizon, nous vient toujours de plus haut, c’est le très haut.¹

For Derrida, chance can be defined through its exchangeability with the notion of the event, and through its spatial representation – chance being “vertical.” The Derridian event is what cannot be foreseen or apprehended. There is thus a correlation between eventfulness and improbability. This conception echoes an important scientific notion of the twentieth century: that of information, as formalized in Shannon’s information theory.² Shannon’s concerns, such as the quantification of randomness, or the optimal way of sharing knowledge in an environment adverse to communication, along with his willingness to apply his findings to the English language, contribute to making his presence in this debate not as incongruous as it would seem. According to Shannon’s theories, the information value of an observation increases with its improbability. If something can be accurately predicted from the knowledge of the context in which it

1 Derrida, Jacques. “Mes chances. Au rendez-vous de quelques stéréophonies épicuriennes.” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*. 45.1, 1983. p. 7.

2 While the original breakthrough has been disclosed in mathematical terms in his paper “A mathematical Theory of Communication” (Shannon, Claude. “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” *The Bell System Technical Journal*. 23.3, 1948. pp. 379-423), a more accessible exposition can be found in Gleick’s work of popular scientific writing *The information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* (Gleick, James. *The information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*. New York: Vintage, 2012. pp 215-231.)

occurs, its information value is null and there is no value in making it known – as highlighted by Shannon in the example of bookmakers’ payouts decreasing with the odds in a horse race, or the removal of some letters from a telegraph message leaving no ambiguity as to its meaning. The motivation behind Shannon’s works is communication, and the outcome of his formalization is that in an efficient communication system, what is certain is not being communicated, what is highly predictable is briefly transmitted, while what is highly unexpected – what has the highest information content – is expanded upon. In other words, the unexpected is what is worth expanding upon, or in a written communication context, what is worth writing about. A common thread links chance, unpredictability, information and “what is worth writing about” – and all of these can indeed also be seen as attributes or aspects of the singular event: the disaster. Shannon’s optimum is exactly reached in Auster’s narration, in which chance events form the foreground of the narration, while the predictable quest serves as a repetitive background. However, there seems to be an apparent contradiction between Derrida’s view on chance and Shannon’s definition (and its echo in Auster’s efficiency as a writer). Derrida asserts that a true event is that which is not announced (“un événement digne de ce nom ne s’annonce pas”). Then, what to make of Auster’s use of analepses, or of the interventions of his own characters commenting on the imminence of events (“That was the event that started the whole miserable story”¹)? Auster is indeed announcing events, but the events occur on a plane different from the one in which they are announced. From the point of view of Auster’s characters, the chance events staged by Auster are truly unexpected and unannounced – they are revealed only to the reader, by the narrator. Using Genette’s terminology, the Austerian disaster is announced in the time of narration (“*temps du récit*”), but still unexpected in the narrated time (“*temps de l’histoire*”), and thus the

1 *Leviathan*, p. 73.

apparent contradiction with Derrida's definition is eluded. One could extend Derrida's definition ("Certains inclineraient à dire qu'un événement digne de ce nom ne s'annonce pas") by adding: "*Il se raconte*," that is to say: "An event worthy of this name is not announced. It is narrated."

Another duality at work in Derrida's definition of chance is that of verticality and horizontality. Derrida aptly highlights how chance is experienced as the vertical, contrasting with the horizontal. This duality exists at several levels, all of which are present in Auster's works. Horizontal and vertical are foremost spatial concepts. In Auster's works, the disaster is often depicted as a vertical displacement (Walt's levitation in *Mr. Vertigo*, Sachs's fall in *Leviathan*, Anna's jumping out of a window in *In the Country of Last Things* or the falling of eggs on the floor in *Moon Palace*¹), whereas the background in which events occur are horizontal displacements (the wanderings of Fogg, Sachs or Nashe). This spatiality has permeated through the realm of language, and it is indeed interesting to note that Derrida's French examples can be effortlessly translated into English. Derrida mentions the French "*chute*," but in English, too, chance events are metaphorically said to "fall" (or "befall") and Auster himself uses this metaphor: "It was the work of pure chance, one of those bits of luck that fall down on you from the sky"². Derrida's "*jet fini*," which gestures towards finitude and death, reminds one of the locution *alea jacta est* – another linguistic clue of the verticality of chance. Finally, insofar as time can be experienced spatially, the verticality of chance can also be seen as a temporal concept. Events are the vertical marks on the horizontal representation of a timeline.

1 We will see in the course of this study how each of these instances (Walt's levitation, Sachs's fall, Anna's self-defenestration, and the falling of the eggs in *Moon Palace*) is experienced as a disaster.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 43.

What binds together the two aspects of chance we have analyzed from Derrida's definition (the unexpected event, and the verticality) is the concept of "*rencontre*" (encounter). Encounter is to be understood here in its broadest meaning, and in the context of Auster's works, this could be the encounter with another character or with one's fate, or both – as in the case of characters embodying fate, such as "Jackpot" (Pozzi) in *The Music of Chance*¹, or Maria Turner in *Leviathan*. The encounter is the intersection point between horizontality and verticality. The conclusion of Derrida's analysis summarizes the encounter as the blurring between the *alter* (the other) and the *altus* (what is high, the altitude, and thus the unexpected that falls) – this blurring being the essence of the event and of the disaster.

3.2 Chance as a boundary

Our analysis of *In the Country of Last Things* shows how Auster uses chance as a narrative technique – an impulse to instantly propel the story in another direction. But chance can be more than a turning point in a story: it can also be its point of departure. The point at which events take an unexpected turn is the point at which they become worth narrating. In this pattern commonly found in Auster's works, two boundaries are made to coincide: the boundary between the foreseeable and the unforeseeable, and the boundary of the text itself.

As the narrator of *The Music of Chance* explains towards the very beginning of the story: "It all came down to a question of sequence, the order of events. If it had not taken the lawyer six months to find him, he never would have been on the road the day he met Jack Pozzi, and therefore none of the things that followed from that meeting ever would

1 In the film adaptation of *The Music of Chance*, Pozzi falls in the grass just as he enters the frame for the first time, providing a depiction of *alea jacta est*.

have happened.”¹ From the very first page, the narrator of *The Music of Chance* establishes that his story is hinged on chance. Similarly, the narrator of *City of Glass* does so from the very first line: “It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences.”² A chance event of the telephone’s ringing three times marks the beginning of the narrative – the text – as well as the beginning of the quest for Quinn to solve the Stillman case in *City of Glass*. More often than not, the characters, like Nashe or Quinn, *find themselves* in certain situations – they do not make themselves part of these situations, let alone create them themselves. Or, put differently, their entering into particular situations usually does not result from a wish, a desire or a conscious decision on their part; it happens (by chance). This reveals a dual relationship between chance and causality: as an unexpected event or an event that is not the product of will, chance eludes causality, but once the event occurs, it impacts the rest of the story. Chance is never a consequence and always a cause. Chance is shown as a disruption between states or between the blank that precedes the text, and the text. In this sense, the definition of chance converges with the definition of disaster.

Yet, chance is not destruction. Chance is what Auster uses to organize his narratives. It is the glue that binds the various parts of the story together, in order to make them cohere. Or, it is the impulse that sets the story in motion. One is struck by the paradox: chance, or that which due to its unforeseen nature essentially disrupts time and

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 1.

2 *New York Trilogy*, p. 3.

the course of events, is the very instrument by which the author seeks to bring order, or create a narrative.

The Music of Chance, *City of Glass* or *Moon Palace* are all told retrospectively – they are a construction, *après-coup*, of the events that are narrated in the paragraphs and pages that follow, most (if not all) of which occur by chance. Auster’s use of this specific narrative pattern hints at another paradox: an event occurring by chance can only be considered as unexpected before it happens; once it has happened, and once it has been written in a journal or narrated, it appears as the inevitable course of events. Randomness does not survive the act of writing. There is a strong contrast between the meaninglessness of the event as it unfolds, and the meaning that is later ascribed to it, at the time of writing or storytelling. Distinguishing between meaningful and meaningless events can only be done from a vantage point in which the consequences of all events have been observed. Chance is experienced in the present, but its value is appreciated retrospectively. Chance engenders a story, but at the same time, it takes a story for an event to be recognized as an occurrence of chance.

3.3 Good fortune, bad fortune: chance and disaster

At this point, it would be important to take into account the fact that “chance,” by its most common definition, or in its most frequent usage can imply both, good fortune and misfortune: “a matter which falls out or happens; a fortuitous event or occurrence; often, an unfortunate event, mishap, mischance.” (*OED*) “Chance” is therefore a single term designating two diametrically opposite notions: good luck, as well as its exact opposite, disaster; its consequences either imply gain or loss. Etymologically, “disaster” points to the notion of fate, or fortune: Dis-*aster* evokes astrological beliefs in bad stars and ominous

signs. By this definition, chance is the means through which disaster manifests itself. Disaster, then, in Auster's work is an event which impacts time, ruptures history, and changes the course of the characters' lives, as well as that of the narratives themselves.

In the particular instances of chance in *In the Country of Last Things* enumerated earlier, chance is concerned with gain – with that which is fortuitous. Anna Blume happens to encounter incidents or people that prove beneficial to her in one way or another. However, there seem to be still other instances of chance where the occurrence of an event, while allowing the character of the story to gain something, takes away something else from the story itself.

The opening lines of *In the Country of Last Things* tell the reader that the “Country of Last Things” is a place where all things disappear: “These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back.”¹ The use of the simple present tense (“One by one they disappear and never come back”) suggests that it is an observation of a generality, which results only from repetition. Besides, it implies that such an observation is not rooted in individual experience (the experience of a single entity or character – in this case, Anna Blume, who, as the reader later learns, is the referent of the pronoun “she”), but stems from collective experience. In other words, the fictional country of last things, as a whole, functions on the principle of irreversibility of disappearance – this irreversibility is its very law. Thus, the text, from its very beginning, hints at the futility of Anna Blume's quest. She is in search of her brother who has disappeared in the land of inevitable, irreversible disappearance. Essentially, the beginning of the narrative announces its end: Anna Blume will never find her brother. Nevertheless, there are two striking incidents in which the founding law of the fictional country is subverted.

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 1.

The first incident occurs in the wake of the scene in which the pregnant Anna Blume, rather ironically, jumps out of a window in order to save her life, when she realizes that the dubious Henri Dujardin and his cousin run a human slaughterhouse, and do not in fact intend to help her, as she had initially assumed, but rather make her their victim. The only aspect that Anna is able to recall of her jumping out of the window is the fall itself, which she describes as “long enough for [her] to know that once [she] hit the bottom, [she] would be dead.”¹ As luck would have it, a man driving by finds her (“they found me by accident”²). This chance witness to her fall, Mr. Frick (the driver of an ambulance of sorts), who also saves her life, later tells Anna that she did indeed die when she hit the ground: “Mr. Frick believed that I had actually risen from the dead. [...] ‘No sir, miss,’ he would say. ‘You was already in the other world. I seed it with my own eyes. You was dead, and then you come back to life.’”³ Thus Anna is told that her recovery “was less a recovery than a resurrection, an absolute rising up out of nothingness.”⁴ Anna’s disappearance is therefore reversible, betraying the law of the country. Moreover, in undermining the law of the country, Anna undermines the law of the irreversibility of death itself. It should nonetheless be mentioned in passing that unlike herself, her unborn baby dies, never to come back to life. She reappears, but with a difference (without her baby). Her “resurrection” or rebirth coincides with the death of her baby – instead of the baby, it is the mother who is (re)born. The mother and the baby become fused into a single image: the mother is – becomes – the baby, and the one cannot be separated from the other.

The other instance in which disappearance is reversed, is to be observed in the return of Samuel Farr. When, in Anna’s absence, a fire breaks out at the National Library

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 125.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 127.

3 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 133.

4 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 126.

(the home she shared with Samuel Farr), she assumes that Samuel has disappeared permanently, if not succumbed to the disaster: “If he was dead, then I had no right to be alive. And if he was alive, then it was almost certain that I would never see him again.”¹ Yet, many months later, Sam comes, accidentally, as it were, to the Woburn house, just as Anna is “dozing off” at work instead of interviewing the people seeking refuge at the house:

I must have dozed off just then, perhaps for five minutes, perhaps for only an instant or two – I can’t say for sure. All I know is that an infinite distance seemed to lie between that moment and the next, between the moment when I closed my eyes and opened them again. I looked up, and there was Sam, sitting in the chair across from me for the next interview. At first I thought I was still asleep. He’s a figment, I said to myself. He comes from one of those dreams in which you imagine yourself waking up, but the waking is only part of the dream. Then I said to myself: Sam – and immediately understood that it could be no one else. This was Sam, but it was also not Sam. This was Sam in another body, with graying hair and bruises on the side of his face, with black, torn-up fingers and devastated clothes.²

Thus, it would seem that Sam too reverses disappearance, and in so doing, breaks the law that governs the country of last things. However, at first, the certainty of his reappearance is rendered questionable, since Anna experiences it in a dream-like state – his reappearance, or rather Anna’s experience of Sam’s return, is cloaked in the language of illusion, or hallucination (“he’s a figment,” “he comes from one of those dreams”). In this passage, Sam is first presented as an imaginary construct – the product of Anna’s hallucination – which goes on to materialize into the “real” character. The act of hallucinating Sam turns him into the “real” Sam. This goes to show that in the above passage, the role of chance (the chance re-encounter between Sam and Anna) is to blur the boundary between illusion and reality, to enable the slipping from one category of

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 130.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 160.

perception to the other. Reality and illusion become interchangeable. Reality is presented as nothing other than the product of imagination. Sam therefore reappears – with a difference, like Anna – undermining the law of irreversibility of disappearance.

In *In the Country of Last Things*, the two main characters Anna and Sam reverse the permanence of disappearance and return. In this case, chance could be equated with gain or good fortune, but in fact, this fortuitousness goes hand-in-hand with a certain form of violence: the reappearance of these characters disrupts the law of the fictional country, and as a consequence, the country of last things is no longer a country of last things. Chance therefore turns the text against itself. The narrative is no longer one about the irreversibility of disappearance. Chance institutes the loss of permanence.

The chance reappearances entail another loss at the level of the narration. It would be important to begin by noting the fact that Samuel Farr and Anna are the only two characters in *In The Country of Last Things* whose disappearance is reversed. All of the other characters who disappear or die, and who, unlike Sam and Anna, are secondary characters, never return: Anna never succeeds in finding William, so he never reappears in the text; Isabel, Ferdinand and Mr. Frick – all three of them – die and never return. There is, however, another entity that disappears, never to return, and that is the narrator or the narrative voice.

The novel opens with a precarious narrator's voice reporting Anna's words: "These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time. It is all happening too fast now, and I cannot keep up." In the next paragraph, the narrative continues in the first person singular – that is to say, in Anna's written words. The narrator

interrupts Anna's words at two other moments: "This is how I live, her letter continued"¹ and "There are people so thin, she wrote, they are sometimes blown away."² The rest of the narrative then continues in Anna's words, and the narrator – rather, the reporting voice – disappears imperceptibly and irreversibly. The text begins with a distinction between the figure of the writer (whom the reader later identifies as Anna) and the figure of the narrator (the unidentified voice reporting Anna's writing), but this distinction is blurred just as soon as it is presented. The voice of the protagonist engulfs the voice of the narrator, and Anna poses as the narrator of *In the Country of Last Things*. It is Anna's reappearance – her chance "resurrection" – that allows her to write the letter and tell her story. In the manner of the survival of the fittest in the country of last things, the dominant voice of the writer obliterates the already feeble narrative voice and takes over the narration. Anna's good fortune spells the misfortune of the narrative voice. This goes to show that in *In the Country of Last things*, Auster does not present chance as an either/or alternative between fortuitousness and disaster, but rather as their simultaneity. Chance as good fortune is nothing but ill fortune in disguise.

3.4 Potentiality, determinism and fate

In addition to designating a fortunate and unfortunate event, as we have seen thus far, chance can also refer to an occasion or opportunity to (start to) do something. Chance in this case implies possibility, potentiality. In this sense, it can no longer be understood as an event, but rather as the possibility for the occurrence of an event. What is unforeseen is no longer an event, but the circumstances of an event. This makes the notion even more

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 2.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 3.

complex because chance can be seen, simultaneously, as potentiality (opportunity), and its opposite, event (actualization, occurrence).

Yet, Auster finds a way to link up the two senses of chance – chance as an event, an accident – fortunate or unfortunate – and chance as an opportunity. It is in *The Music of Chance* that one may find the most striking instance of such a link up or juxtaposition:

For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out. [...] Three days into the thirteenth month, he met up with the kid who called himself Jackpot. It was 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. Had it occurred at any other moment, it is doubtful that Nashe would have opened his mouth. But because he had already given up, because he figured there was nothing to lose anymore, he saw the stranger as a reprieve, as a last chance to do something for himself before it was too late. And just like that, he went ahead and did it. Without the slightest tremor of fear, Nashe closed his eyes and jumped.¹

In *The Music of Chance*, chance – the “random, accidental encounter” – turns out to be a chance (in the sense of an opportunity) “to do something for himself before it was too late.” Thus, at the beginning of the text, the reader is given to understand that the story is going to be about how Nashe finds an opportunity to save himself – or rather, how Nashe takes a chance encounter with Jack Pozzi (“Jackpot”) and turns it into an opportunity to save himself. Yet, the beginning of the story hints towards Nashe’s fate. Or, as Ilana Shiloh notes in her essay “A Place Both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*,” “the end is already contained in the beginning.”² In saying that “[w]ithout the slightest tremor of fear, Nashe closed his eyes and jumped,” the narrator suggests to the reader that Nashe in fact takes a leap into a situation that will prove dangerous – eventually even fatal – to him. In this manner, in linking up chance as an event and chance as an

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 1.

2 Shiloh, Ilana. “A Place Both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*.” *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 43, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 488-517.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209110>> Web. June 20, 2014.

opportunity or potentiality, Auster presents the notion as intimately linked to – and inevitably leading to – disaster. Chance, as an opportunity, creates a context, a canvas, in which chance, as an event, can happen.

If the notion of chance is inherently ambiguous, it is then little wonder that Nashe's relationship with it would be so riddled with contradictions. At the beginning of the story, Nashe welcomes the benefits that chance bestows upon him. The story begins with Nashe's inheriting a significant sum of money, by chance, from his deceased father: "Then, out of the blue, the lawyer found him and the money fell into his lap. It was a colossal sum – close to two hundred thousand dollars [...]"¹ Instead of feeling grief at the news of the death of this father, it turns out that "Nashe felt little else but joy"² on receiving the sum. His inheritance is the result of loss: the chance, unfortunate event of his father's death, brings him good fortune. Conversely, just like in *In the Country of Last Things*, good fortune in *The Music of Chance* is simply a mask for ill fortune, because "[t]hat was where the roof started to cave in on him."³ As the narrative unfolds, the reader learns that Nashe's chance inheritance turns out to be the agent of his own doom, and each event that follows, takes him a step closer to his seeming death.

The reader is told early on in the story that what Nashe sought most was to be in control of himself, that "that was what he was looking for: to feel that he had taken his life into his own hands,"⁴ and it was driving his car across the American territory that made this possible. His desire for control is also reflected in the moment in the text where he

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 2.

2 *The Music of Chance*, p. 3.

3 *The Music of Chance*, p. 3.

4 *The Music of Chance*, p. 12.

reads a passage from Rousseau's *Confessions*. The passage describes the irrational pact that Rousseau makes with himself:

Just before he fell asleep, he came to the passage in which the author is standing in a forest throwing stones at trees. If I hit that tree with this stone, Rousseau says to himself, then all will go well with my life from now on. He throws the stone and misses. That one didn't count, he says, and so he picks up another stone and moves several yards closer to the tree. He misses again. That one didn't count either, he says, and then he moves several yards closer to the tree. He misses again. That one didn't count either, he says, and then he moves still closer to the tree and finds another stone. Again he misses. That was just the final warm-up toss, he says, it's the next one that really counts. But just to make sure, he walks right up to the tree this time, positioning himself directly in front of the target. He is no more than a foot away from it by now, close enough to touch it with his hand. Then he lobbs the stone squarely against the trunk. Success, he says to himself, I've done it. From this moment on, life will be better for me than ever before.¹

According to this pact, the course of Rousseau's life (that everything goes well with his life) depends on his succeeding at hitting the trunk of a tree by throwing a stone at it from a distance. The entire passage depicts a curious mechanism by which Rousseau is doing exactly what Nashe himself desires to do: to take life into his own hands. The process by which Rousseau achieves this, consists in two steps. First, he ties his entire fate to the outcome of a game, which appears to be largely a game of chance, given his lack of skill. This fallacious substitution, or more precisely this synecdoche (a single random event is made to represent everything that is unknown and unpredictable) is acceptable to Rousseau, as it does not directly shift his fate into the realm of the deterministic. Secondly, Rousseau rigs the game by revising the rules as he goes, allowing himself more tries, until the game ceases to be a game of chance, or even of skill, and becomes a mere deterministic event. Mastering the game fallaciously gives him the illusion of mastering fate.

1 *The Music of Chance*, pp. 48-49.

While this passage would appear, at first glance, to be a mere retelling of Rousseau's original text, Auster's account of the anecdote differs from its original narration in *Les Confessions*:

Un jour, rêvant à ce triste sujet, je m'exerçais machinalement à lancer des pierres contre les troncs des arbres, et cela avec mon adresse ordinaire, c'est-à-dire sans presque en toucher aucun. Tout au milieu de ce bel exercice, je m'avisai de m'en faire une espèce de pronostic pour calmer mon inquiétude. Je me dis : Je m'en vais jeter cette pierre contre l'arbre qui est vis-à-vis de moi : si je le touche, signe de salut ; si je le manque, signe de damnation. Tout en disant ainsi je jette ma pierre d'une main tremblante et avec un horrible battement de cœur, mais si heureusement, qu'elle va frapper au beau milieu de l'arbre; ce qui véritablement n'étoit pas difficile, car j'avois eu soin de le choisir fort gros et fort près. Depuis lors je n'ai plus douté de mon salut.¹

Rousseau's original anecdote mentions only one throw – while in Auster's retelling, several successive failures are mentioned as Rousseau steps closer to the tree. One could simply read here an attempt at dramatizing Rousseau's anecdote, but it might as well be a way for Auster to bend Rousseau's text in order to establish a stronger anti-parallel between Rousseau and Nashe. Nashe's reaction to the passage is that he finds it “amusing,” and a form of “self-deception,” but it ultimately proves to be a foretelling of Nashe's fate. Indeed, Rousseau's succession of unsuccessful throws, in Auster's retelling of the scene, seems to echo Pozzi and Nashe's successive games of poker with Flower and Stone. While Rousseau increasingly rigs the game in his favor, Pozzi and Nashe only increase the stakes. While Rousseau's game culminates in a game in which any factor of chance has been stripped away, the conclusion of Pozzi and Nashe's attempt at conning Flower and Stone is a pure game of chance – simply drawing a card from the deck. Rousseau's game is metaphorical and inconsequential, while Nashe is actually risking his future. Rousseau wins and Nashe loses. Thus, while both Rousseau and Nashe share the

1 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Œuvres de J.J. Rousseau: Les confessions. Tome I*. Paris: E.A. Lequien, 1821. p. 358.

same desire of taking control of their fate, their paths go in exact opposite directions. Nashe literally succeeds in tying his fate to a single random event, not just metaphorically like Rousseau. Auster's reappropriation and transformation of Rousseau's anecdote is thus a way of emphasizing not only Nashe's desire to master fate – to go against chance, wage war against it, eclipse it with the force of his will – but also to tell, in an analeptic manner, the singular way by which he aims to achieve this goal.

What Nashe does is indeed take control of his fate, and he does so first by exercising will, by making decisions, rather than finding himself in situations beyond his control. For instance, he decides how he wants to spend the inherited money, he decides to buy a car, then decides to drive across America in it because, as mentioned earlier, driving gives him a sense of being in control. However, when chance strikes, and he finds himself in situations beyond his control, he resigns himself to thinking of it as inevitable. Like Rousseau who tampers with chance and makes his success in hitting the tree inevitable, Nashe experiences chance solely as inevitability. In other words (and as we are about to see), the only way in which Nashe seems to come to terms with chance is by thinking of it as inevitable, by considering it a realm in which he cannot exert any control. However, even this seeming certainty in Nashe's equating chance with inevitability is undermined, and the reader is given to observe further contradictions in Auster's treatment of chance. Two distinct instances in *The Music of Chance* demonstrate Nashe's ambiguous relationship with chance as inevitability.

The first instance involves Nashe's chance meeting with Fiona,¹ when driving through Berkeley. After receiving the sum of money from his father out of the blue, his

1 "Fiona was a journalist who had once written a feature article about him for the *Globe*, 'A Week in the Life of a Boston Fireman.' It was the usual Sunday supplement claptrap, complete with photos and comments from his friends, but Nashe had been amused by her, had in fact liked her very much, and after

meeting with Fiona marks his second encounter with chance: “a second door unexpectedly opened to him. That was in Berkeley, California, and like most of the things that happened to him that year, it came about purely by chance.”¹ When this meeting results in their going back to her house, their intimacy rapidly escalates:

Within an hour [of their arrival at her house], Nashe had moved next to Fiona on the couch, and not long after that he was putting his hand inside her skirt. There was a strange inevitability to it, he felt, as if their fluke encounter called for an extravagant response, a spirit of anarchy and celebration. They were not creating an event so much as trying to keep up with one, and by the time Nashe wrapped his arms around Fiona’s naked body, his desire for her was so powerful that it was already verging on a feeling of loss – for he knew that he was bound to disappoint her in the end, that sooner or later a moment would come when he would want to be back in the car.²

This passage leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind about Nashe’s inability to deal with chance, his difficulty to accept it. The narrator’s saying that they were “not creating an event so much as trying to keep up with one,” hints at the fact that Nashe sees their “fluke encounter” as an inevitable event, and therefore, for him, the inevitability of the sexual encounter is a direct result of chance’s being an inevitable event. For Nashe, the accident – the chance meeting – calls for an “extravagant” but opposite response: “a spirit of anarchy,” gesturing towards the authority and violence of chance, and “celebration,” suggesting not merely the acknowledgement of the event, but rather – and especially – its acceptance as a source of pleasure. Such a contradictory response seems to be rooted in the ambivalence surrounding the notion of chance itself. Furthermore, in the above passage, Nashe imagines loss as the inevitable result (“he knew that he was *bound to* disappoint her in the end” – emphasis is ours) of the always already inevitable chance – chance essentially being that which is unforeseen and therefore necessarily unavoidable. It is also important

she had been following him around for two or three days, he had sensed that she was beginning to feel attracted to him.” (*The Music of Chance*, p. 13)

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 13.

2 *The Music of Chance*, p. 14.

to note here that Nashe's actions are presented as being divorced from his will. His touching her is not a measure taken by him to satisfy a desire: he is not so much consciously giving in to his impulse as he is acting out of submission to a deterministic force beyond his control. The use of the term "desire" therefore seems fraught with ambiguities. As a slave to chance, with all its unpredictability and its inevitability, Nashe is in no place to desire – it cannot be a possibility for him. "His desire" is not his; it belongs to chance, is mediated through chance, and thus, inevitably "[verges] on a feeling of loss."

Yet, further contradictions are revealed in the relationship between chance and inevitability. This is to be observed at the moment in the text when Nashe and Pozzi (whom he also met by chance) finally set out in Nashe's car to go to Flower and Stone's mansion in Pennsylvania to play the decisive game of poker – the game upon which Nashe's (as well as Pozzi's) fate is contingent. This game of poker is to Nashe what the game of the tree was to Rousseau: if Nashe and Pozzi win this game, then "then all will go well with [their] life from now on."¹ The silence that accompanies their drive to the mansion is disrupted by the narrator's report of Nashe's thoughts and feelings:

Nashe felt certain that he had come to a turning point, that no matter what happened in the game that night, his days on the road had come to an end. The mere fact that he was in the car with Pozzi now seemed to prove the inevitability of that end. Something was finished, and something else was about to begin, and for the moment Nashe was in between, floating in a place that was neither here nor there. He knew that Pozzi stood a good chance of winning, that the odds were in fact better than good, but the thought of winning struck him as too easy, as something that would happen too quickly and naturally to bear any permanent consequences. He therefore kept the possibility of defeat uppermost in his thoughts, telling himself it was always better to prepare for the worst than to be caught by surprise.²

1 To borrow Auster's own description of the passage from Rousseau's *Confessions* quoted before.

2 *The Music of Chance*, p. 54.

In this passage, unlike the previous instance, Nashe imagines a disconnect between chance and inevitability. This disconnect makes way for the possibility of the distinction between chance and fate – fate being that which is inevitable. If in the first instance it was possible to equate chance with fate, now the one seems to be removed from the other. Chance is genuine randomness – recognizing that whatever has happened could have happened differently – whereas fate is inevitability. For Nashe, no chance event (“no matter what happened”) can halt or alter the inevitable end of his life on the road. Indeed, he places chance outside of the realm of the inevitable. Moreover, Nashe’s “telling himself it was always better to prepare for the worst than to be caught by surprise” signals the idea that chance is avoidable or liable to be dismissed. It is possible not to be caught by surprise. If one cannot predict which outcome (out of several) will occur, one can still grasp a sense of determinism and predictability by preparing for all of them. In other words, it is possible to turn chance into something expected (and therefore avoidable). After all, as discussed before, what Nashe desires most is to be able to gain mastery over every aspect of his life.

However, just as soon as it is established that chance can be mastered, it is subverted, and this is once again, typical of the Austerian text where nothing is presented as a certainty and nothing is to be taken for granted:

What would he do if things went badly? How would he act if the money were lost? The strange thing was not that he was able to imagine this possibility but that he could do so with such indifference and detachment, with so little inner pain. It was as if he finally had no part in what was about to happen to him. And if he was no longer involved in his own fate, where was he, then, and what had become of him? Perhaps he had been living in limbo for too long, he thought, and now that he needed to find himself again, there was nothing to catch hold of anymore. Nashe suddenly felt dead inside, as if all his feelings had been used up. He wanted to feel afraid, but not even disaster could terrify him.¹

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 54.

Here, Auster presents a character who is caught up in a struggle between the desire to control his life, his own fate, and master chance on the one hand, and the recognition of his being subjected irreversibly to the violence of chance on the other. Nashe is trapped in a situation from which he cannot escape. He is confined to a life that verges on death (“Nashe suddenly felt dead inside”). More than that, Nashe seems to operate a chiasmus that links up eros (i.e. the force of life) and death drive. As the reader later finds out in the course of the narrative, not only does Nashe lose the game of poker, but winds up owing a significant amount of money to Flower and Stone. Unable to settle the debt, he becomes condemned – much like a prisoner¹ – to a life of relentless and meaningless manual labor, moving heavy stones in order to build a wall, while living in a trailer in a secluded area, surrounded on all sides by impassable barbed-wired fences. Yet, while still being in no position to clear his debt, he ends up, by his own doing (as opposed to by chance), plunging himself deeper and deeper into debt. When he finally is freed from his debt, labor and confinement, and regains control of his life by regaining control of his car,² he uses his newfound freedom to drive himself straight into the arms of death, as it appears. He controls his life, paradoxically, by willingly embracing death:

When he looked at the road again a moment later, he could already see the headlight looming up at him. It seemed to come out of nowhere, a cyclops star hurtling straight for his eyes, and in the sudden panic that engulfed him, his only thought was that this was the last thought he would ever have. There was no time to stop, no time to prevent what was going to happen, and so instead of slamming

1 “I didn’t know we were in prison.” (*The Music of Chance*, 109.) ; “...it meant living in a godforsaken meadow for the next fifty days, busting chops like some convict sentenced to a term at hard labor.” (*The Music of Chance*, p. 116.)

2 Falling short of cash to create an opportunity to turn the losing game around and win it, Nashe offers up his car to Flower and Stone instead of money. Flower and Stone give away the car to their servant, Murks. When he is released from his prisoner’s life in the meadow, he goes with Murks and Murks’s son-in-law to a nearby town to celebrate, and on their way back, he is given the chance to drive what used to be his car. Finally sitting behind the wheel of his own car, Nashe admits to “feeling in absolute control.” (*The Music of Chance*, p. 197.)

his foot on the brakes, he pressed down even harder on the gas [...]. And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore.¹

This passage marks the final stage of the plot and closes the narrative. This scene is articulated around Nashe's final confrontation with chance ("it seemed to come out of nowhere") – this time in the sense of disaster. In spite of being in the grips of panic, Nashe is aware – even certain – of the fact that he has absolutely no control over his fate, no matter how hard he may try to control it. Yet, in another attempt to master chance, he faces it as if it were inevitable, as if it were rooted in his own will ("instead of slamming his foot on the brakes, he pressed down even harder on the gas"). He frees himself from the violence of chance paradoxically by giving in to it. However, Auster once again, as if by force of habit, sows the seeds of uncertainty in the fertile field of his literary text: the reader can only conjecture that the suggested disaster – the accident, the head-on collision – has actually occurred, and results in Nashe's death.

In orchestrating chance as being at once intimately tied with and entirely disconnected from inevitability, Auster brings out further ambiguities that are inherent to the notion. While chance is essentially unforeseeable and therefore unavoidable, Nashe tries to master it, gain control over it, in order to turn it into an avoidable incident. The inability to look at chance as either inevitable or avoidable puts his protagonist in a state of irrevocable in-betweenness: Nashe becomes trapped in a space of indifference that is neither life, nor death. Chance, for Auster, is therefore a notion that is not only rife with uncertainty and ambiguities, but articulates an impossibility. His characters, as we have seen through Nashe, attempt to master fate by seemingly making decisions – by giving in to their will. In Nashe's case, however, taking control of his own life ironically coincides with his dying. Thus, Auster equates chance with disaster, and shows how it inevitably

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 198.

entails loss: loss in the lives of the characters, loss of the characters themselves, and in *The Music of Chance*, loss of the narrative itself. The occurrence of the chance event in the final scene brings the narrative to an abrupt halt – a narrative that chance itself had started.

Chapter 4

Coincidence and repetition

“Like everyone else, he craves a meaning. Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a connection between two fragments he is tempted to look for a meaning in that connection.”¹

Coincidence is commonly seen as being synonymous with chance. At times, Auster himself does not seem to establish a distinction between the two. In an interview published in *The Red Notebook*, Larry McCaffery remarks that “[Auster’s] books seem more fundamentally ‘about’ mystery and coincidence, so that these operate almost as governing principles that are constantly clashing with causality and rationality,” to which Auster replies:

When I talk about coincidence, I’m not referring to a desire to manipulate. There’s a good deal of that in bad eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction: mechanical plot devices, the urge to tie everything up, the happy endings in which everyone turns out to be related to everyone else. No, what I’m talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, I’m talking about the powers of contingency. Our lives don’t really belong to us, you see – they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding. We brush up against these mysteries all the time. The result can be truly terrifying – but it can also be comical.²

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 158.

2 *Collected Prose*, “Two interviews”, p. 540.

The definition of coincidence given here – that of its being unpredictable, is aligned with the definition of chance discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, it would be interesting in our study to resist the interchangeability of these two notions and attempt to look at what makes coincidence a distinct notion. Indeed, a chance event may not always be a coincidence. As discussed in the previous chapter, chance, in Auster’s texts, is to be seen as the occurrence of an unforeseen, disruptive event that impacts time and divides it into before and after. As such, a chance event is a singular event, in both senses of the term – the opposite of plural, and the exceptional. Co-incidence, on the other hand, suggests simultaneity, concurrence, and therefore, plurality of incidents or events. Chance is an unforeseeable event, while coincidence is the conjunction of unforeseeable events, or an unforeseeable conjunction of events that would have appeared predictable or trivial had they been considered separately. When asked about examples of coincidences in the interview with Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory, Auster provides the following examples: “Meeting three people named George on the same day. Or checking into a hotel and being given a room with the same number as your address at home.”¹ Or, as the author-narrator of the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* defines it: “Coincidence: to fall on with; to occupy the same place in time or space.”² What appears to be the essence of coincidence is the notion of sameness, the *co-* that binds events. But this sameness can take a variety of forms: sameness of space, sameness of time (simultaneity), sameness of situations, or the perception of a sameness in characters – the recurrence, the double, the interchangeable. The multiplicity of literary possibilities allowed by coincidences motivate this chapter: we will investigate the various forms taken by coincidences in Auster’s novels, and the way in which they are woven through the temporality of the narrative.

1 *Collected Prose*, “Two interviews”, p. 540.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 174.

4.1 Modalities of the coincidence: interchangeability and simultaneity

Interchangeability, a familiar Austerian concern, is profoundly linked to coincidence. When two characters perform the exact same action at different points of the story, or two characters come to occupy the same place, the conjunction can be construed as a mere coincidence, but can also hint at the presence of interchangeability between the two characters.

Interchangeability implies identity (sameness), and as a consequence, the notion of the double. However, it would be important at this point to distinguish between the notion of interchangeability and the notion of the double. The notion of the double implies the idea of a twin – a mirror image. Interchangeability may not always imply the notion of the double – it points, above all, to the possibility of inversion of roles.¹ Through certain instances in Auster's texts where characters switch roles and trade places with each other, we will examine how the interplay of interchangeability and temporality is used to stage coincidences.

As suggested in the introduction of this chapter, it is a fact well known that Auster plays with coincidences in all of his writings. While his work presents a myriad of instances of coincidences, one novel in particular makes coincidence its very axis: *Leviathan*. *Leviathan* proves to be a rich place to examine coincidence: the book does not simply thematize this notion, but coincidence determines and dictates its narrative structure, and the figure of the writer-narrator Peter Aaron articulates this:

One thing leads to another, and whether I like it or not, I'm as much a part of what happened as anyone else. If not for the breakup of my marriage to Delia Bond, I

1 The notion of the double will be taken up in the third part of this study, in the context of the problematic relationship between the self and the other in Auster's works.

never would have met Maria Turner, and if I hadn't met Maria Turner, I never would have known about Lillian Stern, and if I hadn't known about Lillian Stern, I wouldn't be sitting here writing this book. Each of us is connected to Sachs's death in some way, and it won't be possible for me to tell his story without telling each of our stories at the same time. Everything is connected to everything else, every story overlaps with every other story. Horrible as it is for me to say it, I understand now that I'm the one who brought all of us together. As much as Sachs himself, I'm the place where everything begins.¹

In short, Aaron says, *Leviathan* is born of coincidence. The use of the adverbial expression "at the same time," or even the verb "overlap," hints overtly at the notion of simultaneity, a pre-requisite of coincidence. The repetition of the temporal marker "never" in the conditional formulations in this passage further highlights the importance of timing or how the question of temporality is central to the idea of coincidence. What Aaron seems to tell the reader, above all else, is the fact that in *Leviathan*, it is coincidence that is entirely responsible for Sachs's death – the main disaster² with which the story opens, and around which the narrative is articulated. Furthermore, in the above quoted passage, Aaron seems to announce he is interchangeable with all characters of *Leviathan*, insofar as they all act as catalysts for disaster. In other words, all characters of *Leviathan* are interchangeable as agents of Sachs's death. However, towards the end of the passage, Peter Aaron points to another significant instance of interchangeability. Taking partial responsibility for what happens to Sachs in the end (or at the beginning – considering the fact that *Leviathan*, like most other Austerian novels begins with the end), Aaron presents himself as being interchangeable with Sachs as the source of the disaster, ("As much as Sachs himself, I'm the place where everything begins."). This suggested switching of roles

1 *Leviathan*, p. 57.

2 Aaron – the narrator – explicitly uses the vocabulary of disaster to refer to Sachs's death as well as his preliminary accident, that is to say, his fall (emphases are mine): "We hadn't talked in close to a year, but he had said enough during our last conversation to convince me that he was in deep trouble, rushing headlong toward some dark, unnameable *disaster*." (p. 3); "An overly refined conscience, a predisposition toward guilt in the face of his own desires, led a good man to act in curiously underhanded ways, in ways that compromised his own goodness. This is the nub of the *catastrophe*." (p. 147)

between Aaron and Sachs is played out – if not repeated – in another instance of their interchangeability, elsewhere in the novel.

Aaron fancies Benjamin Sachs's wife, Fanny, from the moment he first lays eyes on her in a graduate class at Columbia,¹ before he finds out she is married to Sachs. Much later, Fanny, aware of Aaron's attraction towards her, invites him over to her apartment for dinner one evening when Sachs is away in California working on the screenplay of his novel *The New Colossus*, and before the end of dinner, Fanny asks Aaron to sleep with her. So begins their love affair that lasts for a few weeks, and over time, sleeping together becomes almost a daily habit: "Ben was still out of town, and except for the nights David was with me, I spent every night at his house, sleeping in his bed and making love to his wife. I took it for granted that I was going to marry Fanny."² Thus, Peter Aaron essentially occupies the place of Ben Sachs – he becomes Ben Sachs, becomes interchangeable with him as Fanny's husband. Ben and Peter could therefore be seen as being engaged in a metaphorical relationship. If a metaphor is essentially a process of substitution based on the criterion of resemblance, then Peter Aaron, in substituting for Ben Sachs, becomes a metaphor for Sachs.

Furthermore, Aaron makes sure to mention again, two pages later, "[t]he affair *coincided*³ exactly with Ben's absence,"⁴ thus highlighting that his substituting Sachs is a coincidence. This in turn underlines the importance of time in this coincidence. The affair occurs at a precise time: during Sachs's absence. In order for it to be a coincidence, it has to occur at this very specific time and no other – coincidence being a matter of timing: an

1 While Peter Aaron is still an undergraduate (p. 47)

2 *Leviathan*, p. 94.

3 Emphasis is ours.

4 *Leviathan*, p. 96.

event whose occurrence is the result of a particular temporal arrangement (of its corresponding event). However, it should be noted that at the root of this coincidence lies another coincidence: that of Peter Aaron and Fanny's meeting.

Having noticed Fanny in and around the Columbia campus, and taking a common course with her on "the history of aesthetics given by the professor in the philosophy department,"¹ Aaron grows attracted to Fanny, but is never able to "muster the courage to talk to her [...], [t]he wedding ring on her left hand [being] partly responsible."² Her being married makes her unattainable, and as a result, their meeting becomes implausible. Despite the implausibility of the event, they cross paths once again, and Aaron describes in detail how he meets her for the first time, about six or seven years later:

I mention these things now because I happened to see her a number of times during that year – without having the slightest idea who she was. [...] When Sachs finally introduced me to her in 1975, we recognized each other immediately. It was an unsettling experience, and it took me several minutes to regain my composure. A mystery from the past had suddenly been solved. Sachs was the missing husband of the woman I had watched attentively six or seven years before. If I had stayed in the neighborhood, it's almost certain that I would have seen him after he was released from prison. But I graduated from college in June, and Sachs didn't come to New York until August. By then, I had already moved out of my apartment and was on my way to Europe.³

First, it should be noted that this passage reveals two coincidences: Peter's meeting Fanny, and Peter's finding out that Fanny's husband is none other than Benjamin Sachs. The abundance of temporal markers in this passage ("now," "that year," "finally," "1975," "immediately," "six or seven years before," "June," "August," among others) emphasizes the two coincidences (the coinciding coincidences) by mapping, as it were, the complete temporal organization of their occurrence. This passage further goes to show that the

1 *Leviathan*, p. 47.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 48.

3 *Leviathan*, pp. 47-48.

various temporal markers serve to accentuate the unlikelihood of the two coincidences. As suggested in the previous chapter, what is striking about chance events, what makes them such fertile narrative elements (as well as what links them up) is the fact that they are, in essence, implausible events, which *happen* to occur. By accumulating many of those events in a short passage, their perceived improbability is combined and magnified, joining them in a single entity which is even more striking. Focusing on this improbability becomes a dramatic maneuver – an instrument for the writer to dramatize the occurrence of coincidences.

In order to render their meeting implausible, time is alternately accelerated and stretched. First, Peter's path is made to cross that of Fanny several times within a year ("I happened to see her a number of times during that year"). Then, after a gap of about six or seven years, he is finally introduced to her in 1975. To dramatize this coincidence, Aaron – the narrator – makes a stark contrast between the six or seven-year gap (further highlighted by the adverb "finally") and the instantaneousness of their recognizing each other ("When Sachs finally introduced me to her in 1975, we recognized each other immediately"). The coincidence of Peter's discovery of the relationship between Ben and Fanny is further magnified through the insistence on the improbability of this discovery. This is done by reversing the situation, through the use of the conditional formulation: "If I had stayed in the neighborhood, it's almost certain that I would have seen him [...]" But Aaron insists that he does not see him, because he *happens* to leave for Europe by then. With great care in his treatment of time, Aaron, the figure of the writer, makes it so that the coincidences boil down to a question of timing.

In the manner of a repetition within *Leviathan* itself, the reader stumbles on another more significant coincidence, that doubles as an instance of interchangeability: the meeting

(rather, the reunion) of Maria Turner and Lillian Stern. Peter's lover, Maria Turner – a visual artist, who undertakes, as if on a whim, a multitude of different, and at times risqué¹ projects one after the other – loses touch with her best friend, Lillian Stern, after high school. Maria then engages herself in a new project, which eventually turns out to be disastrous, and in the course of which, she accidentally reunites with Lillian:

As far as I know, she went too far only once. That was in the spring of 1976, and the ultimate effects of her miscalculation proved to be catastrophic. At least two lives were lost, and even though it took years for that to happen, the connection between the past and the present is inescapable. Maria was the link between Sachs and Lillian Stern, and if not for Maria's habit of courting trouble in whatever form she could find it, Lillian Stern never would have entered the picture. After Maria turned up at Sachs's apartment in 1979, a meeting between Sachs and Lillian Stern became possible. It took several more unlikely twists before that possibility was realized, but each of them can be traced directly back to Maria. Long before any of us knew her, she went out one morning to buy film for her camera, saw a little black address book lying on the ground, and picked it up. That was the event that started the whole miserable story.²

The coincidence of Maria's finding the address book is presented as being the root cause of the "whole miserable story" that eventually ends in Sachs's death. The vocabulary of disaster ("catastrophic") used to describe the effect of Maria's new project, stresses the significance of this dangerous coincidence. Maria's accidental encounter with Lillian, which is not orchestrated until several pages later, is hinted at in this passage. Once again, the reader is given the temporal details of the coincidences enumerated above: precise years are listed, in addition to the time of the day ("morning"). In order to further dramatize the coincidence, a temporal gap is also mentioned ("it took years for that to happen"). Besides, the above passage goes to show that for Peter Aaron, "the connection between the past and the present is inescapable" in a coincidence. In other words, for

1 For instance, one of her impulsively undertaken projects requires her to be a dancer in a bar – "an object, a nameless figure of desire." (*Leviathan*, p. 72). The character of Maria is unambiguously inspired by the contemporary artist Sophie Calle.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 72.

Aaron, a coincidence seems to serve as a link between two irreconcilable temporal categories. Moreover, wanting to insist on the improbability of their meeting, the narrator resorts to the use of the conditional formulation (“if not for Maria’s habit of courting trouble in whatever form she could find it, Lillian Stern never would have entered the picture”). However, in the passage quoted above, the improbability is also made explicit – through the use of the term “unlikely” – thereby insisting on its importance to the notion of coincidence (“It took several more unlikely twists before that possibility was realized”).

As the reader later learns, this coincidental meeting between Maria and Lillian paves the way for their interchangeability: Maria later tells the narrator the story of how upon running into Lillian, she spends the day and most of the night talking with her. At some point during their conversation, Maria mentions her new project concerning the address book to Lillian (who has essentially “turned into a whore.”¹) who entertains the idea of swapping places with Maria. As the narrator, responding to this piece of news, summarizes: “[so] you switched. [...] Lillian talked you into trading places with her.”² Thus Maria and Lillian become substitutes of each other, and it is this very instance of interchangeability that will result in the disastrous death of Benjamin Sachs.

Through these examples taken from *Leviathan*, it can be seen that the relationship between coincidence and interchangeability is a two-way relationship. Because Sachs and Peter Aaron are interchangeable (and engaged in a metaphorical relationship), similarities in the events they experience are perceived as coincidences. Conversely, it is only because Maria and Lillian meet through coincidences that they become interchangeable. In this second case, Lillian and Maria’s decision to engage in a relationship of substitution can be

1 *Leviathan*, p. 82.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 82.

seen as an attempt to infuse meaning in the coincidence of their meeting. It would seem that they couldn't resign themselves to accept the utter randomness of their encounter.

4.2 Repetition, trauma and “interpretosis”

Repetition suggests identity and a dimension of difference: perceiving a repetition is becoming aware of a similarity or sameness between phenomena occurring at different points in time, or in different spaces, or more generally, contexts. Repetition is a significant Austerian concern, and is to be found not only within his narratives, but in his career as a writer, in the form of recurring themes, plots, characters (or their types), concerns – among other things – in various narratives, be it fiction or autobiographies.

More importantly, repetition is one of the possible forms of coincidence. For instance, Auster's example of a coincidence, “[meeting] three people named George on the same day,”¹ is indeed a repetition – although with a dimension of difference (the three people named George being three different people).

We must distinguish three modalities through which characters experience repetition in Auster's novels: a passive or involuntary repetition (in which a character unwillingly experiences the same phenomenon twice), the voluntary repetition (which would be a form of compulsion or mania), and the interpretative repetition (in which two events are wrongly interpreted as a repetition of the same phenomenon, in order to ascribe a specific meaning to their conjunction or coincidence). As François Gavillon remarks: “[...] la coïncidence est à l'exacte croisée d'un monde déterministe et d'un monde chaotique. La répétition de l'événement ou sa superposition avec un autre donne l'intuition d'un ordre, d'une syntaxe fatidique. Mais en même temps, son caractère incongru,

1 *Collected Prose*, “Two interviews”, p. 540.

imprévisible et partant, inexplicable, pointe vers un univers chaotique.”¹ Gavillon highlights that the chaos and disorder are the direct result of the unforeseeability and inexplicability of coincidence, and that repetition is a means by which Auster’s characters tend to make sense of what they cannot understand, thus creating the semblance of an order within disorder. The mechanism at work would thus be that of interpretation.

We will therefore see in this section how the Austerian characters attempt to make sense of coincidence through repetition, and, as a result, how some of the most common forms of repetition related to coincidence are at work in Auster’s texts.

Through the instance of Nashe in *The Music of Chance*, it was shown in the previous chapter how, when faced with the challenges of a chance event, Auster’s characters, at times, are left with no choice but to give in to it – to submit to the occurrence of the event. In Nashe’s case, however, his submitting to chance coincides, paradoxically, with his mastering it. In other instances, when the characters are unable to master the chance occurrence, or succumb to the occurrence of a chance event, they nonetheless attempt to make sense of it. As Debra Shostak, in her essay entitled “In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster’s Narratives of trauma,” puts it: “Auster’s fiction shows its narrators attempting to control the randomness of event, if not in the happening itself, then in their understanding of it. The fiction finally suggests that the narrators must learn that contingency does not *mean* – that loss simply *happens*. Only once they reconcile themselves to this knowledge can they move beyond nostalgic, narcissistic melancholia to return to the historical present.”² Chance events, because they are unforeseeable, and therefore incomprehensible, resist meaning. In effect, they bring about disorder or chaos.

1 Gavillon, François. *Paul Auster, gravité et légèreté de l’écriture*, collection “Interférences”, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000. p. 126.

2 Shostak, Debra. “In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster’s Narratives of Trauma.” *Studies in the Novel* 41.1. Denton: UNT Press, 2009. p. 68.

According to Shostak, what prevents Auster's characters from being in the present is their inability to accept the fact that chance events leave no room for the possibility of meaning – of making sense of the event – and they wind up looking for meaning in chance. Like they do with chance, Auster's characters are also given to trying to make sense of coincidences.

While all of Auster's fictional works deal with this phenomenon to varying degrees, it is made most explicit in two novels in particular: *Oracle Night*, and one of Auster's earlier works, *Leviathan*, in which the entire plot is centered around the main character Benjamin Sachs's seeing meaning in coincidences. In *Oracle Night*, the first instance of this is when Sidney Orr notices, at his friend John Trause's apartment, the same blue Portuguese notebook he had recently bought from M.R. Chang at a store named Paper Palace:

The notebook was closed, lying faceup on a small dictionary, and the moment I bent down to examine it, I saw that it was the exact double of the one lying on my desk at home. For reasons that still baffle me, I became enormously excited by this discovery. What difference did it make what kind of notebook John used? He had lived in Portugal for a couple of years, and no doubt they were a common item over there, available in any run-of-the-mill stationery store. Why shouldn't he be writing in a blue hardbound notebook that had been manufactured in Portugal? No reason, no reason at all – and yet, given that I'd spent several productive hours writing in it earlier that day [...], and given that I'd been thinking about those efforts all through the evening at John's, it hit me as a startling conjunction, a little piece of black magic.¹

Although Sidney Orr makes this discovery by chance, it is an instance of a coincidence, where the repeated element is the blue Portuguese notebook in the present of narration. The sense of improbability is not in the fact of owning a blue notebook, but in the exact similarity (an "exact double") of two events. Sidney's referring to this incident as

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 37.

a “startling conjunction” reinforces the idea of concurrence that is immanent in the notion of conjunction. Moreover, Orr’s description of his experience of the coincidence as being “startling,” and therefore excessive, seems to suggest that the coincidence is a traumatic¹ experience for him. Besides, Orr’s hesitation in the above passage – the illusion of awareness and rationality in the shape of the debate with himself, in which he is trying to convince the reader (rather, convince himself) that blue notebooks are common – serves to magnify a seemingly ordinary occurrence to extraordinary proportions. Added to that, the fact that he makes this coincidence out to be “a little piece of black magic,” not only turns the ordinary incident into a supernatural one, but also highlights Orr’s own paranoia – as if he were expecting to be a victim of an evil outcome. His paranoia is further amplified when, ignoring all discretion, he questions John Trause about what essentially amounts to his intimate belongings² (i.e. the objects on his writing desk): “What do you think that means?”³ Thus the narrator of *Oracle Night* looks for meaning in a coincidence.

This instance, however, is not a singular occurrence in *Oracle Night*, and another one is to be found, embedded in the Flitcraft story Sidney Orr is in the midst of writing – his version of Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. Orr’s protagonist, Nick Bowen (an alter ego, rather “an inversion”⁴ of himself), leaves a message on the answering machine of Rosa Leightman – the fictional granddaughter of the fictional author Sylvie Maxwell, and the object of his affections – in which he repeats Sidney Orr’s search for meaning in an incident: “[...] I’ll give you his number, just in case I’ve checked out before you call. [...]

1 In *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Laplanche and Pontalis define trauma (*traumatisme*) as follows: “En termes économiques, le traumatisme se caractérise par un afflux d’excitations qui est excessif, relativement à la tolérance du sujet et à sa capacité de maîtriser et d’élaborer psychiquement ces excitations.” (p. 499)

2 Orr admits that “A writer’s desk is a holy place, the most private sanctuary in the world, and strangers aren’t allowed to approach it without permission.” (p. 37)

3 *Oracle Night*, p. 39.

4 “As for Bowen, however, I expressly made him someone I was not, an inversion of myself. I am tall, and so I made him short. I have reddish hair, and so I gave him dark brown hair. I wear size eleven shoes, and so I put him in size eight and a half.” (*Oracle Night*, p. 15)

816-765-4321. I'll say it again: 816-765-4321. How odd. I just noticed that the numbers go down in order, one digit at a time. I've never seen a telephone number that did that before. Do you think it means something?" If Orr's fiction is somehow a mirror of his own reality,¹ then his attempt to make sense of a coincidence seems to be elevated to the level of a compulsion – it turns into an urge that cannot be resisted. However, his fiction does not merely mirror his reality. Like Freud's little grandson who invents the game of *Fort/Da* (described and analyzed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) to repeat the trauma and anxiety caused by the departure of his mother in order to master it, Sidney Orr resorts to the creation of fiction in which to repeat the trauma of a coincidence.

If Sidney Orr creates fiction in order to repeat his trauma, his trauma, in turn, feeds his fiction. As the story nears its end, the pace of the narrative accelerates: during a confrontation with the burglar – who turns out to be none other than John Trause's son Jacob – Grace, the narrator's pregnant wife, is attacked by Jacob; the violent attack causes, among other physical injuries, a miscarriage, and she is sent to the hospital. Meanwhile, the narrator's writer friend John Trause dies from "pulmonary embolism."² Thus the narrator is faced with a series of chance events, whose occurrence in a short amount of time, and whose similarity, cause them to be perceived as coincidences. Overwhelmed by them, Sidney's response is to look for meaning in them:

The turmoil of the past days had happened for a reason, and with no facts to support one interpretation or another, I had nothing to guide me but my own instincts and suspicions. There had to be a story behind Grace's dumbfounding shifts of mood, her tears and enigmatic utterances, her disappearance on Wednesday night, her struggle to make up her mind about the baby, and when I sat

1 Sidney Orr overtly claims that his characters are not *ex nihilo* inventions – they are based on his own reality. For instance, he creates Rosa in the image of Grace, his wife: "I decided to give Grace's body to Rosa Leightman – even down to her smallest, most idiosyncratic features, including the childhood scar on her kneecap, her slightly crooked left incisor, and the beauty mark on the right side of her jaw." Orr's fiction could thus be construed as a repetition of his reality.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 196.

down to write that story, it began and ended with Trause. I could have been wrong, of course, but now that the crisis seemed to have passed, I felt strong enough to entertain the darkest, most unsettling possibilities. Imagine this, I said to myself. Imagine this, and then see what comes of it.¹

Like a reader, Sidney Orr attempts to interpret every event that occurs. It is through the act of reading that the production of meaning is possible. However, Orr is not only a reader, but also the writer. His quest for meaning is precisely what leads him to write. In other words, Orr's fiction is born of his repetition compulsion. What also seems to be reinforced in this passage is the idea that writing opens up the possibilities of making sense or producing meaning insofar as it makes reading possible. That is to say, writing fiction consists in the production of signifiers, and these signifiers open up the possibility of signification when they are subjected to the act of reading ("I sat down to write that story [...]. Imagine this, I said to myself. Imagine this, and then see what comes of it").

While Orr in *Oracle Night* repeats his trauma within the realm of the fiction he writes, Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan* adopts different methods. He disappears, reappears, then moves to California to be with Lillian for a while, then goes on to create a series of explosions across several American states. Critics like Debra Shostak (in her essay "In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster's Narratives of Trauma") and Scott A. Dimovitz (in his essay entitled "Portraits in Absentia: Repetition Compulsion and the Postmodern Uncanny in Paul Auster's 'Leviathan'") have discussed in detail Benjamin Sachs's repetition compulsion in *Leviathan*. In our study, we will thus touch on this aspect very briefly, by focusing only on Sachs's immediate response to the accident that the other critical texts do not seem to deal with. The narrative of *Leviathan* indeed hinges on Sachs's "accident"² – his fall from a building:

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 181.

2 *Leviathan*, pp. 118-119.

Agnes Darwin was catching the heel of her shoe and stumbling into Maria from behind. Sachs had loosened his grip from the bar of the railing, and when Maria suddenly crashed into him with a violent forward thrust, his fingers opened and his hands lost contact with the bar. His center of gravity heaved upward, he felt himself pitching out from the building, and an instant later, he was surrounded by nothing but air.¹

This fall is indeed coincidental in that it is the consequence of two distinct events: Sachs's inviting Maria to join him on the fire escape, and Maria's crashing into them. The entire event has both a deterministic component – Sachs's deliberate attempt at seducing Maria – and a random component. Sachs's initial response to the trauma is silence:

Something extraordinary had taken place, and before it lost its force within him, he needed to devote his unstinting attention to it. Hence his silence. It was not a refusal so much as a method, a way of holding onto the horror of that night long enough to make sense of it. To be silent was to enclose himself in contemplation, to relive the moments of his fall again and again, as if he could suspend himself in midair for the rest of time – forever just two inches off the ground, forever waiting for the apocalypse of the last moment.²

Sachs's silence – his absence of speech – is not a loss of language that might result from a traumatic experience. It could also be said that, like “the French writer” (Hugo, we may guess) evoked in *Oracle Night*, whose daughter drowns after he writes a narrative poem about drowning, and who takes a vow of silence and never writes a word after that incident, Sachs's silence is a “refusal to accept the power of random, purely accidental forces that mold our destinies.”³ And indeed, as the reader eventually finds out, Sachs refuses to accept the coincidences for what they are, and is convinced that they are not random and that they have meaning.

1 *Leviathan*, p. 130

2 *Leviathan*, p. 134.

3 *Oracle Night*, p. 188. The narrator Sidney Orr reports the anecdote about the French writer that John had told him, and offers these words as an interpretation of the French writer's silence.

Sachs's silence could be construed in yet another way. Although Sachs resumes talking several days later, and describes his experience of the fall in detail to his friend (the narrator Peter Aaron), his silence is the matrix within which he repeats his fall "again and again." At the same time, in Sachs's particular instance, in order for the repetition to occur, it cannot be symbolized. He tries to make sense of the incident without resorting to language, without attempting to symbolize it. Meaning, in this case, seems to come from outside of language: it seems to come from the realm of imagination, from the repeated illusion of disaster. It should be noted that the disaster – the "apocalypse" – that Sachs relives in the above passage is not the actual fall, or the moment at which his body crashes into the ground, but rather the imminence of the fall. Disaster for Sachs is its imminence. It could be said that what is traumatic for Sachs is not the impact or the contact of the body with the ground, but the anticipation of the contact. Disaster is not an experience of the body or a physical injury, it is a purely psychic process. Besides, the fantasy of "suspend[ing] himself in midair for the rest of time" is a fantasy of the suspension of the present – a fantasy to be caught in a present that never comes to pass. Sachs's repetition of the fall is a repetition of imminence.

As suggested earlier, Sachs refuses to accept his accident as a random, incomprehensible and inexplicable event. This refusal is made possible because the fall is not merely a chance event: it is a coincidence, a conjunction of events, and while some of them are under his control, others are not¹. Detailing the experience of his fall, he tells his friend, the narrator Peter Aaron: "But the fact was that my accident wasn't caused by bad luck. I wasn't just a victim, I was an accomplice, an active partner in everything that happened to me, and I can't ignore that, I have to take some responsibility for the role I

1 A similar pattern of a coincidence blurring the notion of responsibility or guilt can be found in *Smoke*, in the scene in which Thomas 'Rashid' Cole mistakenly causes a leak in the sink under which are stored Auggie's precious cigars.

played.”¹ In blaming himself for his accident, Sachs, like Sidney Orr, ascribes meaning to a coincidence. But the reader is already prepared for this tendency of Sachs to make everything mean, from the beginning of the narrative, and as the narrator gets to know Sachs better, he discovers this tendency. For instance, Sachs tells Peter Aaron that his birth coincided with the Hiroshima bombing (which Sachs’s mother confirms) and that “the doctor had delivered him at the precise moment Fat Man was released from the bowels of the *Enola Gay*, but that always struck [Aaron] as an exaggeration.”² Suspicious of Sachs’s account, the narrator goes on to say:

If Sachs invented the rest, it was no more than a bit of innocent mythologizing on his part. He was a great one for turning facts into metaphors [...]. Sachs loved these ironies, the vast follies and contradictions of history, the way in which facts were constantly turning themselves on their head. By gorging himself on those facts, he was able to read the world as though it were a work of the imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark complex pattern embedded in the real. I could never be quite sure how seriously he took this game, but he played it often, and at times it was almost as if he were unable to stop himself.³

Sachs’s impulse to interpret everything makes him a figure of the reader. Sachs is thus presented as the quintessential reader of literature. This figure of the reader that is present in most of Auster’s works, is once again repeated in *Oracle Night*, as discussed earlier, in the shape of Sidney Orr the writer-narrator who is given to looking for meaning in every instance. Scott A. Dimovitz, in his essay “Portraits in Absentia: Repetition Compulsion and the Postmodern Uncanny in Paul Auster’s ‘Leviathan,’” reads Sachs’s ascription of meaning onto coincidences as being related to the Freudian notion of “the uncanny:” “The projection of meaning onto chance occurrences is another method of mythologizing personal experience into a logical event sequence. This leads to an uncanny

1 *Leviathan*, p. 134.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 26. The act of birth (“delivery”) surprisingly mirrors the act of destruction, which itself is described as an act of excretion: “Fat Man was released from the bowels of the *Enola Gay*.”

3 *Leviathan*, pp. 26-27.

feeling when thinking about the experience. As Auster himself claims, these occurrences can ‘become quite disturbing at times, utterly uncanny.’”¹ However, it could be said that in addition to being a means of “mythologizing personal experience,” this repetition, this constant need to interpret is a form of madness, a disease of reading, that Deleuze and Guattari label “*interprétose*” (“interpretosis”).² “Interpretosis” has been fictionalized in works such as Nabokov’s short story “Signs and Symbols” as “Referential mania.”³ “Interpretosis” is also what drives the quest of Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.⁴ For Sidney Orr, Sachs, most other Austerian characters, and the reader himself, everything is a sign. “*Interprétose*” or “referential mania” is a disease that Auster’s characters share with the reader. Through his characters, Auster thus seems to point out the madness, “mania” or the fundamental neurosis (“*névrose de base*”) that afflicts mankind as a whole and that is immanent in reading.

1 Dimovitz, Scott A. “Portraits in Absentia: Repetition Compulsion and the Postmodern Uncanny in Paul Auster’s ‘Leviathan.’” *Studies in the Novel*, 40.4. Denton: UNT Press, 2008. p. 455.

2 “En vérité, signifiante et interprétose sont les deux maladies de la terre ou de la peau, c’est-à-dire de l’homme, la névrose de base.” Deleuze, G, Guattari, F. *Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Minuit, 1980. p. 144.

3 Although, it should be noted that, unlike “*interprétose*,” “referential mania” suggests a form of paranoia in which “the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy, because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to each other, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing, in some awful way, messages that he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. All around him, there are spies. Some of them are detached observers, like glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others, again (running water, storms), are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him, and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If only the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings, but, alas, it is not! With distance, the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther away, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up, in terms of granite and groaning firs, the ultimate truth of his being.” (Nabokov, Vladimir. “Signs and Symbols.” *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage, 1996. pp. 599-600). The relevance of this passage to the paranoia of Austerian characters has also been noted by François Gavillon in *Paul Auster, gravité et légèreté de l’écriture*, collection “Interférences”, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000. p. 84.

4 “And spent the rest of the night finding the image of the Trystero post horn. In Chinatown, in the dark window of a herbalist, she thought she saw it on a sign among ideographs. But the streetlight was dim. Later, on a sidewalk, she saw two of them in chalk, 20 feet apart. Between them a complicated array of boxes, some with letters, some with numbers. A kids’ game? Places on a map, dates from a secret history?” (Pynchon, T. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Surrey: Vintage, 2000. pp. 80-81.)

Consequently, it could also be said that the madness immanent in reading coincides, for Auster, with the madness immanent in writing. As seen earlier, Sidney Orr resorts to writing fiction in order to create meaning, but in *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster suggests that fiction is already at work in the attempt to look for meaning:

Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a connection between two fragments he is tempted to look for a meaning in that connection. The connection exists. But to give it meaning, to look beyond the bare fact of its existence, would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world, and he knows that it would not stand. At his bravest moments, he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, and then he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees.

In this passage, A., the narrator of “The Book of Memory” defines fiction as “build[ing] an imaginary world inside the real world,” thus linking up reality and fiction. He reminds himself that in order to escape the madness of creating fiction, he needs to resist the urge to interpret, and instead, “to say what he sees.” So as to free itself from madness, writing would have to be a purely empirical activity. But, as the rest of Auster’s first autobiographical text goes to show, the writer-narrator of “The Book of Memory” (like most of Auster’s narrators) cannot seem to break out of the compulsion of interpretation. As soon as he establishes the need to cease interpretation, he starts to interpret what he writes: “A key breaks off in a lock, and something has happened. That is to say, a key has broken off in a lock;” “He wants to say. That is to say, he means.”¹ The repetition of the expression “that is to say” introduces A.’s interpretation. In the second instance, his interpretation is more explicit than the first. Although, in the first instance, he pretends not to interpret by making the statement coincide with its meaning, the term “that is to say” betrays him, and locks him in the prison-cell of interpretation: he is interpreting

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 158.

the statement as being literal. As a result, the vicious cycle of madness in reading and writing perpetuates.

Thus far, we have seen how the Austerian characters do not view coincidences as random occurrences of disaster, but instead as events that always mean something. Because coincidence implies plurality, and more precisely, because a coincidence can be the conjunction of seemingly opposite concepts (a deterministic act and a fortuitous one, as is the case with Sachs's fall in *Leviathan*), it can easily elude meaning, and one can get lost in its interpretation. As a result, these catastrophic coincidences become traumatic experiences that make characters repeat certain patterns in order to master their trauma. We also saw how their repetition compulsion drives these characters beyond the limits of reason into the madness of interpretation. In other words, Auster's characters treat coincidences as signifiers and their repetition compulsion is the process by which they attempt to produce sense, and consequently restore order in the chaos caused by coincidence. This goes to show that one of the most striking forms of repetition in Auster's work appears in the shape of the repeated attempt to produce meaning. Trauma, in Auster's fiction, seems to be born of the experience of a repetition, and is mastered through another experience of repetition.

4.3 Other patterns of repetition: the mirror images of coincidences

The opposite of a coincidence would be a perfectly repeatable and predictable course of events. These events would be voluntarily planned and orchestrated by the characters, as a way of undoing a trauma, in particular, one that is caused by a coincidence. It is thus not surprising to find in Auster's works several occurrences of characters'

grieving or mourning through obsessively experiencing the same event over and over again. These repetitions could be seen as the mirror images of coincidences.

A particularly poignant instance of this phenomenon is to be found in *Oracle Night*. John Trause's brother-in-law Richard (the brother of his late wife, Tina), coincidentally comes across a 3-D viewer one day while looking for something else, decides to put in a picture slide of his deceased family members, and this gesture allows him to revisit the past: "Everyone in them looked alive, brimming with energy, present in the moment, a part of some eternal now that had gone on perpetuating itself for close to thirty years."¹ The 3-D pictures in question, like any photograph, do not so much record a past as they do a present. Nonetheless, this present is lost as soon as it is captured in a photograph. A photograph is therefore a representation of a present. However, for Richard, not only do these pictures record a present – an "eternal now" – but they are even capable of producing it. The picture slide that Richard views is not so much a representation of a past-present as it is its possible recreation. As Trause explains: "[Richard] had the impression that if he'd looked a little longer – just one more moment – they actually would start to move."² The act of looking, in this particular case, is one that potentially reverses death, and brings the deceased back to life. This, however, triggers a repetitive pattern for Richard that results in his eventually experiencing mourning once again:

The viewer was a magic lantern that allowed him to travel through time and visit the dead. He would look at the pictures in the morning before he left for work, and he would look at them in the evening after he came home. Always in the garage, always by himself, always away from his wife and children – obsessively returning to that afternoon in 1953, unable to get enough of it. The spell lasted for two months, and then one morning Richard went into the garage and the viewer didn't work. [...]. It was a catastrophic loss, the cruelest of deprivations. He couldn't even look at the slides by holding them up to the light. Three-D pictures aren't

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 32.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 33.

conventional photographs, and you need the viewer to translate them into coherent images. No viewer, no image. No image, no more time travel into the past. No more time travel, no more joy. Another round of grief, another round of sorrow – as if, after bringing them back to life, he had to bury the dead all over again.¹

The viewer is not only an instrument that unifies the present and the past, but is also one that unites life and death. In reversing temporality, it reverses loss. The death of an object spells the death of Richard's family members. What is more devastating to Richard than the death of his loved ones, is their death for the second time – their death after resurrection. If their actual death is a loss, then their symbolic death is a "catastrophic loss." What leads to their (repeated) death is the lack of image – the impossibility of their representation or recreation – and this, for Richard, seems to be more permanent than the instances of their actual death. Thus, Trause's brother-in-law undergoes "[a]nother round of grief, another round of sorrow." When Trause offers to have the viewer repaired, Richard refuses, and this refusal is born of his desire to stay in the present: "Arlene was getting pretty upset, and I wasn't really paying much attention to the girls. Maybe it's better this way. You have to live in the present, right? The past is the past, and no matter how much time I spend with those pictures, I'm never going to get it back."² By repeatedly viewing the images, Richard was creating and maintaining an attachment to his deceased family members, but when his wife, Arlene, and his daughters come into the picture, they interrupt this narcissistic attachment to his departed loved ones. Indeed, they seem to become substitutes for his loved ones that he has lost, and this appears to prevent him from falling into the abyss of melancholia. Mourning his lost family members thus allows him to "live in the present."

1 *Oracle Night*, pp. 33-34.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 35.

Another instance of such a self-imposed pattern of repetition can be found in *Leviathan*. After Sachs's recovery from his fall, he isolates himself in order to work on his book:

Life had been reduced to its barebones essentials, and he no longer had to question how he spent his time. Every day was more or less a repetition of the day before. Today resembled yesterday, tomorrow would resemble today, and what happened next week would blur into what had happened this week. There was comfort for him in that.¹

The key attributes of a repetition are present here: the experience of the sameness and the passage of time. But this repetition is meticulously planned by Sachs. It is a calculated attempt at eliminating chance and unpredictability. The only way to counterbalance the trauma of his fall is to create an environment in which the cause of his accident, that is to say chance (both as an event and a possibility), is excluded. However, it is later revealed that this attempt ultimately fails, through the occurrence of yet another chance event.

Another pattern that would challenge the very notion of coincidence would be the perceived lack of coincidence: a course of events so devoid of unexpected turns, that, as a whole, it appears improbable. An instance of this Austerian pattern can be found in *Moon Palace*, set off by a story told to M.S. Fogg, by his father, Julian Barber. The story Barber tells him is about how Uncle Victor, not wanting to lose Fogg, never reveals to Julian Barber that Fogg might be Barber's son. M.S. Fogg is told this story after his uncle's death – the occurrence of which had already put him on a trajectory towards melancholia² – and his response is a complex one: of mourning combined with frustration:

1 *Leviathan*, p. 157.

2 M.S. Fogg's melancholia will be discussed in the third part of this study.

This story was one of the last things Barber told me, and it tore me apart to hear it. I understood what Victor had done, and seeing that devotion spelled out for me, I was caught in a surge of sentiment – aching with regret for my uncle, mourning his death all over again. But at the same time I also felt frustration, bitterness over the years that had been lost. For if Victor had answered Barber’s second letter instead of running away, I might have discovered who my father was as far back as 1959. No one was to blame for what happened, but that does not make it any less difficult to accept. It was all a matter of missed connection, bad timing, blundering in the dark. [...]. That’s what the story boils down to, I think. A series of lost chances. All the pieces were there from the beginning, but no one knew how to put them together.¹

Listening to the story produces a “surge of sentiment,” akin to the influx of excessive excitation,² which seems to suggest that the experience of the story is traumatic. This resurgence of trauma or the rekindling of its memory seems to cause the reappearance of mourning. Mourning being itself experienced as a compulsion (and therefore, a repetition), memory thus triggers the repetition of repetitions – not merely their continuation. The story in this case (re)institutes loss that evokes mourning – mourning being, according to Freud in *On Mourning and Melancholia*, a normal response to loss. Fogg’s feeling frustrated, on the other hand is his response to the fact that Victor’s failure to reveal the truth prolonged Fogg’s separation from his father. An interesting phenomenon seems to be at work here. In the case of Sidney Orr (*Oracle Night*) and Benjamin Sachs (*Leviathan*), the occurrence of a coincidence is the cause of their discontent, which drives them to search for meaning in the incident and make sense out of a random, incomprehensible event. In M.S. Fogg’s case, his frustration is provoked by the absence or lack of coincidence (“That’s what the story boils down to, I think. A series of lost chances.”). In other words, a coincidence would have led him to his father as early as 1959. Therefore, alongside the loss of his uncle, M.S. Fogg also mourns the loss of the possibility

1 *Moon Palace*, pp. 242-243.

2 “afflux d’excitations qui est excessif” (Laplanche et Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*, p. 499.)

of coincidence, caused by Uncle Victor's failing to mention Fogg's existence in his letter to Barber.

It should be noted that of all of the Austerian characters, M.S. Fogg in *Moon Palace* is the one who mourns most: the loss of his uncle Victor, whose death he mourns twice (as seen above), his grandfather Thomas Effing, and his father Julian Barber. Thus, Auster presents characters that not only mourn the loss of multiple love objects, but at times, mourn the same loss twice. The mourning of the lost love object coincides with the mourning of lost time, or lost opportunities. In John Trause's brother-in-law's case, it is the loss of an unattainable, irretrievable past ("an anguished soul longing for the unattainable"¹), whereas in the case of M.S. Fogg, it is the loss of an impossible past ("I might have discovered who my father was as far back as 1959"). In repeating mourning, they learn to accept coincidences, and are able let go of the past in order to experience the present, or as Shostak puts it: "When they accept the contingency of experience and engage in the working-through that permits them to gain distance on their own trauma, they make the past *past*."² Indeed, as seen earlier, Richard learns to accept that "[the] past is past." Similarly, *Moon Palace* ends with Marco Stanley Fogg's finding himself in the present that is not overshadowed by the past: "This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins."³ Thus, the end of Fogg's mourning the death of his uncle, grandfather and father, coincides with his rebirth. Mourning death, in his case, seems to itself become an experience of death. Mourning allows him to explore the limits of life, and as a result, life and death not only seem to coexist, but appear to be interchangeable as well.

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 34.

2 Shostak, p. 69; original emphasis.

3 *Moon Palace*, p. 298.

As seen in this chapter, coincidence is a distinct notion from chance, which resonates even more strongly with Auster's poetics. Coincidence is not a mere occurrence, but a pattern unfolding in time. As such, it has a higher potential for dramatization and storytelling, because becoming aware of a coincidence or narrating it can involve a precisely arranged timeline of events. Like the disaster, the coincidence is an exceptional event, whose improbability is magnified by the multiplicity of its components. Coincidence conveys a sense of plurality, and thus, opposite concepts such as determinism and randomness can become entangled in one same moment or space. When Austerian characters find themselves struck by a coincidence, they endlessly shift between the opposites it is made of, and ultimately get lost in a chain of readings and interpretations. Improbable (and thus worth being narrated), traumatic, and requiring a reading: these attributes are also those of the historical event. The coincidence would thus appear to be an equivalent, at the scale of an individual life, of a historical event. How the experience of (f)actual historical events compares to deeply subjective events is the topic of the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Historical time, storytelling and disaster

“War stories. Let your guard down for a moment, and they come rushing in on you,
one by one by one...”¹

Representing history, or historical events of the real world is only one way of representing time in fiction. As we have seen thus far, Auster’s treatment of disaster is carried out through his treatment of temporal notions like imminence, presence, chance and coincidence in his narratives. In other words, in the first four chapters of this first part we have dealt with internal time – time represented within his narratives, within the realm of his writing, as opposed to historical time. Consequently, the question that inevitably arises is: what can be said about external time in Auster’s narratives? How does Auster deal with history, as opposed to his-story²? That is to say, what is the relationship – if there is one – between historical time and narratological time in Auster’s work?

5.1 Auster as a Jewish writer?

Before addressing the question of history as a theme in Auster’s fictional works, we need first to consider one modality through which history and disaster might find their way

¹ *Man in the Dark*, p 119.

² Distinction made by Sophie Vallas in her dissertation, « La voix de l’impossible sujet dans l’œuvre de Paul Auster », p. 74.

in his writing: Auster's being born into a (non-religious)¹ Jewish family only two years after the end of World War II, coupled with the resulting fact that his writing situates itself historically in the post-war period, what could be said of the presence of the Shoah in Auster's novels?² The investigation of this question has led critics like Inge-Birgitte Siegumfeldt to become interested in Auster as a Jewish writer – a writer whose writing is intimately tied to his Jewish identity.

In the part of her dissertation dedicated to the question of historical time in Auster's works, Marie Thévenon also examines in detail how Auster's Jewish identity is revealed in his writings – how he emerges as a Jewish writer. For Thévenon, Auster's Jewishness is to be found above all in the importance he gives in his works to memory, the need to remember, and writing as remembering. “La présence forte du thème du souvenir s'apparente donc à cette identité juive,”³ she concludes. Although the theme of the greatest historical disaster of the mid-twentieth century is present in Auster's works, as Thévenon's work reveals, it is never at the core of the narrative. Unlike Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, or more recently, Jonathan Safran Foer (among many other Jewish-American writers), Auster does not strive to represent the Shoah, nor the history of people directly or indirectly affected by it. Thévenon's observation could therefore be seen as applying to the aesthetic aspect of Auster's writing (Auster as a writer writing within the post-war Jewish aesthetic). While it is true that the need to remember the victims of the Shoah through writing became one of the central concerns of Jewish writers in the twentieth century, the relationship between writing and memory, or writing as a form of remembering is not a

1 “Neither one of your parents came from a religious family,” says the author-narrator of *Report from the Interior* (p. 67).

2 Critics like Jonathan Boulter (the author of *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel*) and Inge-Birgitte Siegumfeldt, to name only two among many others, are significantly invested in the historical concerns of Auster's work.

3 Thévenon, p. 182.

new phenomenon in literature, and can be dated at least as far back as St. Augustine's *Confessions*.¹ The question of memory is also one that concerned Montaigne – one of the writers, if not *the* writer, that, as Auster has repeatedly stated, had the most significant influence on his own concerns and writing(s)². Therefore, although Auster seems to be conforming to a Jewish theme because of his affinity with memory, it would be difficult to establish that his interest in the topic of memory is necessarily a reflection of, or at least related to, his Jewish identity. As Hank Lazer quoting Rothenberg quoting Jabès in “Who or What is a Jewish American Poet, with Specific Reference to David Antin, Charles Bernstein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Jerome Rothenberg” says: “One might be a writer and a Jew, but not a Jewish writer.”³ Indeed, Paul Auster does not emerge as a Jewish-American novelist in the way that Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth or Jonathan Safran Foer – who in representing the Shoah overtly question the Jewish identity in their fiction – do today.

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- 1 In announcing the theme of Chapter IX of Book X of *Confessions*, St. Augustine writes: “Not only things, but also literature and images, are taken from the memory, and are brought forth by the act of remembering,” thus making the relationship between literature or writing and memory explicit. The rest of the short chapter further develops this relationship: “[...] For what is literature, what skill in disputation, whatsoever I know of all the many kinds of questions there are, is so in my memory, as that I have not taken in the image and left the thing without, or that it should have sounded and passed away like a voice imprinted on the ear by that trace, whereby it might be recorded, as though it sounded when it no longer did so; or as an odour while it passes away, and vanishes into wind, affects the sense of smell, whence it conveys the image of itself into the memory, which we realize in recollecting; or like food, which assuredly in the belly hath now no taste, and yet hath a kind of taste in the memory, or like anything that is by touching felt by the body, and which even when removed from us is imagined by the memory. For these things themselves are not put into it, but the images of them only are caught up, with a marvelous quickness, and laid up, as it were, in most wonderful garners, and wonderfully brought forth when we remember.” (*Confessions*)
 - 2 Sophie Vallas, in her essay “‘All the others inside me’ : les enjeux ambigus de la citation dans ‘The Book of Memory’ (*The Invention of Solitude*) de Paul Auster,” mentions the surprising fact that despite Montaigne’s concerns with the question of memory, he is never mentioned in Auster’s “The Book of Memory” which, while dealing with memory itself, cites other authors that are also concerned with the topic: “Auster est un grand lecteur de Montaigne (bizarrement absent du (*Book of Memory*)).”
 - 3 The full quote reads as follows: “‘One might be a writer and a Jew, but not a Jewish writer. This is a formulation from Edmund Jabès, said in conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop, and told to me by Waldrop in conversation.’” Lazer, Hank. “Who or What is a Jewish American Poet, with Specific Reference to David Antin, Charles Bernstein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Jerome Rothenberg.” *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*. Ed. Miller, Stephen P., and Morris, Daniel. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010. p. 20.

Dennis Barone fleetingly evokes the problematic identity of Auster as a Jewish writer in his introduction to *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. Comparing Auster to his contemporary Roth, Barone writes:

It is interesting to note that while Auster does not provide an explicit centrality for Judaism in his work, the Jewish tradition is ever present. Auster is not Philip Roth and yet in a metaphoric manner Auster asks questions similar to those Roth probes in a more explicit way. Sometimes Judaism makes a surprising, sudden, and important appearance. In *In the Country of Last Things*, when Anna Blume enters the library she encounters a group of Jewish scholars. ‘I’m Jewish, too,’ she blurts out.¹

The Jewish tradition may certainly be present in Auster’s works, but whether it is “ever present,” is debatable. The novel *In the Country of Last Things* is premised on disappearance. The titular fictional country is one where “one by one [things] disappear and never come back,” things referring not only to objects, but people as well. In other words, the country of last things may be seen as a country struck by an unnamed disaster, the consequence of which is disappearance. This premise may therefore seem to be reminiscent of (without explicitly evoking) the disaster of the Shoah that led to the death (and as a result, the disappearance²) of Jews. During the Shoah, the fate of Jews was disappearance: be it disappearance through death, or conversely, disappearance in order to escape death. Identifying herself as Jewish in a country where everything (especially people: for instance, Anna Blume’s brother, William Blume – the object of Anna’s quest) disappears may therefore seem striking. As if to insist on the link between the country of last things and the Shoah, as well as her Jewish identity, Anna says, recalling her conversation with the Rabbi (who is part of the group of Jewish scholars Barone mentions) says: “Every Jew, [the Rabbi] said, believes that he belongs to the last generation of Jews.

1 Barone, p. 23.

2 It is interesting to note that unlike the English word “disappearance”, the French word “*disparition*” commonly signifies death.

We are always at the end, always standing on the brink of the last moment, and why should we expect things to be any different now? Perhaps I remember those words so well because I never saw him again after that conversation.”¹ In this particular instance of Auster’s fiction, Jews are presented as being subjected to the disastrous fate of disappearance. However, the Rabbi’s disappearance has little to do with his being Jewish. When Anna goes looking for the Rabbi in the library, Henri Dujardin, who had taken the Rabbi’s place in the library, informs her: “The Jews cleared out two days ago [...]. The Jansenists are going tomorrow, and the Jesuits are due to leave on Monday. Don’t you know anything?” When Anna responds that she “[doesn’t] have the slightest idea what [he’s] talking about,” Dujardin explains: “The new laws. Religious groups have lost their academy status.” In this particular instance, the Jews are almost interchangeable with the Jansenists and the Jesuits: the Jews in the country of last things do not so much represent a people as they do a religious category. They disappear not because they are singularly Jewish, but because they are a “religious group,” and as a religious group in the fictional country of last things, they are no different from the Jansenists or the Jesuits: they are all unified in their fate.

Anna, who, as Barone points out emphatically claims that she is Jewish, is not forced to disappear, like the Rabbi. In fact, she goes on to state: “In the end, Sam and I never suffered from these laws,”² thus confirming that the evictions of the religious groups were not focused on the Jews alone. In spite of being Jewish, and therefore “always standing on the brink of the last moment,” she escapes the fate of disappearance. If she were to disappear³ in the country of last things, it would be due to her being subjected, like

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 112.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 113.

3 There is no precise indication in *In the Country of Last Things* that Anna finds her way home from the fictional country. The novel ends with the possibility of her return, but uncertainty prevails over any

everyone or everything else, to the law of that country – the law according to which everyone or everything disappears never to come back – rather than her being Jewish. As she writes: “You see what things are like in this country. Everything disappears, people just as surely as objects, the living along with the dead. I mourned the loss of my friend, felt pulverized by the sheer weight of it. There was not even the certainty of death to console me – nothing more than a kind of blank, a ravening null.”¹ In Anna’s mourning, the Rabbi is no longer the Jewish scholar, but simply a friend – Anna mourns the loss of her friend, rather than the loss of her Jewish friend. Instead of confirming his Jewish identity, the Rabbi’s disappearance robs him of this very identity, and confers on him the final identity of being a friend.

Although the above instance is particular to this novel, it nonetheless goes to show, that Judaism or the Jewish identity is not a central concern in Auster’s writing.² Moreover, historical time is subordinate to narrative time in Auster’s works, and the characters operate within histories (collective and personal) that are internal to their respective narratives.

possibility: “Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing” (p. 188).

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 114.

2 There are two instances in Auster’s work where the Jewish identity of the characters – though not insisted upon – impacts the unfolding of the narrative. The first instance is Anna Blume’s identifying herself as a Jew that leads her to find Samuel Farr, the journalist who goes to the country of last things to replace Anna’s missing journalist brother, William. As Norman Finkelstein observes in his essay “In the Realm of the Naked Eye” published in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (p. 51): “Anna’s sudden admission of her hitherto unrevealed Jewish origins is due to the instinctive trust she puts in the rabbi, for he reminded me of how things had been when I was very young, back in the dark ages when I still believed in what fathers and teachers said to me.” This almost miraculous sense of connection in a world that is literally falling apart leads to a major turning point in the narrative, since it is with the rabbi’s help that Anna meets her lover Samuel Farr, a colleague of her brother for whom she is searching.” The second instance of the effect of a character’s Jewish identity on the course of the narrative is to be observed in *The Book of Illusions*, in relation to the speculated Jewish identity of Hector Mann (the object of the narrator David Zimmer’s quest). Thévenon notes in her thesis (p. 187): “La judéité hypothétique de Hector Mann est donc interprétée par Zimmer comme une cause possible de son meurtre hypothétique, ce qui montre assez le poids de cette identité.”

The logical question that may arise at this point is: if Auster is a writer, and a Jew (even Jewish-American) what keeps him from being a Jewish (or Jewish-American) writer? One way, among many others, might be to look at what he says about his Jewish identity. Explicit occurrences of this question are quite rare. Whereas Auster provides some insight into his Jewish ancestry in his first (autobiographical) work – in the first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, “Portrait of an Invisible Man” – without focusing entirely on this aspect, it is in his most recent (autobiographical) work – *Report from the Interior* – that he takes up, once again in passing, but at the same time, explicitly, the question of his Jewish identity. Speaking of himself in the second person “you,” Auster writes:

You can't remember the precise moment when you understood that you were a Jew. It seems to you that it came sometime after you were old enough to identify yourself as an American, but you could be wrong, it could be that it was a part of you from the very beginning. Neither one of your parents came from a religious family. There were no rituals practiced in the household, no Sabbath meals on Friday night, no lighting of candles, no trips to the synagogue on the high holy days, let alone on any Friday night or Saturday morning of the year, and not a single word of Hebrew was uttered in your presence. [...] [J]ust one serious rite that you took part in, which occurred when you were eight days old, far too early for you to remember anything about it, the standard circumcision ceremony, or bris, when the foreskin of your penis was lopped off by a fastidiously sharpened knife in order to seal the covenant between your newborn self and the God of your ancestors. For all their indifference to the particulars of their faith, your parents nevertheless considered themselves Jews, called themselves Jews [...]. No, your parents stood firm and never questioned who they were, but in the early years of your childhood, they had nothing to offer you on the subject of your religion or background. They were simply Americans who happened to be Jews [...].¹

The only marker of his Jewish identity is the “standard” corporeal one: his circumcision. However, this part of his identity is lost to time – it is impossible to recall the particular instance of the religious ceremony. Therefore, his being a Jew as a result of his circumcision can be established only through reconstruction – perhaps as fiction, as a story

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 67-68.

narrated to him by his parents. Being circumcised, for Auster, does not seem to be enough to consider himself Jewish. The author-narrator's admitting to hesitating about the moment at which he began to identify himself as a Jew, coupled with the fact that his parents were not religious, did not practice Judaism and did not raise their son as a Jew (at least not until he was about nine or ten years old,¹) suggests that Auster views his Jewish identity as a socio-cultural construct, independent of his body. He identifies himself first as an American – being a Jew seems subordinate to his American identity. Auster's Jewish identity was largely (if not entirely) absent in his early childhood. In other words, Auster was not born a Jew; he became a Jew (at a later point in his life). Moreover, being a Jew is presented as a mere coincidence ("There were simply Americans who *happened* to be Jews;" our emphasis).

Auster goes even further in removing himself (his young self) from his Jewish background, however, just as soon as he does this, he reaffirms his identity as a Jew:

[I]n your mind the notion of Judaism was above all associated with foreignness, as embodied in your grandmother, for example, your father's mother, an alien presence who still spoke and read mostly in Yiddish, whose English was nearly incomprehensible to you because of her heavy accent, and then there was the man who turned up occasionally at your mothers' parents' apartment in New York, a relative of some kind by the name of Joseph Stavsky [...] [y]our mother told you that cousin Joseph had come to America after the war with help from her parents, that back in Poland, he had been married and the father of twin girls, but his wife and daughters had all been murdered in Auschwitz, and he alone had survived [...]. The war had been over for some years by then, but the war was still present, still hovering around you and everyone you knew, manifested not only in the war games you played with your friends but in the words spoken in the households of your family [...]. [I]t wasn't long before you understood what the Nazis had done to the Jews, to Joseph Stavsky's wife and daughters, for instance, to members of your own family for the sole reason that they were Jews, and now that you had fully grasped the fact that you yourself were a Jew, the Nazis were no longer just the enemy of the American army, they were the incarnation of a monstrous evil, an

1 Auster explains later in *Report from the Interior* that when he entered the fourth grade, he also entered Hebrew School. (p. 74)

anti-human force of global destruction, and even though the Nazis had been defeated [...], they lived on in your imagination [...].¹

What is at stake in this particular fragment of *Report from the Interior* is Auster's Jewish identity: he does not seek to narratively represent the Shoah. What is most striking in this passage is that it reveals a sudden, unforeseeable shift of Auster's Jewish non-identity to his confirming his Jewish identity. At first, the narrator distances himself from Judaism: in relating it to "foreignness," he presents it as being outside of himself. Then, suddenly, through the story his mother tells him about Joseph Stavsky, he becomes aware of himself as a Jew. If his physical (corporeal) entrance into Judaism is through the instance of circumcision, his historical, and above all cultural, entrance into Judaism is through fiction – through the telling of stories. Besides, if the war continues to prevail even past its end, it is through fiction and language (storytelling) – the war games being the product of the children's fertile imagination and therefore essentially fiction(al), and the "words spoken in the households of your family" being essentially a form of storytelling, such as that of Joseph Stavsky. As if to emphasize the role of fiction, Auster states that the Nazis, despite their defeat, continued to exist in his imagination. While this may be construed as suggesting the importance of remembrance in the post-Shoah Jewish tradition in writing, the above passage seems to insist primarily on the construction of Auster's Jewish identity: his identity as a Jew is born of and determined by fiction; it first emerges as a fictional construct. Soon after that, an attempt is made to reinforce it through attending Hebrew school:

[In] the same September you entered the fourth grade, you also entered Hebrew school, which meant going to the synagogue to attend classes [...]. There were a thousand other things you would rather have been doing, but three times a week over the course of four long years you reluctantly dragged yourself into that penitentiary of boredom, hating every moment of your imprisonment, slowly

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 68-69.

learning the rudiments of Hebrew, studying the principal stories of the Old Testament, most of which horrified you to the core [...], all of which confirmed your low opinion of God, who by turns came across to you as an angry and demented psychopath, a petulant child, and a wrathful murdering criminal [...]. To make matters worse, you were stuck in a class made up entirely of boys, most of whom had even less interest in being there than you did, who looked upon this forced extra schooling as unjust punishment for the sin of merely being alive, fifteen or twenty Jewish boys with ants in their pants and an insurrectionist contempt for every word spoken by the teacher, an assistant rabbi with the unfortunate name of Fish [...]. Poor Rabbi Fish. He had been thrown into a room with a pack of wild Indians, and three times a week he was scalped.¹

The experience of Hebrew school is explicitly compared to the experience of imprisonment. What is intended to help shape and reinforce his Jewish identity (in fact, not only Auster's identity alone, but also that of his peers at the Hebrew School), winds up estranging him even further: Auster comes to reject the material instructed to him, and the religious aspect of his Jewish identity is subjected to ridicule. The experience removes him and his peers from Judaism to such an extent that they take on an entirely different identity: "wild Indians." In other words, Hebrew school turns the young Jewish boys into native Americans. At the same time, the category of "Indians" does not seem to be an arbitrary choice. Indeed, a parallel may be drawn between the experience of the Indians and that of the Jews: "the Indians [...] had been chased off their lands and massacred,"² just like the Jews would be in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, his description of God as a "demented psychopath, a petulant child, and a wrathful murdering criminal" ascribes to God the image of a tyrant who delivers "unjust punishment for the sin of merely being alive." It may not be far-fetched to find a resemblance between this hyperbolic description of his experience and his earlier description of the Shoah: "you understood what the Nazis had done to the Jews, to Joseph Stavsky's wife and daughters, for instance, to members of

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 74-75.

2 *Report from the Interior*, p. 73.

your own family for the sole reason that they were Jews [...].”¹ What is implied here is that the Nazis inflicted “unjust punishment for the sin of merely being alive.” When the historical event of the Shoah finally makes its way more explicitly into Auster’s writing (in *Report from the Interior*), it is made to coincide with the mockery and ridicule towards the Jewish religion, as the above-quoted passage highlights. It appears ironical that the Hebrew school program that is meant to firmly establish his Jewish identity is experienced as a disaster, and not just any disaster, but one that is specific to the Jewish people. This seemingly backhanded approach to defining the Jewish identity could be explained by what Auster says just before he begins his description of the Hebrew school experience: “The resurgence of Jewish life in postwar America was a direct result of the death camps [...].”² The reinforcement of the Jewish identity is possible only as a result of the Shoah.

While this experience may have contributed to his ability to identify himself more and more as a Jew, it enabled him, above all else, to become more sensitive towards “outcasts:”

Your sympathies turned toward the outcasts, the despised and mistreated ones, the Indians who had been chased off their lands and massacred, the Africans who had been shipped over here in chains [...]. There were few opportunities to take a stand, but you did what you could do whenever an occasion presented itself, you fought back when the tough older boys in town called you Jewboy and Jew shit, and you refused to take part in Christmas celebrations at school, to sing Christmas carols at the annual holiday assembly, and therefore the teachers allowed you to stay alone in the room when the rest of the class tromped off to the auditorium to rehearse with the other classes in your grade. The sudden silence that surrounded you as you sat at your desk [...] as you read your Poe and Stevenson and Conan Doyle, a self-declared outcast, stubbornly holding your ground, but proud, nevertheless proud in your stubbornness, in your refusal to pretend to be someone you were not.³

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 69.

2 *Report from the Interior*, p. 74.

3 *Report from the Interior*, p. 73.

In his sympathizing with the “outcasts,” he seems to be placing the Jewish experience of the Shoah on the same plane as the experience of the Indian massacres and that of the African slaves, thereby suggesting the universality of catastrophe. In other words, although the three segments of history do not coincide in time, they are unified under the sign of disaster. The young Auster chooses to manifest his Judaism through his rejection of Christianity, through his refusal to participate in Christmas celebrations. In this sense, the singularity of his Jewish identity is defined negatively, and established through a differential relationship with its other: Christianity. However, in Auster’s case, such a differential definition does not seem to assert his Judaism as much as confirm his non-Christianity. Indeed, the pride he claims to feel is not tied to his Jewish identity, but rather in his staunch refusal to accept what he is not – he takes pride in his being an outcast. Auster deliberately eschews categorization – his early works blurred the line between poetry and prose, or autobiography and fiction, and he consistently produced works that defied the very notion of genre. The “Jewish writer” denomination would contradict this singularity. The identity constructed in his autobiographical works is primarily that of an outcast. It just so happens that his being an outcast coincides with his being a Jew. Auster’s Jewishness is thus conceived as a negative image, as something that exists by default, through the absence of any deliberate choice or possibility of choice. It could thus be experienced, in his writings, only through the absence of themes and figures characteristic of other religions. This is indeed partly true in Auster’s *œuvre*, in which tropes typically associated with Christianity – such as sin, redemption, the body as a site of the forbidden, the category of the evil, or even the Apocalypse¹ – are strikingly absent, in spite of their being associated with the occurrence of the disaster. *Leviathan* might appear as an

1 In the American literary tradition, such tropes may be found most prominently in, for instance, the works of William Faulkner.

exception – Sachs’s relationship with Lillian could be read as an attempt at redeeming himself. Yet, this attempt fails and winds up in his disastrous death.

Thus, Auster’s Jewish identity is once again presented as a coincidence. More precisely, being born a Jew is a coincidence, and Auster seems to highlight this. He enters into Judaism through fiction, and views his identity as a fictional construct. Although his identity is related to fiction, it does not inform his fiction. The themes and concerns that seem to strike readers and critics as belonging to the post-war Jewish aesthetic or Jewish tradition in Auster’s writings could also be seen as mere coincidences. It therefore appears difficult to place Auster’s work under the sign of Jewish writing. The catastrophes and disasters represented in his works are, for the most part, specific to the texts in which they occur, and do not always or necessarily draw from the Shoah.

5.2 Fictionalizing history

Many critics have dealt exhaustively with the representation of historical events in Auster’s writings, of how the personal history of Auster’s characters is influenced by the collective history of the real world. Marie Thévenon, in her recent thesis offers a comprehensive study on the confluence of what she calls “*petite histoire*” and “*Grande Histoire*,” in which she explains in detail, among other things, how Auster’s historical concerns shift as his career unfolds. According to her, Auster’s earliest writings testify to a strong preoccupation with the author’s own personal history, and his later works reveal how, as time unfolds, he becomes more and more interested in collective history.¹ This is

1 “Nous assistons ainsi à une évolution chez notre auteur qui, d’abord critique des faits de la Seconde Guerre mondiale et défenseur de ses origines juives, choisit plus tard de s’engager dans un combat politique plus ancré dans l’Histoire de son époque, et résolument tourné vers l’avenir. De la même manière que ses personnages sortent progressivement de l’espace intérieur et se déplacent vers un espace extérieur, nous voyons ici un changement d’horizon chez notre auteur qui, sortant d’un certain solipsisme axé sur son propre passé, choisit de s’engager dans le monde en s’intéressant à l’Histoire de tous. Histoire

especially resonant in the context of one of Auster's post September eleven works, *Man in the Dark*.

Man in the Dark presents its protagonist, the old and ailing August Brill, lying in bed, inventing stories in the silence of the night. But it is also a silence of grief that has been brought on by the war in Iraq: the reader learns in the frame tale that his granddaughter Katya's companion Titus has been abducted and brutally murdered on his way to Baghdad. In the story he imagines, his character, Owen Brick, finds himself in an alternate America that he fails to recognize. Indeed, Brill imagines his character in an alternate reality – an alternate history – where “September eleventh” has never happened,¹ but in which a civil war is raging. Brill's imagining an alternate America that has never experienced the September eleven attacks, and is therefore not engaged in a war against Iraq, but is experiencing, instead, a civil war – an alternate America at war with itself – seems to suggest that for him, America might be playing out its internal conflict in the guise of a war with Iraq. We have not entirely left the interior space – even when it comes to history, the conflict with the self is privileged over the conflict with the other(s).

However, Brill's story about Owen Brick eventually comes to an end with an explosion that strikes out of the blue:

The idle thoughts of an insomniac, searching the cupboards for a clean glass and a bottle of scotch: the endless banalities that flit through the mind as one notion mutates into the next. So it goes with all of us, young and old, rich and poor, and then an unexpected event comes crashing down on us to jolt us out of our torpor.

et histoire se rejoignent donc dans les romans de Paul Auster. Tout au long de l'œuvre de cet auteur, certaines grandes dates historiques viennent coïncider avec des dates beaucoup plus “personnelles” qui concernent seulement la sphère intime de certains personnages.” (Thévenon, p. 220)

- 1 Lost and utterly famished in this unrecognizable America, Brick chances upon a diner. In an attempt to learn about the reality in which he finds himself, he asks the waitress (Molly Wald) questions about the history of his unknown place: “Now, if I said the words *September eleventh* to you, would they have any special meaning? [...] And the *World Trade Center*?” (p. 31; original emphasis) When Molly answers that they're still standing, Brick learns that he is in a uchronic reality where “September eleventh” has never happened.

Brick hears the low-flying planes in the distance, then the noise of a helicopter engine, and an instant after that, the keening blast of an explosion. [...]

He runs outside onto the lawn [...]. A contingent of Federal troops had massed in the middle of the street, fifty or sixty helmeted men, all of them armed with machine guns. [...] The first bullet hits him in the leg, and he falls down [...]. [A] second bullet goes straight through his right eye and out the back of his head. And that is the end of Owen Brick, who leaves the world in silence, with no chance to say a last word or think a last thought.

[...] And the war goes on.¹

This passage, while insisting on the unforeseeable nature of disaster – an event that strikes out of nowhere – also reveals its particularities: disaster interrupts the rhythm of routine, of ordinary life (“endless banalities”), and unites humanity by affecting both “young and old, rich and poor.” Whether the disaster occurs in the context of a domestic or an international conflict, the senseless reality of random, meaningless deaths caused by it is universal.

Besides the September eleven attacks in *Man in the Dark*, few historical events are recounted or fictionalized in Auster’s novels. Ripples of the 2008 credit crunch can be observed in *Sunset Park* – in which the protagonist, Miles, is a member of a crew cleaning up houses abandoned by their inhabitants who were unable to pay their mortgage, and ends up joining a group of squatters due to economic hardships. As sudden and brutal as it was, the disaster of the economic collapse belongs to the past when the narration begins, and the narrative would not have travelled a much different path had it taken place a few years earlier – the story just *happens* to take place in this context. Another weak historical connection in Auster’s fiction is the resemblance between the character of Dimaggio (and to some extent his double, Sachs) from *Leviathan* and Ted Kaczynski, the “Unabomber” responsible for a series of bombings between 1978 and 1995: Like Dimaggio, he is an

1 *Man in the Dark*, p. 117-118.

academic trained at Berkeley. Like Sachs, he has retraced the steps of Thoreau through a retreat in a cabin. All of them have transformed their fascination for anarchism into a form of terrorism. However, the terrorist acts narrated in *Leviathan* are benign. The only explosion that kills, and that is narratively treated as a disaster is the one that kills Sachs – as if to draw the attention of the reader away from the horror of the act of terrorism itself, and to re-focus it on the personal history of the terrorist, since the central disaster of *Leviathan*, Sachs’s fall, belongs indeed to the personal sphere.

Thus, real-world disasters of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are rarely an inspiration for Auster’s fiction. Not only does Auster not seem to share the concerns of contemporary Jewish writers, but he also seems to be removed from the other contemporary non-Jewish writers who are concerned with representing other disasters of the real world, such as the September eleven attacks. As Dennis Barone, comparing Auster to his contemporary DeLillo, puts it: “Most of all [...], DeLillo’s novels are concerned with actual events of the world today, are concerned with what Auster calls ‘the sociological moment’ [...] whereas at the center of Auster’s writing is a ‘preoccupation with the possibilities of *telling*, of making a de facto ‘reality’ which can meld with the reality we otherwise know [...].”¹ In other words, instead of focusing on historical time or the collective history of a society, Auster’s writing is articulated around storytelling, and as a consequence, it focuses, for the most part, on the realities or the histories within which his characters are born and exist. It is therefore not surprising to observe that in Auster’s works, the most prominent chronology is the one implied by storytelling.

1 Barone, p. 11 (original emphasis).

5.3 Storytelling

Storytelling, for Auster, is related to the notion of end. As discussed briefly in relation to the notion of imminence¹, storytelling is a means of delaying the end in Auster's works – the end of life, the end of the world, as well as the end of the book. The figure of Scheherazade – whose storytelling not only delays the disaster of her murder, but frees her completely from its threat when she is made the queen – launches Auster's career as well as his work. The second section of *The Invention of Solitude*, "The Book of Memory," inaugurates Auster's career-long preoccupation with storytelling. Having attempted to tell the story of his (then) recently-deceased father's life in the previous section "Portrait of an Invisible Man," in order to prevent his life from "vanish[ing] along with him,"² Auster finds himself questioning the role and stakes of the art of storytelling in the face of disaster. Invoking Scheherazade – the muse of storytellers³ – and commenting on passages from *Thousand and One Nights*, the narrator A., incarnating the author, opens the subsection "The Invention of solitude. Or stories of life and death" with the notion of the end: "The story begins with the end. Speak or die. And for as long as you go on speaking, you will not die. The story begins with death."⁴ In announcing the opening of *Thousand and One Nights*, Auster, in a metafictional maneuver, is also commenting on his own work-in-progress, since the story of *The Invention of Solitude* starts with the death of his father. The invocation of Scheherazade, however, serves not only to establish the relationship between storytelling and the notion of the end, but also gestures towards its relationship with a

1 We looked at the similarities and differences between Scheherazade and two Austerian characters: Graf from *Travels in the Scriptorium*, and Thomas Effing from *Moon Palace*.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

3 John Barth, Auster's contemporary (and with whom he shares the preoccupation for metafiction and storytelling, if not much else), often presents incarnations of his muse Scheherazade as a character in his novels. *Chimera* (where she appears as herself) and *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (where Scheherazade is embodied as *WYSIWYG*), are two works that are explicit instances of the embodiment of Scheherazade in Barth's works.

4 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 160.

particular modality of the end: disaster. Quoting directly from *Thousand and One Nights* the passages in which Scheherazade begs to be married to King Shahryar in order to alter the disastrous fate of the women of the kingdom, Auster writes:

‘Marry me to this king, for either I will be the means of the deliverance of the daughters of the Muslims from slaughter, or I will die and perish as others have perished.’ She goes off to sleep with the king and puts her plan into action: ‘to tell delightful stories to pass away the watches of our night...; it shall be the means of my deliverance and the ridding of the folk of this calamity, and by it I will turn the king from his custom.’

The king agrees to listen to her. She begins her story, and what she tells is a story about story telling, a story within which are several stories, each one, in itself, about storytelling – by means of which a man is saved from death.¹

For Scheherazade, telling stories is a means to prevent a disaster (“calamity”) akin to the Shoah – the destruction of the “daughters of Muslims” in the kingdom being comparable to that of the Jews. In order to eliminate one form of repetition (the king’s murderous “custom”), Scheherazade proposes another repetition (telling stories, night after night) and this superposition of repetitions – which itself is a modality of time – counters disaster.

In Auster’s novels, Scheherazade appears as a recurring figure, and seems to be incarnated in several characters, including Graf and Thomas Effing (as we have already seen), and the premise of the *Arabian Nights* presents itself in the form of stories about stories² and stories within stories (*mise en abyme*).³ One character, aside from Graf and

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 160-161.

2 Story about stories is a modality of metafiction. One of the central concerns of Marie Thévenon’s thesis being the status of metafiction in Auster’s work, she writes, “Cette forte composante métafictionnelle permet à la fois une mise en scène de l’identité auctoriale mais également une prise de distance de l’auteur par rapport à son travail.” (Thévenon, p. 379)

3 Auster’s short story, *Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story* (also stitched into the screenplay of the movie *Smoke*) is a significant instance of a story within a story and a story about storytelling.

Thomas Effing (among many other figures of storytellers), however, emerges as bearing the closest resemblance to Scheherazade: Aesop in *Mr. Vertigo*.

In order to examine Aesop's resemblance to Scheherazade as a storyteller, it would be important to first contextualize his storytelling. In *Mr. Vertigo*, in order to initiate Walt¹ into the art of flying (levitation), Master Yehudi, his mentor of sorts, subjects him to thirty-three agonizing² preliminary stages or tests. Summarizing his experience, Walt – the narrator of *Mr. Vertigo* – tells the reader:

That was how my initiation began. Over the weeks and months that followed, I lived through more of the same, an unremitting avalanche of wrongs. Each test was more terrible than the one before it, and if I managed not to back down, it was only from sheer reptilian stubbornness, a brainless passivity that lurked somewhere in the core of my soul. [...] He told me to jump, and I jumped. He told me to stop breathing, and I stopped breathing.³

What is common to each of these “tests” is the fact that they are all corporeal. The body is subjected to violence, and the experience of the thirty-three-stage program is an experience of physical suffering.⁴ While Master Yehudi's name already seems to gesture towards his role as the tyrannical Master in a master-slave relationship, Walt's description of his experience confirms this relationship. Walt is thus reduced to passivity (“a brainless passivity that lurked somewhere in the core of my soul”), even if it is a passivity in which he is active, and indifference (“if I could not bring myself to love him, neither did I hate him or resent him for the sufferings I endured”). It is in the context of this disaster that Aesop's role as a storyteller comes into existence:

1 Walt and Aesop are homologues in their relationship to Master Yehudi – their mentor and provider, among other things.

2 “[H]e turned into a slave driver, subjecting me to agonies that no living soul should have to endure.” *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 37.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 42.

4 The body as a site of disaster will be examined in the eighth chapter of this study.

He was a great one for telling stories, Aesop was, and I liked nothing better than to listen to that sweet voice of his spinning out the wild tales that were crammed in his head. He knew hundreds of them, and whenever I asked him, lying in bed all bruised and sore from my last pummeling, he would sit there for hours reciting one story after another. Jack the Giant Killer, Sinbad the Sailor, Ulysses the Wanderer, Billy the Kid, Lancelot and King Arthur, Paul Bunyan – I heard them all. The best ones, though, the stories he saved for when I was feeling particularly blue, were about my namesake, Sir Walter Raleigh.¹

Aesop, despite the implication of his name, seems to incarnate Scheherazade, rather than the legendary Greek fabulist.² The Greek “legendary figure” is associated with the written form as opposed to the oral tradition of storytelling within which Scheherazade operates, and Aesop in *Mr. Vertigo* is a teller, rather than a writer, of stories. The stories that the Austerian character tells are not fables with a moral where animals appear as characters: they are tales of voyage, adventure and heroism. Aesop (the character) coincides with Scheherazade in his telling the story of Sinbad the Sailor – which Scheherazade tells in *Thousand and One Nights*. It should also be noted that Aesop’s storytelling in *Mr. Vertigo* is not an act of remembrance of a catastrophic event: it is an act of altruism meant to appease Walt’s experience of disaster (“He knew hundreds of them, and whenever I asked him, lying in bed all bruised and sore from my last pummeling, he would sit there for hours reciting one story after another;” “The best ones, though, [were] the stories he saved for when I was feeling particularly blue”). Like Scheherazade, whose storytelling saves the women of the kingdom, Aesop’s storytelling saves Walt. Storytelling in this instance is a diversion,³ and as a result, proves therapeutic. At the same time, it is

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 43.

2 Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that “Aesop, the supposed author of a collection of Greek fables, almost certainly a legendary figure. Various attempts were made in ancient times to establish him as an actual personage. [...] The probability is that Aesop was no more than a name invented to provide an author for fables centring on beasts, so that “a story of Aesop” became synonymous with “fable.” The importance of fables lay not so much in the story told as in the moral derived from it.” (“Aesop.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 14 Aug. 2014.
<<http://www.britannica.com/turing.library.northwestern.edu/EBchecked/topic/7451/Aesop>>)

3 *Man in the Dark* is another work in which storytelling is present as a diversion. August Brill tells himself

not only a means to prevent disaster, but also a means to recover from disaster. This implies a distinction between the notions of the end and disaster – the end being a finality with no possibility of an “after,” and disaster, while being an end (the end of order, for instance), divides time into before and after: disaster institutes a past and a future.

If storytelling in *Mr. Vertigo* occurs in an “after” produced by disaster, and is a means to recover from a disaster in the period that follows it, in *Oracle Night*, storytelling itself becomes a form of disaster. John Trause tells Sidney Orr – the narrator of *Oracle Night* – the story of a French writer whose daughter drowns after he publishes a “book-length narrative poem that revolved around the drowning of a young child.”¹ This disastrous coincidence is interpreted by the unnamed French writer (who, as stated previously, we may guess, is Victor Hugo) as a prophetic instance: “Lost in the throes of grief, he persuaded himself that the words he’d written about an imaginary drowning had caused a real drowning, that a fictional tragedy had provoked a real tragedy in the real world.”² This instance seems to underline the performative power of language and fiction – the writing of words producing the action. Indeed, the writing of the narrative-poem could be read as a speech act of disaster. Writing and storytelling (or storytelling through writing), in this case, produce disaster.

John Trause’s anecdote of storytelling as coinciding with or performing disaster is repeated in the plot of *Oracle Night*, in Sidney Orr’s writing of stories in the blue notebook he buys from Mr. Chang at “PAPER PALACE.” Upon purchasing the blue notebook, Orr is compelled to write in it, and so he starts to write the story of a character he creates, Nick

stories in his head all night, in order to avoid thinking about his granddaughter’s boyfriend’s horrific murder near Baghdad: “As I mull over the things Katya has said to me, my thoughts gradually return to Titus, and before long I’m inside his story again, reliving the disaster I’ve been struggling to avoid all night.” (p. 168.)

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 187.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 188.

Bowen, whom he puts into a disastrous situation when, in the plot of Orr's story, Bowen finds himself locked inside a fallout shelter with no possibility of escape. Orr hints at the performative potential of the blue notebook when the dream his wife Grace has one night, resembles the story he is in the midst of writing, without Grace's ever having read it: "I know you never go into my workroom. But if you did, and if you happened to open the blue notebook I bought on Saturday, you'd see that the story I've been writing is similar to your dream. The ladder that goes down to an underground room, the library bookcases, the little bedroom at the back. My hero is locked in that room right now, and I don't know how to get him out."¹ Here, the coincidence or the suggested performative function of the notebook manifests itself in the realm of a dream, suggesting a parallel between dreams and fiction, and consequently implying a relationship between fiction and the unconscious.

If Grace's dream merely hints at the performative potential of the blue notebook, this potential manifests itself towards the end of the novel when Sidney Orr writes the story of his turbulent relationship with his wife Grace and imagines an affair between John Trause and Grace. As it turns out, after Orr writes this story in the blue notebook and then destroys it for fear of its turning into reality, he learns that Trause and Grace had indeed been involved in an affair that had begun even before Grace's marriage to Sidney Orr, and that had continued even after their marriage, even resulting in Grace's pregnancy. What is striking is the fact that the destruction of the notebook does not prevent the disastrous reality from manifesting itself:

[...] I tore up the blue notebook and threw it into a garbage can on the corner of Third Place and Court Street in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. [...] I was more or less convinced that the failures and disappointments of the past week were finally over. But they weren't over. The story was just beginning – the true story started only *then*, after I destroyed the blue notebook – and everything I've written so far is

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 115.

little more than a prelude to the horrors I'm about to relate now. Is there a connection between the *before* and the *after*? I don't know. Did the unfortunate French writer kill his child with his poem – or did his words merely predict her death? I don't know. What I do know is that I would no longer argue against his decision. [...] We sometimes know things before they happen, even if we don't know that we know.¹

The fact that the destruction of the notebook coincides with the moment at which the imagined story turns into the truth suggests that for Auster, a story exists independently of the book in which it is written. In other words, a story exists in time, rather than in space. In addition to that, it also implies that because a story exists in time, it has the ability to withstand disaster and destruction. Furthermore, a striking phenomenon seems to be at work in Orr's particular case. While Orr's storytelling also has a performative function in which the disastrous affair between Trause and Grace materializes, it does not stop there. Aside from being performative, his story is also the manifestation of his unconscious fear of losing Grace to his friend Trause. His fears become apparent when he begins to write the story. In fact, they motivate him to write the story: "The turmoil of the past days had happened for a reason, and with no facts to support one interpretation or another, I had nothing to guide me but my own instincts and suspicions. [...] I could have been wrong, of course, but now that the crisis seemed to have passed, I felt strong enough to entertain the darkest, most unsettling possibilities."² For Orr, storytelling thus becomes the process by which that which is latent becomes manifest. The affair between Grace and Trause, which is only revealed at the end of the novel, is latent in the story from the beginning – the narrative, from the start, hints at the relationship between Grace and Trause. In a footnote, the narrator mentions:

John was the only person who called her *Gracie*. Not even her parents did that anymore, and I myself, who had been involved with her for more than three years,

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 189.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 181.

had never once addressed her by that diminutive. But John had known her all life – literally from the day she was born – and a number of special privileges had accrued to him over time, elevating him from the rank of family friend to unofficial blood relation. It was as if he had achieved the status of favorite uncle – or, if you will, godfather-without-portfolio. John loved Grace, and Grace loved him back [...].¹

This footnote serves to establish Trause as a quasi-parental figure (“unofficial blood relation;” “favorite uncle;” “godfather-without-portfolio”), so as to make the affair between him and Grace improbable, and as a consequence, makes the revelation of the (incestuous) relationship towards the end of the narrative that much more striking. At the same time, Orr already hints at their relationship in this footnote (“a number of special privileges had accrued to him over time;” “John loved Grace, and Grace loved him back”), without his necessarily being aware of it, because as he admits later: “[we] sometimes know things before they happen, even if we don’t know that we know.” Thus the affair between Grace and Trause appears as being latent in the narrative. As if to insist on its latency, this fact is mentioned in passing in a footnote, rather than in the main text of the narrative, and is made manifest through the story Sidney Orr’s tells (writes) in the blue notebook. In this instance, it would appear that for Auster, storytelling has the same function as a dream, in that it brings to the surface or makes manifest that which is latent or hidden. It is therefore not surprising that the first instance in which the story from Orr’s blue notebook actualizes, is in the realm of a dream (Gracie’s dream).

Thus, we have seen how Auster’s literary concerns do not seem to be rooted in his Jewish identity, although they may coincide with the post-Shoah literary aesthetic. If the Shoah is present in his works, it is not in order to assert his Jewish identity – and this distinguishes him from the Jewish writers in America. Furthermore, with the exception of these sparse references to the Shoah, and to the historical events surrounding the

1 *Oracle Night*, pp. 24-25 (footnotes).

September eleventh attacks, Auster does not seek to constantly represent historical time in his works. In fact, representing historical time or telling stories about ongoing wars, for him, is a sign of weakness. As August Brill, the narrator of *Man in the Dark*, says: “War stories. Let your guard down for a moment, and they come rushing in on you, one by one by one.”¹ But if war stories are unwelcome, they are just as inevitable.

It seems, in fact, that Auster gives a perfect fictitious example of how he would not address the question of history in his novels, in the form of *The New Colossus*, the first novel authored by Sachs in *Leviathan*:

As every reader knows, *The New Colossus* is a historical novel, a meticulously researched book set in America between 1876 and 1890 and based on documented, verifiable facts. Most of the characters are people who actually lived at the time, and even when the characters are imaginary, they are not inventions so much as borrowings, figures stolen from the pages of other novels. Otherwise, all events are true – true in the sense that they follow the historical record [...]²

In *Leviathan*, Peter Aaron could be seen as Paul Auster’s fictitious double, and the duo Aaron-Sachs is often described as a pair of opposites. It is thus not surprising to find that Sachs, in his figure of the opposite, or complementary, of Auster’s double, is the one who has written the overtly historical novel that Auster himself would not write. It would seem that Auster deliberately exhausts all possibilities of historical novels in this exuberant instance. Yet, *The New Colossus* is ultimately a product of Auster’s imagination. Auster is both its critic and its author, and as such, Auster cannot help projecting in the fictitious opus his own obsessions with chance and coincidences:

But small events are also recorded, and these are finally what give the book its texture, what turn it into something more than a jigsaw puzzle of historical facts. [...] There are dozens of such episodes in the book. All of them are true, each is grounded in the real, and yet Sachs fits them together in such a way that they

1 *Man in the Dark* p. 119.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 41.

become steadily more fantastic, almost as if he were delineating a nightmare or a hallucination.¹

What Peter Aaron appreciates in Sachs's novel – this art of orchestrating events in time, this realism that leaves room for the odd and the unexpected – is what Auster strives to achieve in his prose. What concerns Auster more than historical time, is the time of his stories, and the relationship of his stories with time. Such relationships are, as demonstrated in this first part of our work, governed by the temporality of the disaster.

1 *Leviathan*, p. 43.

SECOND PART:
SPACE OF THE DIASTER

Chapter 6

The spatial experience of solitude

“The world has shrunk to the size of this room for him [...]”¹

6.1 Solitude: absence vs. presence

Solitude, first and foremost, in its broadest sense, can be defined as a state of being that has for its center the self. In solitude, the presence of the self is the only presence. Solitude, or being alone, is the self without others; identity, or sameness, without alterity. Yet, solitude can only be conceived of in relation to others: an individual is alone, because of the lack of others; the absence of others is what seems to define solitude. As Sophie Vallas puts it, “la solitude, où qu’on l’expérimente, entraîne le même processus : elle signifie avant toute chose l’absence du monde. Replié sur soi, enfermé dans sa solitude, le sujet austérien gomme dans le même temps le reste du monde.”² If solitude is to be understood as the absence of others, an individual could also be said to be solitary or alone due to his own absence among others: solitude as the exclusion of the self from others; solitude as an absence of the self to others.

Solitude appears as a leitmotif in Auster’s work, and in a way, also marks the beginning of his career as a writer of prose. He makes solitude one of the central themes and concerns in his first work of prose, *The Invention of Solitude*, and this trope will continue to be repeated, traversing nearly every piece of prose written by Auster, up to his most recent autobiographical work *Report from the Interior*. As discussed towards the

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 83.

2 Sophie Vallas, p. 134.

beginning of our chapter on (temporal) presence, in the first part of this study, Auster presents characters who are caught up in the process of withdrawal: they are perpetually retreating; they extract themselves from the world, move inwards, confine themselves to themselves. Indeed, they resist relation, they elude relationships and seek isolation. It is through voluntary seclusion or isolation that the typical Austerian character experiences life. Thus solitude, in the sense of seclusion, is an experience of space. In secluding themselves, his characters exist as absence: they are present *in* and *as* their absence to others.

Absence is best embodied in Auster's work by his father, Samuel Auster. As Samuel Auster's son – the author-narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" – clearly and bluntly summarizes: "Earliest memory: his absence."¹ In this first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster establishes his father, Samuel Auster, as the quintessential figure of solitude – a solitary figure who is also responsible for Auster's own solitude. The text opens with what could be seen as an instance of ultimate solitude – the ultimate, although involuntary, isolation from the world, the ultimate disaster: Samuel Auster's death. Having been an ever-elusive figure throughout Paul Auster's childhood, the author presents his father's absence in terms of invisibility:

Devoid of passion, either for a thing, a person, or an idea, incapable or unwilling to reveal himself under any circumstances, he had managed to keep himself at a distance from life, to avoid immersion in the quick of things. He ate, he went to work, he had friends, he played tennis, and yet for all that he was not there. In the deepest, most unalterable sense, he was an invisible man. Invisible to others, and most likely invisible to himself as well. If, while he was alive, I kept looking for him, kept trying to find the father who was not there, now that he is dead I still feel as though I must go on looking for him. Death has not changed anything. The only difference is that I have run out of time.²

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 21.

2 "Portrait of an Invisible Man." *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 6-7.

Samuel Auster's experience of absence is presented here on a mode of sensual perception. The experience of absence is an experience of seeing or not seeing. His solitude manifests itself through his invisibility.¹ Solitude is invoked here as a presence that resembles absence; solitude is absence-as-presence. Although Samuel Auster's death makes his physical, material, corporeal absence permanent, by eliminating every possibility of his physical presence, "death [does] not [change] anything." His absence remains intact. Yet, it is only in disaster – through death – that Samuel Auster can become present to his son, Paul:

Discovering these photographs was important to me because they seemed to reaffirm my father's physical presence in the world, to give me the illusion that he was still there... I had lost my father. But at the same time, I had also found him. As long as I kept these pictures before my eyes, as long as I continued to study them with my complete attention, it was as though he were still alive, even in death.²

In Samuel Auster's case, his absence becomes a necessary condition for his presence. His presence is mediated through his absence – he cannot be present without the agency of absence. Therefore absence – the ultimate form of which is death – is necessary for existence: one must be absent in order to be there. Or as Quinn, quoting Baudelaire in his red notebook in *City of Glass*, says: "Baudelaire: Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas. [...] Or more bluntly: Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself."³ In order to be himself, Samuel Auster has to be absent.

1 However, the author-narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" goes even further in problematizing the definition of solitude: "Solitary in the sense of retreat. In the sense of not having to see himself, of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else." While this definition of solitude does seem to echo the definition of solitude based on perception, or vision or (in)visibility, it differs in the way that the process of perceiving the self is evoked. Solitude "[in] the sense of not having to see himself, of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else" is not simple invisibility, is not simply invisibility. It presents a double maneuver of invisibility: being in denial of one's spatial, physical presence to oneself ("not having to see himself"), and being in denial of one's spatial, physical presence to others ("not having to see himself being seen by anyone else") – solitude or absence seems to be, in this case, a condition activated by the process of denial of one's presence – denying one's being visible.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 14-15.

3 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 110.

However, Paul Auster problematizes the notion of solitude-as-absence, first by detailing for his reader the process by which Samuel Auster orchestrates his absence, how he hides from the world, how he eludes and deludes the world:

Because nothing mattered, he gave himself the freedom to do anything he wanted (sneaking into tennis clubs, pretending to be a restaurant critic in order to get a free meal), and the charm he exercised to make his conquests is precisely what made these conquests meaningless. With the vanity of a woman, he hid the truth about his age, made up stories about his business dealings, talked about himself only obliquely – in the third person, as if about an acquaintance of his (‘There’s a friend of mine who has this problem; what do you think he should do about it? ...’). Whenever a situation became too tight for him, whenever he felt pushed to the verge of having to reveal himself, he would wriggle out of it by telling a lie. Eventually, the lie came automatically and was indulged in for its own sake. The principle was to say as little as possible. If people never learned the truth about him, they couldn’t turn around and use it against him later. The lie was a way of buying protection. What people saw when he appeared before them, then, as not really him, but a person he had *invented*, an artificial creature he could manipulate in order to manipulate others. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain.¹

In tracing the details of Samuel Auster’s process of withdrawing himself in order to perform, as it were, his invisibility or his absence, and thereby inventing his own “artificial” identity, Paul Auster seems to sketch the features of the process by which an author creates his work – his work of fiction, to be precise. It is through fiction that Samuel Auster retreats from the world and makes himself disappear. Several markers in the above passage point towards the work of creating fiction. Some of these are subtle, for instance, pretense (“pretending to be a restaurant critic”), lies (“whenever he felt pushed to the verge of having to reveal himself, he would wriggle out of it by telling a lie”), while others hint more explicitly at the work of a storyteller, a fiction writer: he “made up stories,” he “invented an artificial creature he could manipulate in order to manipulate others. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark,

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 16; emphasis is ours.

solitary place,” he even “talked about himself only obliquely – in the third person.” Besides, as Sarah Kofman writes in *Nerval: Le charme de la répétition*, fiction operates charm¹, and like the writers of fiction, Samuel Auster indeed exercises charm: “the charm he exercised to make his conquests is precisely what made these conquests meaningless.” These metafictional elements thus elucidate not only the art of creating fiction, but also the process of writing an autobiographical work, which happens to be exactly what the narrator(s) of *The Invention of Solitude* is (are) engaged in. The author is thus presented as a solitary figure. By assuming a role that resembles that of a writer of fiction, Samuel Auster *invents* his solitude, his absence, his invisibility. He weaves a veil of fiction to distance himself from the world, if not to disappear from it. Solitude then goes from being a state of existence to being a construct – a fictional construct, no less.

If solitude is the complete absence of self, absolute invisibility, what is the reader supposed to make of the title of the section “Portrait of an Invisible Man:” how can there possibly be a portrait of an *invisible* man? More concretely, how to represent that which cannot be seen, that which is not there? Is invisibility, in fact, a necessary catalyst for the construction of one’s portrait? A possible answer to this question can be found towards the beginning of this first section of *The Invention of Solitude*:

There is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man. Things are inert: they have meaning only in function of the life that makes use of them. When that life ends, the things change, even though they remain the same. They are there and yet not there: tangible ghosts, condemned to survive in a world they no longer belong to. What is one to think, for example, of a closetful of clothes waiting silently to be worn again by a man who will not be coming back to open the door? Or the stray packets of condoms strewn among brimming drawers of underwear and socks? Or an electric razor sitting in the bathroom, still clogged

1 “Par le charme qu’elle opère, la fiction est l’équivalent d’un opium : ainsi, en même temps que les philosophes du XVIII^e siècle posaient des principes destinés à détruire la société de fond en comble, ils inventaient des *contes charmants* pour endormir cette même société, détourner son attention du travail de sape qu’ils effectuaient par ailleurs.” (Kofman, Sarah. *Nerval: le charme de la répétition*. p. 29)

with the whisker dust of the last shave? Or a dozen empty tubes of hair coloring hidden away in a leather traveling case? – suddenly revealing things one has no desire to see, no desire to know. There is a poignancy to it, and also a kind of horror. In themselves, the things mean nothing, like the cooking utensils of some vanished civilization. And yet they say something to us, standing there not as objects but as remnants of thought, of consciousness, emblems of the solitude in which a man comes to make decisions about himself: whether to color his hair, whether to wear this or that shirt, whether to live, whether to die. And the futility of it all once there is death.¹

While the objects “[in] themselves... mean nothing,” they open up the possibility of signification: in essence, they function as (empty) signifiers whose signification is produced in their being viewed (by the son – the author-narrator) and read (by the reader of the narrated text). The list of belongings or objects that outlive their user – Samuel Auster – seems to echo his very own condition: “It was never possible for him to be where he was. For as long as he lived, he was somewhere else, between here and there. But never really here. And never really there.”² The objects, like Samuel Auster, are “there and yet not there.” Although being “never really here[;] never really there” does not so much gesture towards emotions as it does towards a state of being, an experience in space – presence vs. absence – the objective correlative at work here suggests to what extent inanimate objects can participate in the construction of human identity. Paul Auster learns more about his father’s habits by inspecting his belongings. If a metaphor is to be conceived of in terms of substitution based on resemblance, then these objects that resemble Samuel Auster – resemble his state of being, to be precise – constitute the metaphorical presence of the author-narrator’s father. Besides, it is interesting to note that these inanimate objects, these “emblems of the solitude in which a man comes to make decisions about himself,” not only act as substitutes for the spatial or bodily presence of a human being, but they also represent complex, secondary psychic processes such as thinking: “remnants of thought, of

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 10-11.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 19.

consciousness.” Abstract constructs and processes like solitude, thought and consciousness are mediated through inanimate objects, and in their ability to structure these processes, the objects become a substitute for language. Objects speak of their user, for their user, and this idea seems to be articulated even more clearly in *Man in the Dark* when, during a discussion of three foreign films¹ with her grandfather – the narrator of *Man in the Dark* – Katya makes the following generalization: “Inanimate objects as a means of expressing human emotions. That’s the language of film.”²

The passage from the *Invention of Solitude* quoted above seems to be echoed in two instances of Katya’s film analyses, first in her analysis of *The Bicycle Thief*, and then in her analysis of *Grand Illusion*. Describing the pawnshop scene in *The Bicycle Thief*, Katya says:

Then we’re at the pawnshop, which isn’t a pawnshop, really, but a huge place, a kind of warehouse for unwanted goods. The wife sells the sheets, and after that we see one of the workers carry their little bundle to the shelves where pawned items are stored. At first, the shelves don’t seem very high, but then [...] we see that they go on and on and on, [...] and all of a sudden, it looks as if every family in Rome has sold their bed linens, that the entire city is in the same miserable state as the hero and his wife. [...] In one shot, we’re given a picture of a whole society living at the edge of disaster.

Whereas Samuel Auster’s objects represent the disaster that has occurred (his unexpected death), the objects in *The Bicycle Thief* announce an imminent disaster. However, taking into account the fact that this film is centered around the effects of World War II on the Roman society, they not only represent the implied economic disaster (poverty) that is yet to come, but also the disaster that has already occurred. In so doing,

1 *Grand Illusion*, *The Bicycle Thief* and *The World of Apu*. (*Man in the Dark*, pp. 15-16)

2 *Man in the Dark*, p. 16.

the objects become the spatial representations of two times: the past (that which has occurred: the war) and the future (that which is yet to come: poverty).

In the second analytical instance, Katya describes a scene from *Grand Illusions*:

[T]his young widow who has already lost her husband to the madness of war, and what does she have to do? She has to go back into the house and confront the dining room table and the dirty dishes from the meal they've just eaten. The men are gone now, and because they are gone, those dishes have been transformed into a sign of their absence, the lonely suffering of women when men go off to war, and one by one, without saying a word, she picks up the dishes and clears the table.¹

Like the passage from *The Invention of Solitude* with Samuel Auster's personal belongings, the dishes in Katya's reading of the film are a representation of absence onto which the viewer projects (his or) her thoughts or feelings. In both cases (*The Invention of Solitude* and *Grand Illusions*), the viewer participates in the production of meaning of these objects (signifiers). For Katya, in *Grand Illusions*, the dishes are spatial or material representations of the absence of their users, as well as the solitude of the widow.

In the instances of Samuel Auster's objects in *The Invention of Solitude* and the objects in the second film analyzed in *Man in that Dark – Grand Illusions* – the belongings or objects of the absent individuals, although inviting their viewer to participate in ascribing meaning to them, do not rely on their viewers' using them to give meaning to them. In *The Book of Illusions*, however, the objects of the departed or the absent only gain meaning when they are used. Having lost his wife Helen, and his two sons Marco and Todd in an airplane disaster, David Zimmer, the narrator of *The Book of Illusions*, finds himself using the objects that belonged to his wife and sons:

I would visit the boys' room and sit down on the floor, surrounding myself with their things. I wasn't able to think about them directly or summon them up in any

¹ *Man in the Dark*, p. 18.

conscious way, but as I put together their puzzles and played with their Lego pieces, building ever more complex and baroque structures, I felt that I was temporarily inhabiting them again – carrying on their little phantom lives for them by repeating the gestures they had made when they still had bodies. [...] I couldn't go into our bedroom after dark, but I spent a lot of time there during the day, standing inside Helen's closet and touching her clothes, rearranging her jackets and sweaters, lifting her dresses off their hangers and spreading them out on the floor. Once, I put one of them on, and another time I got into her underwear and made up my face with her makeup. It was a deeply satisfying experience, but after some additional experimentation, I discovered that perfume was even more effective than lipstick and mascara. It seemed to bring her back more vividly, to evoke her presence for longer periods of time.¹

Thus, in a double maneuver, Auster seems to insist on the role played by objects in spatializing solitude or absence, and in playing a significant role in the process of mourning. Fetishizing the objects of his deceased wife and sons seems to be one of the ways in which Zimmer chooses to mourn their loss. However, David Zimmer, unlike the narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man" or the widow in Katya's reading of *Grand Illusions*, is not merely a viewer of the objects. He uses them, and in so doing, "inhabits" his sons, inhabits their absence, occupies their space. Mourning, in this instance, gains a spatial dimension – it becomes an experience in space. While these objects on their own symbolize the absence of the departed, subjecting them to touch is a way of simulating the presence of their former users. The senses of touch – as well as smell (Helen's perfume) – thus seem to be at the frontier of absence and presence, of life and death. Touch and smell open up two worlds, two possibilities of experience – two spaces become superposed: absence and presence.

1 *The Book of Illusions*, pp. 7-8.

6.2 Confined spaces or predecessors of the “little room”

As discussed earlier, the experience of solitude for the Austerian character is a spatial experience – an experience of seclusion. For Auster – the author-narrator of *Report from the Interior* – the experience of seclusion originates in his childhood, in his parents’ backyard:

Not a big house, but the first house your parents had ever lived in, which made it your first house as well, and even though the interior was not spacious, the yard behind the house seemed vast to you, for in fact it was two yards, the first one a small grassy area directly behind that house, and then, [...] there was a second yard behind it, the back backyard, which was wilder and bigger than the front backyard, a secluded realm in which you conducted your most intense investigations into the flora and fauna of your new kingdom. [...] Your father’s garden, running along a side of the garage in the back backyard. His patch of ground, but your world – and there you lived until you were twelve.¹

Thus Auster claims, in a hyperbolical maneuver, to have lived in solitude or isolation until he reached the brink of adolescence.² As if to magnify the seclusion, the young narrator chooses the “back backyard.” This “back backyard” of his childhood will be replaced by the space of the room in his adulthood. In addition to introducing the reader to the original space of solitude, this passage goes to show how he views the space of seclusion as a space of investigation. Whereas his parents’ “back backyard” served as a space to carry out biological investigations (“investigations into the flora and fauna of your new kingdom”), the room will become the space where he carries out, above all else, his literary investigations. His childhood preoccupations with nature will be replaced by his preoccupations with culture in his adulthood.

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 9-10.

2 If Thoreau appears as the quintessential solitary figure in Auster’s works – be it in *The Invention of Solitude*, or *Ghosts (The New York Trilogy)*, to name only two among many others – it seems to be through Auster’s identification with him. In other words, if Thoreau influences or informs Auster’s works, it is because Auster can identify with his solitude; Auster’s relationship with solitude precedes his relationship with the works of Thoreau. Auster’s solitude is not born of literary works.

The small, closed space of the room (and rooms, in general) pervades Auster's works – autobiographical and fictional (novels). The first instance of the room (like most other Austerian tropes) appears in *The Invention of Solitude*. As if to preface the appearance of the original room "at 6 Varick Street"¹ in New York, Auster evokes, in a rare metaphorical gesture, the biblical image of Jonah in the belly of the whale, which, like the room, represents a confined space. In so doing, however, he establishes a parallel between solitude and silence, between loss of presence and loss of speech. In Book Seven of "The Book of Memory," the author-narrator, commenting on the *Book of Jonah*, writes:

Jonah flees. He books passage aboard a ship. A terrible storm rises up, and the sailors fear they will drown. Everyone prays for deliverance. But Jonah has 'gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.' Sleep, then, as the ultimate withdrawal from the world. Sleep as an image of solitude. Oblomov curled on his couch, dreaming himself back into his mother's womb. Jonah in the belly of the ship; Jonah in the belly of the whale.

[...]

The fish is what saves him from drowning in the sea. [...] In the depth of that solitude, which is equally the depth of silence, as if in the refusal to speak there was an equal refusal to turn one's face to the other [...] – which is to say: who seeks solitude seeks silence; who does not speak is alone; is alone even unto death – Jonah encounters the darkness of death. [...] And when the fish then vomits Jonah onto dry land, Jonah is given back to life, as if the death he had found in the belly of the fish were a preparation for new life, a life that has passed through death, and therefore a life that can at last speak. For death has frightened him into opening his mouth. [...] In the darkness of the solitude that is death, the tongue is finally loosened, and at the moment it begins to speak, there is an answer. And even if there is no answer, the man has begun to speak.²

In the above passage, Auster insists on the relationship between three similar yet distinct notions: solitude, sleep and death. As we have already discussed, death is to be understood as the ultimate form of solitude, and Auster seems to reiterate this in the above passage. Presenting sleep as a metaphor for solitude ("Sleep as an image of solitude") is

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 80.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 133-134.

also not a new phenomenon – it is a fairly banal metaphor. Besides, like death, sleep is “the ultimate withdrawal from the world.” Sleep is thus not only a metaphor, but also a rehearsal for death. But, solitude, or its resembling substitute – its metaphor – sleep, or the ultimate form of these two categories of withdrawal and isolation, death (“the darkness of the solitude that is death”), although evoking absence, do not seem to suggest nothingness. These states of existence seem, instead, to convey a sense of potentiality. Solitude, sleep and death are not finalities, but intermediary states; they imply possibility. Auster reads Jonah’s stay in the belly of the fish – his “death” – as transitory state, a state of in-betweenness. Death then seems to become, for Auster, a necessary condition for life: “[and] when the fish then vomits Jonah onto dry land, Jonah is given back to life, as if the death he had found in the belly of the fish were a preparation for new life, a life that has passed through death.” Not only does this reading suggest Jonah’s rebirth (along with creating a troubling equivalence between birth and death, by ascribing to the experience of being in the belly – the “womb” – the image of death, as if being in the womb coincided with dying), but it also communicates the idea that in order to experience life, Jonah necessarily has to undergo death. Loss of life is necessary to restore life. Absence activates – produces – presence. Solitude, in this case (like in most cases, for Auster), has a regenerative quality; it is a resource, it is potentiality. Secondly, for Auster, solitude is also determined by the loss of speech, by silence: “who seeks solitude seeks silence; who does not speak is alone.” Death is not only “the darkness of solitude,” but it is also silence. As a corollary, speech restores life, it is the sign of life: “In the darkness of the solitude that is death, the tongue is finally loosened, and at the moment it begins to speak, there is an answer. And even if there is no answer, the man has begun to speak.” The experience of life, of being alive, is the experience of voice, the experience of speech.

What Auster seems to suggest here is the dual nature of solitude: it is both death, and life, disaster and regeneration. In its being death, it creates the possibility of life. But death and solitude are desirable states only so long as they do not suggest a finality. And in order for solitude and death not to be finalities, there must be speech, there must be the experience of voice. Thus Auster insists on speech as a means to avoid complete loss, absolute absence. This idea seems to be reinforced in *In the Country of Last Things*. Caring for the dying Isabel, Anna Blume is struck by Isabel's loss of speech: "The breakdown of muscle and bone finally reached her throat, and when that happened, Isabel started losing the power of speech. A disintegrating body is one thing, but when the voice goes too, it feels as if the person is no longer there."¹ For Anna Blume, Isabel's spatial presence is determined not by her tangible body which occupies space, but by the articulation of her voice, her speech. As a consequence, the ultimate disaster is not Isabel's physical death: it is the absence of speech. At the same time, through Anna, Auster demonstrates how the loss of speech becomes the condition of possibility of writing: "I tremble when I think how closely everything is connected. If Isabel had not lost her voice, none of these words would exist. Because she had no more words, these other words have come out of me. I want you to remember that. If not for Isabel, there would be nothing now. I never would have begun."² Anna's letter, that is the novel *In the Country of Last Things*, is thus born of the loss of speech, of words. The text is a product of absolute silence, of disaster. Just like Samuel Auster's absence is necessary in order for him to be present, the loss or absence of Isabel's words – her silence – is necessary for the words of the book to be present. Once again, Auster seems to insist on the regenerative power of silence, and through it, the necessity of absence for presence.

1 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 78.

2 *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 79.

6.3 The room(s)

For an author, the instance of speech can only be rendered or communicated through the artificial medium of the written word. For this reason, and as a means to resist (if not to reverse) loss, death or absence, Auster – the author, the master – demands that writing take place. This phenomenon is not only to be observed in Auster’s first autobiographical work,¹ but also reappears in his more recent memoir, *Winter Journal*: “Speak now before it is too late, and then hope to go on speaking until there is nothing more to be said. Time is running out after all.”² Thus, Auster, from *The Invention of Solitude* to *Winter Journal* (and beyond – as this phenomenon reappears in *Report from the Interior*), presents his readers with narrators who are figures of the author. They are essentially, for the most part, solitary figures themselves, who orchestrate their solitude by confining themselves to small, closed spaces – in “the room”³ – in order to write, to create their work. If writing is born of silence, of solitude, as seen above, it is also carried out in silence and solitude. The narrator of “The Book of Memory” is the first in the genealogy of the quintessential Austerian author-narrator, shown in the very act of writing:

He lays out a piece of blank paper on the table before him and writes these words with his pen. It was. It never will be again.

Later that same day he returns to his room. 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. [...]

[A] brief disquisition on the room. An image, for example, of a man sitting alone in a room. As in Pascal: ‘All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing

1 “I knew that I would have to write about my father. I had no plan, no precise idea of what this meant. I cannot even remember making a decision about it. It was simply there, a certainty, an obligation that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news. I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him. *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 1.

3 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 80.

only: that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room.’ As in the phrase: ‘he wrote *The Book of Memory* in this room.’¹

In this passage, the reader finds the typical Austerian figure of the author shown in the process of writing. It should be noted that this figure is not specific to Auster’s autobiographies, and reappears in most of his works of fiction.² This metafictional instance serves to highlight the fact that in Auster’s texts, the process of creating a work, the act of writing, precedes the story and interrupts it as well. What is supposed to be an autobiography becomes an account of the process of writing. The story of the self is the story of writing. The work of creation (of a book, of fiction) is achieved only when the writer retreats, withdraws, isolates himself from the world. Paul Auster’s poetics is born of solitude. Solitude, in this case, is a creative force, and the room becomes the spatial metaphor for solitude – its embodiment. The room also evokes the image of the womb where the fiction of the self develops. Writing about the self then becomes synonymous with giving birth to the self. Like the belly of the fish for Jonah, the room is, for Auster, the site of gestation, of transition.

It should be noted here that “the room” as a space of creative production takes the shape of other small rooms or room-like spaces over the course of Auster’s works. First, in *Ghosts* – the second book of the *New York Trilogy* – the character Black, confining himself to the space of his room, is constantly engaged in the act of writing. Blue, who is hired by White to follow Black, in turn confines himself to his room, opposite Black’s, in order to observe his activities, and writes his observations in a book. The two rooms in *Ghosts*, thus

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 79-80.

2 These figures include, among others: Anna Blume (“Then, taking one of the pencils I had bought from Mr. Gambino so long ago, I propped up the notebook against my knees and started writing this letter.” *In the Country of Last Things*, p. 182); Peter Aaron (“I mention these things because that is where I am now – sitting at a green table in the middle of the largest room, holding a pen in my hand.” *Leviathan*, p. 10); Sidney Orr (“I put a fresh ink cartridge in my fountain pen, opened the notebook to the first page, and looked at the top line. I had no idea how to begin.” *Oracle Night*, p. 10).

mirror each other, not only in terms of their physical categories as “rooms,” but also in what they make possible: writing. Similarly, in order to write a book on (the films of) Hector Mann, David Zimmer, in the *Book of Illusions*, looks for a place to “hole up in” (“If I meant to write the book, I would need a place to hole up in”¹), thus emphasizing the importance of a small room-like space in which to carry out writing. In *Leviathan*, Benjamin Sachs’s first novel *The New Colossus* is born within the confines of another room-like structure: his prison cell. Unlike the room in an apartment or in a house, the prison does not evoke a space of comfort, but Sachs begs to differ. As he tells Peter Aaron: “[they] weren’t as bad as you’d think. You don’t have to worry about anything there. You’re given three meals a day, you don’t have to do your laundry, your whole life is mapped out of you in advance. You’d be surprised how much freedom that gives you.”² For Sachs, the prison cell is not only a space of comfort, but also, ironically, a space of freedom. In *Mr. Vertigo*, the writing room takes the shape of a “parlor” (“I was sitting at a desk in the upstairs parlor with a pen in my hand, scratching away at the first sentence.”³) In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, although Mr. Blank is not shown in the act of writing a story, he nonetheless narrates aloud the rest of Graf’s story that he improvises as he tells, and this is in keeping with the Austerian room’s function of being a space of literary production.

If, in certain cases, the experience of solitude and isolation in the room is an experience of creativity, in others, it suggests destruction. A striking instance of this is to be found in *Leviathan*, in the description of Dimaggio’s study. When Ben Sachs goes to Berkeley, and winds up living in Lillian’s house⁴, he decides to clean and tidy her dirty and

1 *The Book of Illusions*, p. 27.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 22.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 275.

4 Sachs becomes part of Lillian’s household, without categorically choosing to do so: “[t]he living room sofa became Sachs’s bed, and he started sleeping there every night. They all took this for granted, and the fact that he now belonged to the household was never so much as even mentioned.” (p. 221).

messy house, room by room, with the exception of Dimaggio's¹ study: "The only room he didn't touch was Dimaggio's study. He was reluctant to open the door again, but even if he had wanted to go in there, he wouldn't have known what to do with the debris."² Instead of being a space of productivity and creation, Dimaggio's study is described, through the use of the term "debris," as a site of disaster. The term "debris," however, evokes a particular category of disaster: an explosion (of a bomb). This could be seen as an instance of prolepsis. As the reader later learns, (and as we will see in our next chapter), it is within the space of Dimaggio's study that Sachs's terrorist plans germinate, and his acts of terrorism will eventually lead to his death from an accidental bomb explosion. Dimaggio's study is therefore a room or a space that generates a destructive force.

In *City of Glass*, however, Peter Stillman's experience of the room is dual. It is both creative, and destructive. First, identifying himself as a poet, Stillman Jr. says to Quinn:

I am mostly now a poet. Every day I sit in my room and write another poem. I make up all the words myself, just like when I lived in the dark. I begin to remember things that way, to pretend that I am back in the dark again. I am the only one who knows what the words mean. They cannot be translated. These poems will make me famous. Hit the nail on the head. Ya, ya ya. Beautiful poems. So beautiful the whole world will weep.³

To begin with, Peter Stillman Jr. is not the quintessential Austerian figure of the writer. The typical figure of the writer in Auster's work is never merely a character in the story. He is, in most cases, also its narrator. In other words, he is a homodiegetic narrator. Stillman Jr. is a character in this story who assigns himself the role of the writer, of the "poet." Yet, Stillman Jr. is not exempt from the rules of artistic production that govern

1 Dimaggio being Lillian's husband, whom Ben accidentally kills prior to arriving in Berkeley. In fact, he goes to Berkeley in order to offer a monetary compensation to Dimaggio's widow, using the money he finds in Dimaggio's car.

2 *Leviathan*, pp. 219-220.

3 *City of Glass*, p. 19.

Auster's main author-figures. Just like the other figures of the author-narrator, Stillman seeks solitude, and retreats into a room to write. His experience of solitude is an experience of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. His work as a poet is not only to produce new signifiers, but consists in reinforcing the arbitrariness of the sign: "I make up all the words myself, just like when I lived in the dark... I am the only one who knows what the words mean." In saying this, he seems to resound the words of Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*: "'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'" ¹ Stillman Jr. even seems to share with Humpty Dumpty the scornful tone, establishing the superiority of his knowledge or his mastery of words ("I am the only one who knows what the words mean. They cannot be translated") over that of the rest of humanity, establishing therefore his singularity. As a result, his experience of solitude – his experience of the room – seems to consist in his nurturing a secret. Solitude here acts as a catalyst for secrecy. It separates the knowable from the unknowable, that which can be said from that which cannot be said. Stillman Jr. is the keeper of a secret: his work as a poet consists in hiding a piece of knowledge, a truth, behind the veil of signifiers. The readers of his poems would therefore be faced with signifiers whose signifieds, according to him, are impossible. The question of language is a question of relationship with others. If the connection between the signifier and the signified is to be understood as an agreement, or convention, among all speakers of the same tongue, Stillman Jr.'s refusal to participate in this convention causes him to distance himself from the others. Refusing the basic premise of language is a way of rejecting alterity. Stillman's solitude in the space of the room is thus echoed by his solitude in the space of language.

1 Interestingly, later in the narrative, Stillman Jr. quotes this very same passage from *Through the Looking Glass* explaining to Quinn that "Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs[...]" (*New York Trilogy*, p. 81)

However, Peter Stillman Jr.'s writing poetry, a double experience of isolation – the isolation in the space of the room, and the isolation in the space of language – is a reenactment of a previous traumatic experience, as is revealed through his introduction of himself to Quinn when they meet for the first time:

‘My name is Peter Stillman. Perhaps you have heard of me, but more than likely not. No matter. That is not my real name. My real name I cannot remember. Excuse me. Not that it makes a difference. That is to say, anymore.

[...]

‘No mother, then. Ha ha. Such is my laughter now, my belly burst of mumbo jumbo. Ha ha ha. Big father said: it makes no difference. To me. That is to say, to him. Big father of the big muscles and the boom, boom, boom. No questions now, please.

‘I say what they say because I know nothing. I am only poor Peter Stillman, the boy who can’t remember. Boo hoo. Willy nilly. Nincompoop. Excuse me. They say, they say. But what does poor little Peter say? Nothing, nothing. Anymore.

‘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 caca piles. The pipi lakes. The swoons. Excuse me. Numb and naked. Excuse me. Anymore.

‘There is the dark then. I am telling you. There was food in the dark, yes, mush food in the hush dark room. He ate with his hands. Excuse me. I mean Peter did. And if I am Peter, so much the better. That is to say, so much the worse. Excuse me. I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. Thank you.

‘Poor Peter Stillman. A little boy he was. Barely a few words of his own. And then no words, and then no one, and then no, no, no. Anymore.¹

In the above passage, this vague, uncertain introduction of himself is essentially an account of Peter Stillman Jr.'s experience of the “dark room,” during the first nine years of his life. Cloaked as a scientific experiment carried out to test his hypothesis that an infant

1 *City of Glass*, pp. 16-17.

isolated from the world will gain access to “God’s language”¹ and naturally start to speak it, Stillman Sr. locks up the infant Stillman Jr. in a dark room, secluding him from the world, from people, from language. But, a total isolation being impossible without its coinciding with death, Peter inevitably enters into language: “Peter knew some people words. That could not be helped. But the father thought maybe Peter would forget them. After a while. That is why there was so much boom, boom, boom. Every time Peter said a word, his father would boom him. At last Peter learned to say nothing. Ya ya ya. Thank you.”² “Boom, boom, boom,” as the reader comes to realize, is the linguistic, onomatopoeic representation of Peter Stillman Jr.’s being beaten by his father for speaking. Stillman Jr.’s experience of solitude in the dark room is an experience of trauma. In fact, the very experience of language becomes a traumatic experience when the infant’s primitive instinct to express himself in order to have his basic needs and desires fulfilled is met with beating, with physical violence. Stillman Jr. even goes on to qualify his experience of the dark room as an experience that escapes language: “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” (emphasis is ours). The statement “as if I could talk about it,” is not only an instance of a terrible irony in which an individual deprived of language is made to use language to narrate his traumatic experience inside the room, but it also suggests that the experience inside the dark room is an experience that escapes all linguistic representation; it cannot be symbolized; it cannot be named, spoken, described. In spite of its unnamability, Stillman attempts to represent through language his experience of the dark room. This is achieved mostly through the repetition of abstractions and onomatopoeia: “dark” is repeated over and over, as is the onomatopoeia “boom.” Stillman Jr.’s language

1 “The father talked about God. He wanted to know if God had a language... The father thought that a baby might speak it if the baby saw no people.” (*City of Glass*, p. 20)

2 *City of Glass*, p. 20.

thus acquires a poetic dimension, which further suggests that his experience of solitude, his experience of trauma, exceeds the scope of ordinary language, and can only be communicated poetically (it should be mentioned that in his introduction of himself to Quinn, he is at a stage where he has undergone the process of acquiring what could be called ordinary language – the language used by the people native to his country). Onomatopoeias are exceptions to the arbitrariness of the sign – as they could be universally understood without the need for a convention between speakers, being as they are, these rare instances in which the signifier imitates the signified. Thus, they could be seen as what helps Stillman Jr. recreate a connection with others. They provide him with a path, within the realm of language, to reach the others. As if to emphasize the poetic quality of his introduction, and as if, by the same gesture, to pay a tribute to Poe, Stillman repeats, periodically, like the Raven would, “Anymore.” A distant, yet familiar echo of “The Raven’s” “Nevermore,” the repetition of “Anymore” seems to be a way for Peter Stillman Jr. to insist on the inescapable, interminable melancholia resulting from his traumatic experience of the dark room.

Aside from its poetic quality, another significant characteristic of Peter Stillman’s speech that can be observed in the passage quoted above is his repetition of terms suggesting the lack of importance of his speech: he tends to follow his utterances with such expression as “no matter,” “not that it makes a difference,” “it makes no difference.” As if to suggest that what he says makes no difference; as if to point out to the futility of the instance of speech itself – whether he speaks or not is not important. However, his speech is important – it must take place in order for the quest to begin, in order for Auster’s narrative to unfold, and in order for Stillman Jr. to survive. Stillman Jr. seems to juxtapose the importance or necessity of his speech with his indifference to it. In his denial of its importance, he articulates a contradiction. Added to that, his speech also reveals such

formulations of impossibility as “if I am Peter, so much the better. That is to say, so much the worse—” formulations that are in essence logical fallacies where the conclusion contradicts the premise. Such a formulation is reminiscent of the formulation with which Blanchot opens his text, *L'Écriture du désastre*: “Le désastre ruine tout en laissant tout en l'état,”¹ suggesting that impossibility is inherent to the notion of disaster, that impossibility is the mode in which disaster operates, that the experience of disaster is the experience of impossibility. Stillman Jr.'s paradoxical formulations to describe his experience of the dark room could thus be seen as his way of communicating the experience of disaster. If the experience of the dark room is ineffable, it would appear that it can only be articulated as impossibility, and via formulations of impossibility.

Thus, in Auster's work, solitude is presented as, above all else, a spatial experience – an experience in space, and an experience of space. In order to be present, the experience of absence is necessary, not only for the characters (as seen in Samuel Auster's case), but also for speech. In equating silence with absence, Auster also seems to insist on silence as the condition of possibility for speech: words for him are born of silence – silence being a modality of solitude. If words are born of solitude, they are also born in solitude: through the isolation of the figures of the writers in small, confined spaces. The small, closed room in Auster's texts becomes the embodiment of solitude in which writing originates. But, Auster does not view the room as a mere embodiment of solitude. Commenting on Van Gogh's painting, *The Bedroom*, the author-narrator of the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* writes: “the room is not a representation of solitude, it is the substance of solitude itself.”² However, the experience of solitude in the room, while being one of creativity and creation, can, at times, also be an experience of destruction and disaster.

1 *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 1.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 153.

The room is not only occupied by Auster's characters, but is also inhabited by the product of the characters' creativity: the book – which is another manifestation of a confined space in Auster's work. In the second novella of the *New York Trilogy*, *Ghosts*, the narrator explicitly ascribes to the book, the status of a room: "How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?"¹ The book, however, has its own status in the Austerian corpus, and plays a significant role in the thematization of disaster.

1 *New York Trilogy*, p. 172.

Chapter 7

The Space of the Book

“A book is a mysterious object, I said, and once it floats out into the world, anything can happen.”¹

Born in the room and inhabiting the room, the book figures consistently and prominently throughout Auster’s work. It is what binds the solitary Austerian writer-character to the room. It is the link between the room and the world outside of the room: it marks the boundary between the inside and the outside. The writer-character fully experiences solitude via the instance of writing, as Auster posits in the *Invention of Solitude*:

Every book is an image of solitude. It is a tangible object that one can pick up, put down, open, and close, and its words represent many months, if not many years, of one man’s solitude, so that with each word one reads in a book one might say to himself that he is confronting a particle of that solitude. A man sits alone in a room and writes. Whether the book speaks of loneliness or companionship, it is necessarily a product of solitude.²

In addition to being the product of solitude, the book is given two additional dimensions in this definition. First, the book is a tangible object – it acquires a materiality that makes it a part of space, a space within space. Secondly, an equivalence between the book and time is established – the time of its writing becomes embedded in it. Through the

1 *Leviathan*, p. 5

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 145.

book, an equivalence between time and space is established – the thickness of the pages representing months (if not years) of writing. The abundance of the solitary figures of the writer, shown in the process of writing, is not the only way in which Auster thematizes the book in his novels and autobiographies – which suggests that other conceptions or definition of the book might appear in Auster’s prose. If the book can be born of solitude and in solitude, it also lies at the frontier between silence and speech. As seen in the previous chapter, Anna Blume’s book, which takes the shape of the letter without an addressee, and which is the direct result of silence, of Isabel’s loss of speech, is a means to restore speech, and prevent the disaster of absolute silence. In this case, the book is where the precarious speech or the trembling, fading voice goes to live, to survive, to stand the test of time and space. In short, the voice solidifies, becomes immortal in the book. The book, however, is not only the shrine of the voices of Auster’s narrators, characters or homodiegetic narrators. At times, the Austerian book also opens up the space for other literary voices, making other literary works – other books – part of itself, and as a result, the book starts contrasting with the room in which it is born in that it ceases to be a space of solitude.

Intertextuality further complicates the question of the problematic voice(s) in Auster’s work. Sophie Vallas deals extensively and thoroughly with the question of the voice(s) in her dissertation “La voix de l’impossible sujet dans l’œuvre de Paul Auster,” as well as in her essay “‘All the others inside me’ : les enjeux ambigus de la citations dans ‘The Book of Memory’ (*The Invention of Solitude*) de Paul Auster,” which is centered around the very notion of intertextuality in the second section of Auster’s first work in prose. In her essay on “The Book of Memory,” Vallas argues that while the instances of citations of Montaigne’s works coincide with the author’s disappearance from the text – his stepping aside, giving up his place and giving over his speech to the other (“*laissant la*

place et la parole à l'autre"¹) – in Auster's work, it is the process by which the author asserts his presence, his authority, his Austerity. The voice of the author (hiding behind that of the narrator A.) gives birth to itself by making use of the myriad of other voices that appear to pose an obstacle:

Force est de constater que cette voix, dans sa pratique citationnelle, se donne naissance à elle-même en multipliant à plaisir les obstacles à son propre avènement : parce qu'elle s'entoure de dizaines d'autres voix, parce qu'elle se condamne à un commentaire qu'elle sait au fond redondant, parce qu'elle se prend délicieusement au piège du miroir aux citations qui promet différents et trompeurs reflets de soi, la voix de A. finit par se citer elle-même, intensifiant ainsi cette confusion entre texte original et texte second déjà générée par la place du commentaire, une confusion qui semble la placer finalement dans les marges de la page— car l'autocitation, dans "The Book of Memory", consiste finalement tout à la fois à célébrer une voix nouvelle et à citer un auteur qui restera A.-nonyme.²

For Vallas, the instance of (copious) citation in "The Book of Memory" does not coincide with the loss of A.'s voice, but results instead in the voice's quoting itself ("autocitation"), thereby insisting on its own presence, while blurring the boundaries between the original text and the citations. In other words, the abundance of books within "The Book of Memory" reinforces its singularity: appropriating what is foreign to the text of "The Book of Memory" gives it more freedom to appropriate what is innate, domestic, or familiar to it. Thus, other books (Biblical, literary, philosophical works, among others) become prisoners in the Austerian book, and lose themselves imperceptibly in it.

The figure of the book as a prison is established in Auster's very first work of narrative fiction: *The New York Trilogy*. *Leviathan* presents a slightly different relationship between the book and the prison. Benjamin Sachs's first novel *The New Colossus* is conceived during his time in prison. As suggested in the previous chapter, the narrator of

1 Vallas, S. "“All the others inside me”: les enjeux ambigus de la citation dans ‘The Book of Memory’ (*The Invention of Solitude*) de Paul Auster". *E-rea*. 2004. Web. Aug. 19, 2014. <<http://erea.revues.org/484>>.

2 *Ibid.*

Ghosts in *The New York Trilogy* asks a crucial question: “How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?”¹ The focus in this question seems to be as much on the room as it is on the book. The rhetorical question could be seen as the formulation of a frustration, brought on by the experience of imprisonment. In other words, the Austerian book is not just a room – not just any room – it is also a prison from which Blue, the apprentice detective, would like to escape. At the same time, the narrator’s rhetorical question gestures towards a universality: it summarizes the condition of any reader, of every reader, equating the experience of reading with the experience of imprisonment. At the same time, reading is the process by which a book permanently becomes a part of the reader. Every book holds its reader captive, not only during the act of reading, but also once the reader reaches the end of the book.

Thinking of the book as a prison raises the question of spatiality in the definition of the book. In this chapter, we will first examine Auster’s own shifting definitions of the book that are made part of his narratives. Then we will discuss the relationship between the book and the disaster, and see how the book is presented as a space of disaster in Auster’s work.

7.1 Defining the book

In his essay on “L’Absence du livre,” Maurice Blanchot provides several definitions of the book, one of which presents the book as a space:

La culture est liée au livre. Le livre comme dépôt et receptacle du savoir s’identifie au savoir. Le livre n’est pas seulement le livre des bibliothèques, ce labyrinthe où s’enroulent en volume toutes les combinaisons des formes, des mots et des lettres.

1 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 172.

Le livre est le Livre. À lire, à écrire, toujours déjà écrit, toujours déjà transi par la lecture, le livre forme condition pour toute possibilité de lecture et d'écriture.¹

Blanchot thus defines the book as a container – a space in which knowledge can be stored. But this space of the book implies a duality: the book, for him, is defined by the material space of the object that is found in libraries, and at the same time, the book is also that which exceeds the material boundaries of the object named “a book.” For him, the book precedes its material, spatial existence: it is at once the knowledge that already exists in the world and the knowledge still to be produced, that is to say, still to be read, to be written (“À lire, à écrire”). The book is that which invites reading as well as that which invites writing – it is at once the realization (actualization) and the potential. Thus he equates the book with knowledge, and the material book is born of the knowledge that already exists in the world outside of its pages.

Blanchot's conception of the book seems to be an appropriate point of departure for our understanding of how Auster conceives of it. We shall therefore begin by looking at Auster's definition of the book, and discuss how his view of it converges with Blanchot's at a certain point, and deviates from it, at another.

As seen in the previous part of this study, in *Moon Palace*, Marco Stanley Fogg sells, box by box, the 1492 books that he inherits from his uncle, Victor, in exchange for money. The books become money, and thus lose their function as books, as receptacles of knowledge (as Blanchot would have it), or as that which calls upon writing and reading. The definition of books and the question of their value becomes one of the concerns in *Moon Palace*. After making an effort to justify to the reader his traumatic (“wrenching”)

¹ Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Entretien infini*. Paris : Gallimard, 1983. p. 621.

experience of trading in Uncle Victor's books for money¹ at "Chandler's Bookstore," and frustrated by the fact that the books did not yield much due to Chandler's viewing the books differently than himself,² the narrator M.S. Fogg shares with the reader his own understanding of books:

For me, books were not the containers of words so much as the words themselves, and the value of a given book was determined by its spiritual quality rather than its physical condition. A dog-eared Homer was worth more than a spanking Virgil, for example; three volumes of Descartes were worth less than one by Pascal. Those were essential distinctions for me, but for Chandler they did not exist. A book was no more than an object to him, a thing that belonged to the world of things, and as such it was not radically different from a shoebox, a toilet plunger, or a coffeepot.³

M.S. Fogg and Chandler's contradictory understanding of books happen to be organized around the two central elements of Blanchot's definition of the book, as seen above⁴: space (or materiality) and knowledge. M.S. Fogg, unlike Blanchot, seems to reject the spatial definition of books. He does not see them as receptacles or "containers" of words, or the knowledge for which the words are signifiers, but as "the words themselves." Put differently, for Fogg, books are not containers of knowledge, but knowledge itself – knowledge which exists (has the ability to exist) independently of its material limits. In this sense, his definition of the book seems to be aligned with Blanchot's. For both Fogg and Blanchot, words and knowledge (words or knowledge) precede and exceed the boundaries set by the pages of a book. The narrator of *Moon Palace* seems to insist on the singularity of each book. It would appear that, for him, a book is to be appreciated because of its

1 "I found it wrenching to part with Uncle Victor's former possessions, but at the same time I knew that he would not have held it against me. I had somehow discharged my debt to him by reading the books, and now that I was so short of money, it seemed only logical that I should take the next step and convert the books into cash." (*Moon Palace*, p. 22)

2 "The problem was that I wouldn't earn enough. Chandler drove hard bargains, and his understanding of books was so different from mine that I barely knew what to say to him." (p. 22)

3 *Moon Palace*, pp. 22-23.

4 It should be repeated that the definition of the book extracted from Blanchot's work is only a small fragment, and not his entire and absolute definition of it. His definition of the book is much more complex, and his essay on "The Absence of the Book" (from which the quote is extracted) elaborates these complexities.

singularity: he seems to appreciate a book by Homer not because Homer, for him, is better than Virgil (although that may be the insinuation of his claim), but because Homer is not Virgil. For Fogg, books have meaning and value only in relation to other books, whereas for Chandler, books are interchangeable with other objects of ordinary life that have little value. However, the reader of *Moon Palace* is struck by one blatant contradiction: Fogg's looking at books for the singularity of the knowledge they represent, in the above passage, stands in stark opposition to his conception of the books during the period of his mourning his uncle's death.

Two weeks after Uncle Victor's funeral, Fogg decides to read all of the books he inherited, and this gesture is part of the process of his mourning his uncle's death:

Two weeks after the funeral, I picked out one of the boxes at random, slit the tape carefully with a knife, and read everything that was inside it. It proved to be a strange mixture, packed with no apparent order or purpose. There were novels and plays, history books and travel books, chess guides and detective stories, science fiction and works of philosophy – an absolute chaos of print. It made no difference to me. I read each book to the end and refused to pass judgment on it. As far as I was concerned, each book was equal to every other book, each sentence was composed of exactly the right number of words, and each word stood exactly where it had to be. That was how I chose to mourn my Uncle Victor. One by one, I would open every box, and one by one I would read every book. That was the task I set for myself, and I stuck with it to the bitter end.¹

In comparison to the previous quote, this passage reveals another difference. Marco Stanley Fogg, in this particular passage, seems to see books as objects – physical or material entities. Aside from these contradictions that arise relationally – when the reader compares them, looks at them in relation to each other – another contradiction appears, but within this very passage: in spite of categorizing the books and listing some of the genres of literature contained in the box, Fogg insists on his indifference towards the books. In

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 21

saying that “each book [is] equal to every other book,” Fogg seems to reject the singularity of the books that will be suddenly become important, just a single page later. But an important detail seems to be revealed in this passage: reading the books is the process by which he is mourning Uncle Victor’s death. His indifference to the books could therefore be seen as a result of his mourning. In his essay *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud posits: “Serious mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved one, contains the same painful mood, the loss of interest in the outside world – except as it recalls the deceased – the loss of ability to choose any new love-object – which would mean replacing the mourned one – turning away from any task that is not related to the memory of the deceased.”¹ If mourning consists in a loss of interest in the outside world, then Fogg’s indifference to the books could be seen as a symptom of mourning. Fogg seems to be in denial of their singularity, and his refusal to “pass judgment” on them reinforces this. Judging a book would imply that he considers the books as works of art that call upon judgment. However, for Fogg, the books take the place of Uncle Victor, and insofar as they replace or stand for uncle Victor, they lose their status as works of art, and as a consequence, also lose their singularity. Accepting their singularity would therefore mean “replacing the mourned one.”

Does the fact that just one page later, a book by Homer starts to distinguish itself from a work by Virgil, then mark the end of mourning? Put differently, does it then mean that the end of mourning coincides with the emergence of the singularity of the books? To look at the sudden establishing of the singularity of books as marking the end of M.S. Fogg’s mourning Uncle Victor, could be one way to explain the contradiction in the

1 Freud, Sigmund. *On Murder Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 204.

definition and value of books for Fogg. However, there might be another way to construe it.

For Fogg, the difference in the books arises at the time of their being exchanged for money. The difference arises only when money comes into the picture – when the books are turned into money, when they risk losing their status and function as books, and become interchangeable with physical objects as part of the network of transactions made possible by money. It could thus be said that money institutes difference in the books. Moreover, if the difference in (or between) the books is instituted by money, it is mediated through another difference: the difference between the self and the other. The value (monetary or otherwise) of a book for the self (for M.S. Fogg) is different from the value of a book for the other (Chandler).

A few pages later, still another contradiction arises which also seems to reinforce the idea that it is in fact money that institutes the singularity of the books. Summarizing his experience of reading and selling his uncle's books, Fogg says:

[...] I dutifully read through the last of Uncle Victor's books, then sold them off to Chandler up the street. The closer I got to the end, however, the more trouble the books gave me. I could feel my eyes making contact with the words on the page, 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. When I came to the end, I would start in on the second line, and then the third 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 started to make sense. I touched all the words in those books, and because of that I earned the right to sell them.¹

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 30.

The use of the term “dutifully” to describe the act of reading-as-mourning, once again seems to justify Fogg’s general indifference to the books and the experience of reading during this period. For Freud, “[the] inhibition and restriction of the ego is a manifestation of exclusive devotion to mourning, leaving nothing over for other interests and intentions.”¹ The term “dutifully” is suggestive of Fogg’s “extreme devotion to mourning” that takes away from his investing in anything other than the act of “pure” mourning – that is to say, reading without experience of signification. What is also striking about this passage is that it reveals a curious displacement within the act of reading. First, the act of reading is, as it should be, an experience of seeing: “I could feel my eyes making contact with the words on the page.” But it is an act of reading which produces no signification or meaning: “but no meanings rose up to me anymore.” In short, Fogg’s experience of reading is not an experience of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds (“no meanings rose up to me [...], no sounds echoed in my head.”). Then the act of reading, shifts from the realm of sight to the realm of touch – seeing imperceptibly develops into touching. At this point, it is no longer an experience of reading: it is an experience of the pure materiality of the books: “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 [...] like a blind man reading braille.” It should be observed in passing that unlike a blind man, for whom the reading of braille produces meaning, Fogg’s touching the pages of the books produces no effect of signification, although he claims the opposite: “this actually seemed to make sense.” The meaning (“sense”), if any, then seems to come from outside of the realm of the books.

Thus, reading paradoxically consists, in this case, in the loss of signifiers, signifieds (and therefore signification). In being robbed of language, the knowledge contained in

1 *On Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 204.

books becomes inaccessible. When there are no longer any words, but instead, just “an arbitrary collection of lines and curves,” what remains is silence: “The black marks [...] divulged nothing but their own muteness.” As seen in the previous chapter, in Auster’s work, writing is important because it overcomes silence, and silence, or the loss of words (or loss of speech) is an absolute absence, and is therefore disastrous. In Fogg’s case, reading becomes an experience of disaster.

Thus far, the complexity of the definition of books has been highlighted in a single work: *Moon Palace*. Aside from the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* – which, through its title, makes the notion of the book a central concern (“The Book of Memory”) – the book (the notion of the book) becomes a topic of much discussion in *Leviathan*. It is in this work that Auster appears to challenge this definition even further by introducing another layer of complexity, and by linking it to the concept of the disaster.

The discussion around the notion of the book in *Leviathan* gives rise to a striking definition. Peter Aaron, the narrator of *Leviathan* claims that “[books] are born out of ignorance, and if they go on living after they are written, it’s only to the degree that they cannot be understood.”¹ The question of knowledge thus becomes central to Aaron’s conception of the book. As seen at the beginning of this chapter, one of the ways in which Blanchot conceives of the book is in terms of knowledge: that the book comes from knowledge, is the storage space of knowledge. For Peter Aaron, it comes from the exact opposite, that is to say, from lack of knowledge (“ignorance”). Moreover, for him, their existence or survival depends on their making knowledge inaccessible, impossible. Aaron seems to be articulating Auster’s own views about the notion of the book. In an unpublished interview with Chris Pace, Paul Auster says: “It’s the book that gets under

1 *Leviathan*, p. 40.

your skin, that you can't completely figure out right away, that haunts you and then triggers speculation and thoughts and anxieties and illuminations about the world. The one that you can never completely grab hold of.”¹ The ideal book for Auster is the one that escapes understanding. As discussed in the first part of this study, according to Barthes' distinction in *S/Z* between “readerly” (“*lisible*”) and “writerly” (“*scriptible*”) texts, a writerly text is one whose meaning is open (i.e. not fixed), and one that does not produce a sense of pleasure upon being read – reading a writerly text produces an experience of discomfort. The readerly text, on the other hand, entails pleasure and satisfaction. Auster's ideal book thus seems to be aligned with Barthes' notion of the “writerly” text. In *Leviathan*, Peter Aaron thus seems to define the book as a text that resists meaning. Like the notion of disaster itself, which lies outside the realm of sense, which makes meaning impossible, Auster's ideal book is one of which the reader cannot make sense.

7.2 The book as a space of disaster

The premise of *Leviathan*, like many other Austerian narratives, is writing. Peter Aaron takes it upon himself to write the true story about Benjamin Sachs (who dies in a bomb explosion) before the FBI agents are able to identify him: “It's not that I want to defend what he did, but since he's no longer in a position to defend himself, the least I can do is explain who he was and give the true story of how he happened to be on that road in northern Wisconsin.”² Like the first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, “The Portrait of an Invisible Man,” in which the narrative is born of Samuel Auster's absence, Aaron's writing, in *Leviathan*, is born of Sachs's absence. *Leviathan* is born of disaster, and Peter Aaron renders this explicit: “We hadn't talked in close to a year, but he had said enough

1 Pace, Chris. “Unpublished interview with Paul Auster.” Web. 17 Aug. 2014.
<<http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/links/secret.html>>

2 *Leviathan*, p. 2.

during our last conversation to convince me that he was in deep trouble, rushing headlong toward some dark, *unnameable disaster*.”¹ Thus, Peter Aaron’s writing project, and therefore, the story of *Leviathan* are articulated around this unnameable disaster. In fact the unnameability of the disaster is the condition of possibility of the narrative, and this claim deserves further explanation. While the first page – the first line, to be precise – already names the disaster as being an explosion (“a man blew himself up”), the troubles that drove Ben Sachs to his death from an explosion are not revealed in the incipit, and thus become the object of the narrative. The rest of the story reveals how the final disaster turns out to be a culmination of other disasters.

Peter, however, is not the only figure of the writer in *Leviathan*. Several of its characters write books. Benjamin Sachs is the author of the novel *The New Colossus* that, as previously discussed, he wrote while in prison. He had another book underway when he died – also named *Leviathan*. As Peter later declares: “To mark what will never exist, I have given my book the same title that Sachs was planning to use for his: *Leviathan*.”² Peter Aaron’s *Leviathan* is thus a book born of a book.

What should also be noted about Benjamin Sachs is that it is his association with Dimaggio that leads to his death. Dimaggio, whom Ben accidentally kills, is Lillian’s husband. Dimaggio is another character in *Leviathan* whose writing becomes a key element in the unfolding of the story.³ When Ben Sachs finally finds the courage to go into Dimaggio’s study at Lillian’s house in Berkeley, he stumbles upon some of his belongings, one of which becomes particularly interesting to him:

1 *Leviathan*, p. 3; emphasis is ours.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 159.

3 Dimaggio is not a writer in the true sense of the word: he holds an academic position in the History department at Berkeley.

‘I finally found the courage to go into his room,’ Sachs said. [...] ‘Nothing personal was left – no letters or documents, no diaries or telephone numbers, no clues about his life with Lillian. But I did stumble across some books. Three or four volumes of Marx, a biography of Bakunin, a pamphlet by Trotsky on race relations in America, that sort of thing. And then, sitting in a black binder in the bottom drawer of his desk, I found a copy of his dissertation. That was the key. If I hadn’t found that, I don’t think any of the other things would have happened.’¹

Dimaggio’s study is the place where the supremacy of books is established: the books seem to trump all of the other personal archival documents, like letters or diaries. Ben Sachs explicitly mentions that it is Dimaggio’s dissertation (dissertation resembling a book – essentially, a book-length project) that is mainly responsible for the final disaster. If Peter Aaron’s book is born of Ben Sachs’s disaster, his eventual self-destruction, is born of a book: Dimaggio’s dissertation on Berkman. However, Sachs’s immediate response to Dimaggio’s dissertation is an urge to write:

My first thought was to write something about him. Something similar to what he had written about Berkman – only better, deeper, a genuine examination of his soul. I planned it as an elegy, a memorial in the shape of a book. If I could do this for him, I thought, then maybe I could start to redeem myself, and then maybe something good could start to come out of his death. I would have to talk to a lot of people, of course, go around the country gathering information, setting up interviews with as many people as I could find: his parents and relatives, his army buddies, the people he went to school with, professional colleagues, old girlfriends, members of Children of the Planet, hundreds of different people. It would be an enormous project, a book that would take me years to finish. But that was the point somehow. As long as I was devoting myself to Dimaggio, I would be keeping him alive. I would give him my life, so to speak, and in exchange he would give my life back to me.²

Dimaggio’s writing thus, in turn, inspires the writing of a book – “an elegy, a memorial in the shape of a book.” The book in this instance becomes a site or the space of memory – a receptacle or container of memory. However, as the reader eventually learns, this elegy or memorial will only be achieved in the form of death. Besides, Sachs appears

1 *Leviathan*, p. 250.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 253.

to imagine the elegy or the memorial in the guise of a biography: an attempt to reconstruct the life or the history of Dimaggio. What links Dimaggio and Sachs is not only the former's dissertation, but their shared interest in history. Sachs's *The New Colossus* is a historical novel¹ and Dimaggio's academic work – especially his dissertation – involves the study of a historical figure: Alexander Berkman.² Sachs's biographical approach therefore does not seem to be an arbitrary choice. Moreover, Sachs's method to reconstruct the life and works of Dimaggio, elaborated in the above passage, goes to show to what extent one's identity is a construct – perhaps even a fictional construct, given the fact that Sachs intends to conduct talks with the people Dimaggio knew so that they would be able to tell him stories about Dimaggio. It reinforces the idea that identity is not innate, that it is the product of inter-subjective relations: the self is defined in relation to others, and this in turn establishes its singularity. In devoting himself to Dimaggio, Sachs desires to “keep him alive,” to give Dimaggio his life in exchange for his own. This implies that in killing Dimaggio, Sachs loses his own life – that his killing Dimaggio coincides with Dimaggio's killing him. Thus, writing about Dimaggio is not only a means to reverse his death, but also to reverse Sachs's own death. Sachs seeks to be reborn – to give birth to himself – through writing. The book, in this instance, is not a site of disaster, but a space of creation of life. It then appears ironical that it is in writing an elegy – a poetic text lamenting death – to Dimaggio that Sachs desires to be reborn. In expressing a desire to write about Dimaggio, Sachs desires to operate a chiasmus in which the boundaries of life and death, of presence and absence, are transgressed: death crosses over into life. Eventually, the suggested exchange and interchangeability between Sachs and Dimaggio (“As long as I was devoting myself to Dimaggio, I would be keeping him alive. I would give him my life,

1 “As every reader knows, *The New Colossus* is a historical novel, a meticulously researched book set in America between 1876 and 1890, and based on documented, verifiable facts.” (*Leviathan*, p. 41)

2 “It was a study of Alexander Berkman – a reappraisal of his life and works in four hundred fifty-odd pages.” (*Leviathan*, p. 251).

so to speak, and in exchange he would give my life back to me.”) transpires when Sachs, taking the route of terrorism (the Statue of Liberty explosions), *becomes* Dimaggio in order to “carry out Dimaggio’s work.”¹ In other words, Dimaggio and Sachs become one through the latter’s acts of terrorism.

However, the reader learns just as soon as Sachs’s desires and intentions are revealed (and the end of the book confirms this), that the book Sachs intends to write about Dimaggio never materializes:

I never got anywhere with it. I sat down a few times to take notes, but I couldn’t concentrate, I couldn’t organize my thoughts. I don’t know what the problem was. Maybe I still had too much hope that things would work out with Lillian. Maybe I didn’t believe it would be possible for me to write again. God knows what was stopping me. But every time I picked up a pen and tried to start, I would break out in a cold sweat, my head would spin, and I’d feel as though I was about to fall. Just like the time I fell off the fire escape. It was the same panic, the same feeling of helplessness, the same rush toward oblivion.²

The act of writing about Dimaggio is described as a disastrous experience. Sachs compares writing to this experience of the disaster of falling down from the fourth floor fire escape on the night of July 4th 1986.³ Put differently, writing repeats the previous disaster, and as a result, it no longer evokes a creative force, but rather, a destructive force. Sachs’s failure to write about Dimaggio is destructive for another reason: the elegy was meant to be a way for Sachs to keep Dimaggio alive, and in exchange for it, to get his life back. By not writing this book, he simultaneously, and symbolically, commits suicide and kills Dimaggio.

1 *Leviathan*, p. 256.

2 *Leviathan*, pp. 253-254.

3 “Perhaps Ben’s life did break in two that night, dividing into a distinct before and after [...]” (*Leviathan*, p. 119.)

In addition to that, this passage is a good reminder of the fact that Sachs becomes Dimaggio or takes his place, well before he desires to be at one with him through writing and organizing the terrorist activities. Ben Sachs becomes Dimaggio even before he enters into his study and discovers his dissertation. This occurs when he goes to Berkeley and ends up living in Lillian's house – not only taking on the role of the provider (by offering Lillian money), but also taking Dimaggio's place in the household, and especially, Dimaggio's place in Lillian's bed, as they consummate their new relationship. What is striking in the above passage is that what makes it impossible for Sachs to write about Dimaggio is, among other things, Lillian ("I don't know what the problem was. Maybe I still had too much hope that things would work out with Lillian"). If writing about Dimaggio is supposed to be a means of establishing the specularly between him and Sachs, then this specularly is broken by Lillian. She installs difference. When the specularly is broken, writing suffers. Specularity between Dimaggio and Sachs is, for Sachs, the condition of the possibility of writing. It is interesting to note that Lillian at once enables the interchangeability between Dimaggio and Sachs in the house(hold), in her bedroom, but at the same time, she institutes difference between them in the act of writing the book.

There is, however, another instance of interchangeability that at once runs parallel to that between Dimaggio and Sachs, and is related to it. When Sachs moves into Lillian's house, he not only takes the place of Dimaggio, but also takes Lillian's place in the life of her daughter, Maria. Dimaggio, Lillian and Sachs become entangled in a complex triangle. Sachs becomes Dimaggio, but he also becomes Lillian, and as if to emphasize this, the narrator, Peter Sachs, tells the reader: "Like any other American housewife, he shopped for food, he cleaned, he took dirty clothes to the Laundromat, he worried about buying the

right brand of peanut butter for school lunches.”¹ The interchangeability between Sachs and Lillian therefore implies a reversal of gender roles, if not a gender reversal. To complete the experience of becoming an “American housewife,” Sachs also becomes invested in little Maria’s life, as a mother. However, his role as Maria’s mother is imperiled when Lillian and Sachs turn into lovers:

[Sachs and Lillian] had fallen in love, perhaps, but they had also upset the balance of the household, and little Maria wasn’t the least bit happy with the change. Her mother had been given back to her, but she had lost something as well, and from her point of view, this loss must have felt like the crumbling of a world. For nearly a month, she and Sachs had lived together in a kind of paradise. She had been the sole object of his affections, and he had coddled her and doted on her in ways that no one else had ever done. Now, without a single word of warning, he had abandoned her. He had moved into her mother’s bed, and rather than stay at home and keep her company, he left her with baby-sitters and went out every night. She resented all this. She resented her mother for coming between them [...]²

During the month that Sachs and little Maria spend together “in a kind of paradise,” the two of them grow inseparable. Maria relates to him as she would to a mother. In fact, when the narrator points out that “[her] mother has been given back to her,” it is unclear to whom he is referring – Sachs or Lillian. When Sachs arrives in Berkeley, Lillian does not appear to participate much in Maria’s life. But when Sachs begins to invest in Maria’s life and her well-being by giving her nourishment (in fact, the first morning he spends at Lillian’s house, he makes breakfast for Maria while Lillian is still asleep in her bedroom) and showering her with love and affection, he essentially fulfills the role of her mother. Thus, the statement “[her] mother had been given back to her” could be seen as her finding a mother in Sachs, to compensate the loss of Lillian, her absence in Maria’s life. Seeing Sachs as her mother seems to establish the specularity that defines the mother-child relationship, and like any child, Maria wants to be the “sole object of [Sachs’s] affections.”

1 *Leviathan*, p. 227.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 238.

However, when Lillian and Sachs engage in sexual relations, the specularity between Maria and Sachs is broken, forbidding Maria from fulfilling her desire of the mother (Sachs). Lillian thus institutes difference between Sachs and Maria (for which Maria resents Lillian: “She resented her mother for coming between them”) and in so doing, she (Lillian) assumes the role of the father. Lillian could thus be seen as operating the “law”¹ of the father that prohibits incest between the mother and child.

Thus, Sachs’s ability to be (interchangeable with) at once Dimaggio and Lillian suggests how his identity is volatile – how he is nobody in particular, and because he is nobody in particular, he can be both Dimaggio and Lillian. Therefore, when he entertains the idea of orchestrating the Statue of Liberty bombings, he feels a sense of wholeness: “All of a sudden, my life seemed to make sense to me. [...] It was a miraculous 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.”² He abandons the disastrous experience of the writing of the book (the elegy for Dimaggio) in favor of a series of disasters (the series of explosions), one of which will be the final disaster: his death. Ironically, his death involves an experience of physical (corporeal) fragmentation: “His body burst into dozens of small pieces and fragments of his corpse were found as far as fifty feet away from the site of the explosion.”³ Fragmented in his identity, Sachs becomes whole through the fragmentation of his body at death. The explosion makes possible what the book does not.

1 Lacan speaks of the “law” of the Father that institutes difference between the mother and child: “C’est dans le *nom du père* qu’il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l’orée des temps historiques identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi.” (Lacan, Jacques. “Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse,” *Écrits*. Paris : Seuil, 1966, p. 278)

2 *Leviathan*, p. 256.

3 *Leviathan*, p. 1.

Thus far, we have seen how Dimaggio's book (his dissertation) is responsible for setting into motion the final disaster or explosion with which *Leviathan* opens. While Dimaggio's book entails disaster, the (aborted) book that he inspires Sachs to write is the experience of disaster itself (in its repeating Sachs's disastrous fall), and although it never gets written, it is realized in the instance of the final explosion. Mallarmé makes a curious comment linking up explosion and the book, that Maurice Blanchot quotes in *l'Écriture du désastre*: “*Il n'est d'explosion qu'un livre* (Mallarmé)”¹ suggesting that the only explosion possible is a book.² Paul Auster, who is not only a reader, but also a translator of Mallarmé's, seems to toy with this idea in *Leviathan*.

In *Leviathan*, the final explosion is not triggered only by Dimaggio's book. Another book is also said to be responsible for it: the address book that Maria Turner happens to find: “Long before any of us knew her, [Maria] went out one morning to buy film for her camera, saw a little black address book lying on the ground, and picked it up. That was the event that started the whole miserable story. Maria opened the book, and out flew the devil, out flew a scourge of violence, mayhem, and death.”³ In this case, it is the book (the address book), as a material object, that causes the disaster. As if to insist on its materiality, the narrator (Peter Aaron) gives an exhaustive description of the book.⁴ Unlike the previous instances, it is not the act of writing the book that is highlighted. The act of

1 *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 16. ; original emphasis.

2 “*There is no explosion except a book.* (Mallarmé)” ; original emphasis (Blanchot, M. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock, p. 7).

3 *Leviathan*, pp. 72-73.

4 “It was one of those standard little address books manufactures by the Schaeffer Eaton Company, about six inches tall and four inches across, with a flexible imitation leather cover, spiral binding, and thumb tabs for each letter of the alphabet. It was a well-worn object, filled with over two hundred names, addresses, and telephone numbers. The fact that many of the entries had been crossed out and rewritten, that a variety of writing instruments had been used on almost every page (blue ballpoints, black felt tips, green pencils) suggested that it had belonged to the owner for a long time. Maria's first thought was to return it, but as is often the case with personal property, the owner had neglected to write his name in the book. She searched in all the logical places – the inside front cover, the first page, the back – but no name was to be found. Not knowing what to do with it after that, she dropped the book into her bag and carried it home.” (*Leviathan*, p. 73)

opening the book, and reading the addresses it contains – a gesture which inaugurates Maria's quest (to meet the people whose information is recorded in the address book) – is sufficient in laying the groundwork for the disasters to come (Sachs's fall, his explosions, his death). At the origin of the disasters in *Leviathan*, is thus an unidentified person, a non-character, who never appears in the story: the owner of the address book. The only certain information about this mysterious entity is that he/she is an acquaintance of Dimaggio's, because it is thanks to this address book that Lillian, having traded places with Maria Turner, meets Dimaggio and winds up marrying him. If an address is the spatial particulars of a person, then Dimaggio first enters into the picture and the story through his spatial identifications.

In all of the above instances, the books that appear in *Leviathan* are all related to the most important disasters: the fall, the series of Statue of Liberty explosions, death. These major disasters are accompanied by other smaller disasters in the novel. One such disaster is the disintegration of Peter Aaron's marriage to Delia. Although this event is also a link in the chain of events triggering the bigger disasters (if it were not for Peter and Delia's separation, he would never have met Maria – the finder of the above mentioned address book), Peter experiences it at a very personal level, and this event is therefore a disaster in itself, rather than being a stepping-stone for the other disasters to come. The final straw in their turbulent relationship is Delia's journal entry:

[W]hen I entered the room I saw her journal lying open on the desk. [...] She had often read passages from it to me, but until that evening I had never so much dared to look at it without her permission. Standing there at that moment, however, I found myself gripped by a tremendous urge to read those pages. In retrospect, I understand that this meant our life together was already finished, that my willingness to break this trust proved that I had given up any hope for our marriage, but I wasn't aware of it then. [...]

So I looked down at the open journal, and once I crossed that threshold, I wasn't able to turn back. I saw that I was the subject of that day's entry, and what I found there was an exhaustive catalogue of complaints and grievances, a grim little document set forth in the language of a laboratory report. [...]

It was all so abrupt, so final, that I almost felt relieved. [...] I couldn't doubt where things stood anymore, and however shaken I might have been in those first moments, I knew that I had brought this disaster down on myself. [...] [The] next morning I moved out.¹

The “disaster” of their separation has a book for its source: Delia's journal. Like Maria Turner, and unlike the previously mentioned characters of *Leviathan*, Delia is not a writer by profession. She is a free-lance copyeditor. Yet, it is the instance of her writing that brings disaster. Put differently, she resorts to the act of writing in order to orchestrate the disaster.² However, for Peter, the disaster occurs before he even reads the words written about him in Delia's journal. For him, it is his transgression into the space of Delia's intimacy (the space of her personal journal) that is the real disaster (“I understand that this meant our life together was already finished, that my willingness to break this trust proved that I had given up any hope for our marriage”). Disaster, in this instance, is presented as a purely spatial phenomenon, actualized by the transgression of inter-personal boundaries. The pages of Delia's journal – the material object – are not only the limits that separate Peter from Delia, but also separate Peter from the disaster. Besides, in saying that he “brought this disaster down on [himself],” Peter suggests that disaster is no longer an event – it is not unexpected, unforeseen, but rather, the product of will.

1 *Leviathan*, pp. 61-62.

2 Peter contemplates the possibility of Delia's having staged the dissolution of their marriage: “The pages were open on the desk, and Delia had just asked me to go into the room for her. She must have understood that I would notice them. Assuming that was true, it was almost as if she were inviting me to read what she had written. In all events, that was the excuse I gave myself that night, and even now I'm not so sure I was wrong. It would have been just like her to act indirectly, to provoke a crisis she would never have to claim responsibility for. That was her special talent: taking matters into her own hands, even as she convinced herself that her hands were clean.” (*Leviathan*, p. 61)

Leviathan, while abounding in books that engender disaster, is not the only work in which the book plays a significant role in the occurrence of disaster. Another Austerian text in which the book figures as the space of disaster is *Oracle Night*. Its narrator, Sidney Orr, who is also a writer, buys a blue notebook from Mr. Chang's store "PAPER PALACE." The notebook turns out to be a space that actualizes and performs writing, and as a result produces disaster; indeed, it is, at a basic level, a writable prophetic book.¹ The story Orr writes about the relationship between his wife, Grace, and their mutual friend, John Trause (also a writer), materializes, thus leading to the final disaster of Jacob's attack on Peter and Grace, and Grace's miscarriage and hospitalization that results from this act of aggression. While the blue notebook only emerges as a space of disaster towards the end of the narrative, the narrator initially provides the reader with a detailed description of the appearance of the notebook:

The Portuguese notebooks were especially attractive to me, and with their hard covers, quadrille lines, and stitched-in signatures of sturdy, unblottable paper, I knew I was going to buy one the moment I picked it up and held it in my hands. There was nothing fancy or ostentatious about it. It was a practical piece of equipment – stolid, homely, serviceable, not at all the kind of blank book you'd think of offering someone as a gift. But I liked the fact that it was cloth-bound, and I also liked the shape: nine and a quarter by seven and a quarter inches, which made it slightly shorter and wider than most notebooks. I can't explain why it should have been so, but I found those dimensions deeply satisfying, and when I held the notebook in my hands for the first time, I felt something akin to physical pleasure, a rush of sudden, incomprehensible well-being. There were just four notebooks left on the pile, and each one came in a different color: black, red, brown, and blue. I chose the blue, which happened to be the one lying on top.²

1 An additional striking aspect of this particular blue notebook is that not only is it prophetic, but it also makes the act of writing coincide with absence or invisibility. When Sidney Orr starts writing the story of Nick Bowen in the blue notebook, he becomes invisible to his wife, Grace. When Grace gets home from work and peeks into Orr's workroom, she does not see him there. Orr, however, insists that he did not leave his desk, to which Grace replies "Well, I didn't see you. Maybe you were somewhere else. In the bathroom maybe." But Orr swears: "I don't remember going to the bathroom. As far as I know, I was sitting at my desk the whole time." (*Oracle Night*, p. 23)

2 *Oracle Night*, pp. 4-5.

The notebook in this instance is a purely physical, spatial phenomenon – perhaps even a corporeal phenomenon. Orr’s description of the notebook resembles a description he might have given if he were to describe a woman – a female character. Indeed, the terms “attractive,” “stolid,” “homely” (which appears in contradiction to “attractive”) suggest the qualities of a person. He then goes on to state how the physical (corporeal) dimensions of the notebook were “deeply satisfying” – how the experience of touching the notebook brought him “something akin to physical pleasure, a rush of sudden, incomprehensible well-being.” As if touching the notebook amounted to making love to it. Such an interpretation is rendered even more plausible when, a short instant later, Mr. Chang caresses the notebook.¹ It would appear that Orr takes care to describe it vividly as an object of love, so that when the horror of the notebook’s producing reality is revealed, the contrast becomes more tangible. In other words, the pleasant description of the notebook serves as a foil for its disastrous potential. Keeping in mind the fact that the blue notebook is responsible for the disaster articulated at the end of the narrative, the notebook could be seen as a figure of the femme fatale, whose role in detective fiction consists in seducing the detective, and being an agent of doom, by enabling in some way (small or otherwise) the unfolding of the crime.

We have thus seen how the definition of the book becomes problematic for Auster, in that it implies both a materiality, and knowledge that transcends its boundaries. Despite its problematic definition, the ideal book for Auster is one where meaning is not fixed – one that, like disaster itself, cannot be fully understood, one that makes a unified meaning impossible. This led us to look at the book as a space of disaster. We saw how the figure of the book (in its various forms) plays a significant role in the occurrence of disaster or

1 “When he came to the blue notebook, however, he paused for a moment, held it up in the air, and ran his fingers lightly over the cover. It was a gesture of appreciation, almost a caress.” (*Oracle Night*, p. 5)

disastrous events in Auster's novels. The book is such a central figure in Auster's work, that in a particular instance, it even gains the status of a character – a character with corporeal attributes, able to bring, in the manner of a lover, physical pleasure to the narrator, and in its being implicated in the disaster that looms over the narrative, fulfills the role of a femme fatale.

Chapter 8

“Bodies in space:”¹ Disaster and the Body

“[...] and that is where the story begins, in your body, and everything will end in the body as well.”²

For Paul Auster, the body is simultaneously the site of writing (“where the story begins”), and the site of the disaster (where “everything will end”). On the one hand, seeing the body as the locus of loss or end is not in itself a new phenomenon, and directly points to the biblical notion of the original sin. In the Christian tradition, as it is revealed, for instance, in Saint Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* (chapter 7), the body is considered as a space condemned to sin and the site of death:

7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

[...]

7:23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

7:24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

7:25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.³

1 *Winter Journal*, p. 220.

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 12.

3 *King James Bible*. Online. <<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Romans-Chapter-7/>> Web. Aug 20. 2014

On the other hand, Auster's view of the body as the space in which storytelling and writing begin needs further explanation. In our previous chapters, we analyzed two categories of space related to writing: the space of the room and the space of the book. For Paul Auster, a third – and universal – category of space seems indispensable to the act of writing: the body.

8.1 Motion, or the writing body

First, at an extra-textual level, it is worth observing that what caused Paul Auster, originally a poet, to reinvent himself as a writer of prose after a poetic impasse in the late 1970s, is the striking spectacle of the moving body in a dance performance:

The dancers saved you. They are the ones who brought you back to life that evening in December 1978, who made it possible for you to experience the scalding, epiphanic moment of clarity that pushed you through a crack in the universe and allowed you to begin again. Bodies in motion, bodies in space, bodies leaping and twisting through empty unimpeded air, eight dancers in a high school gym in Manhattan, four men and four women, all of them young, eight dancers in their early twenties, and you sitting in the bleachers with a dozen or so acquaintances of the choreographer's to watch an open rehearsal of her new piece.¹

The metaphor, the very image of Auster's being "pushed through a crack in the universe" evokes a disastrous event, a birth. The consequences of this defining moment are detailed in an interview with Larry McCaffrey published in the author's *Collected Prose*²: this image of bodies moving in space is what set into motion Auster's career as a writer of prose. But for Auster, the connection is more than metaphorical, since his own writing

1 *Winter Journal*, p. 220.

2 "The simple fact of watching men and women moving through space filled me with something close to euphoria. The very next day, I sat down and started writing *White Spaces*, a little work of no identifiable genre – which was an attempt on my part to translate the experience of that dance performance into words. It was a liberation for me, a tremendous letting go, and I look back on it now as the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose." *Paul Auster: Collected Prose*, p. 550.

process relies on a specific movement of the body in space: walking. Addressing himself in the second-person singular “you” in *Winter Journal*, the author-narrator says:

In order to do what you do, you need to walk. Walking is what brings the words to you, what allows you to hear the rhythms of the words as you write them in your head. [...] Writing begins in the body [...]. You sit at your desk in order to write down the words, but in your head you are still walking, always walking [...]. Mandelstam: ‘I wonder how many pairs of sandals Dante wore out while working on the *Commedia*.’¹

The body is significant to Auster in its capacity as both a container and a producer of words.² For him, writing does not begin in the static body thinking in the solitude of the room, but in the body in motion: the walking body. Walking being, for Auster, a necessary condition for the act of writing, it is another way for the writer-narrator to experience solitude.³ However, for him, walking and writing are similar not only in their being an experience of solitude, but also in their being an experience of motion in space. As he writes in *White Spaces*: “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 this space [...].⁴” This parallel between writing and walking is actually not specific to Auster alone, and his quoting Mandelstam suggests that the connection between the two activities has already been established by other writers or philosophers. It seems to be best developed by Michel de Certeau in *L’Invention du quotidien*. For de Certeau, walking does not simply resemble writing; it is an instance of writing:

1 *Winter Journal*, pp. 224-225.

2 The writing instrument, or agent, itself acquires a corporeal dimension in this anecdote told in “The Story of My Typewriter”: “The only serious trauma it has suffered occurred in 1979 when my two-year-old son snapped off the carriage return arm. But that wasn't the typewriter's fault. I was in despair for the rest of the day, but the next morning I carried it to a shop on Court Street and had the arm soldered back in place. There is a small scar on that spot now, but the operation was a success, and the arm has held ever since.” (“The Story of My Typewriter”, *Collected Prose*, p. 295).

3 Walking as an experience of solitude is one that is shared by many authors, and Rousseau’s *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* seems to be a perfect illustration of this experience.

4 “White Spaces” *Collected Poems*. p. 159.

[The ordinary practitioners of the city] are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility.¹

In Auster’s work, Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass* is the quintessential “ordinary practitioner of the city” – the quintessential walker and writer.

From the most basic and purely biological point of view, displacement of the body in space presupposes a healthy body – a body capable of walking. If the experience of writing is so intimately tied to the experience of the body moving in space, what happens when disaster strikes the body? Most, if not all, of Auster’s characters (who are often writers) experience a corporeal disaster at one point or another in the course of the narrative. They fall, attack, get attacked, get sick, get mutilated, explode, die. In *Winter Journal*, Paul Auster undertakes an enterprise of cataloguing many such instances of corporeal disasters: “Perhaps it is just as well to put aside your stories for now and try to examine what it has felt like to live inside this body from the first day you can remember being alive until this one. A catalogue of sensory data.”² He then goes on to record every instance of corporeal pleasure and pain he can recall, insisting on physical pains (resulting from disasters), because they are “no doubt more persistent and intractable, and at one time or another nearly every part of [his] body has been subjected to assault”³. Here, the focus is on the author-narrator himself, and not on the host of characters that he has been subjecting to assault over the past three decades. Perhaps he leaves the unspoken cataloguing task up to his readers. However, our aim in this chapter will not be to enumerate such instances, or

1 De Certeau, Michel. “Walking in the City.” *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. p. 93.

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 1.

3 *Winter Journal*, p. 2.

to establish a taxonomy of them, but to analyze two salient categories of corporeal catastrophes emerging from Auster's fiction: illness (the ailing body) and acts of violence and aggression (the maimed body). We will study in particular how they relate to some of the mechanisms of the Austerian disaster highlighted in the previous chapters. These two categories of corporeal disaster will form the two sections of this chapter.

8.2 Illness, or the ailing body

One would expect the most serious diseases such as cancer to appear in Auster's work in the guise of the classic disaster – opening a novel, being the subject of an analepsis, or having their imminence dramatized. However, a study of Auster's corpus reveals that a very different pattern is at play – an apparent oddity that we will attempt to elucidate.

The most striking instance of an ill or ailing character in Auster's work is Nathan Glass in *Brooklyn Follies*, who in the opening sentence of the novel announces, “[is] looking for a quiet place to die.”¹ Two pages later, the cause of the imminent death is revealed:

My lung cancer was in remission, and based on what the oncologist had told me after my most recent exam, there was cause for guarded optimism. That didn't mean I trusted him, however. The shock of the cancer had been so great, I still didn't believe in the possibility of surviving it. I had given myself up for dead, and once the tumor had been cut out of me and I'd gone through the debilitating ordeals of radiation treatment and chemo, once I'd suffered the long bouts of nausea and dizziness, the loss of hair, the loss of will, the loss of job, the loss of wife, it was difficult for me to imagine how to go on.²

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 1.

2 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 3.

These first pages hint at a chronology of three disasters: the onset of the disease (a “shock” – that is to say, from a temporal point of view, an instant), the trauma of living with the disease and enduring its treatment, and the imminent death. Beginning the narration with the disaster is a frequent Austerian pattern, but its orchestration in *Brooklyn Follies* is quite different from the treatment of, for instance, the opening explosion in *Leviathan*. What is striking here is the lack of dramatization of the disease. The narrator Nathan Glass does not build towards it, nor does he announce it suddenly, abruptly. The onset of the disease is already in the past once the novel begins, and the “shock of the cancer” is presented on a mode of description: the actual diagnosis is excluded from the narrative. This is more reminiscent of the chronicle or report form found in Auster’s autobiographies, in which imminence is downplayed (as highlighted in our discussion of *Hand to Mouth* in the first chapter of this study). The losses resulting from the disastrous diagnosis are enumerated, but not dramatized. The focus, in this particular passage, therefore seems to be on the effect of the disaster, rather than on the occurrence of the disaster.

Another Austerian character diagnosed with cancer is Adam Walker in *Invisible*. Like Nathan Glass in *Brooklyn Follies*, Walker’s illness is not made to appear as an event in the story. In a letter to his friend Jim Freeman, Adam Walker reveals the news about his suffering from leukemia:

At the risk of sounding melodramatic, I should also add that I am not well, am in fact slowly dying of leukemia, and will be lucky to hang on for another year. Just so you know what you’re getting yourself into, in case you choose to get into it. I look like a fright these days (no hair! thin as a twig!), but vanity has no place in my world anymore, and I have done my best to come to terms with the thing that has happened to me, even as I fight on with the treatments. A couple of centuries ago,

sixty used to be considered old, and since none of us thought we would live past thirty, reaching the double of that isn't half bad, is it?¹

Walker announces his illness to Jim almost apologetically (“at the risk of sounding melodramatic”), in passing, as an aside. In fact, Walker’s focus in his message to Jim is not his illness, and the rest of the letter is structured around the manuscript of a story he is writing. In addition to that, Walker seems to adopt a distanced tone in his description of the effects of the treatment. Not only does Walker avoid resorting to the use of the language of disaster to announce his illness, but presents the terrible news as a case of good fortune (“that isn't half bad, is it?”). Thus, like Glass’s lung cancer, Walker’s leukemia is downplayed through its not being dramatized in the unfolding of the story.

In a striking contrast with the lack of dramatization of Walker’s leukemia in *Invisible*, and Glass’s own lung cancer announced at the beginning of *Brooklyn Follies*, an illness suddenly befalls Glass in the final pages of the novel:

Ten minutes after Joyce emitted that laugh, my own life was coming to an end. We were sitting on the sofa watching the film, and suddenly I felt a pain in my chest. At first, I took it for heartburn, indigestion brought on by the food I had eaten, but the pain continued to grow, spreading across my upper body as if my insides had caught fire, as if I had swallowed a gallon of hot molten lead, and before long my left arm had gone numb and my jaw was tingling with the pinpricks of a thousand invisible needles. [...] I figured my moment had come. I tried to stand up, but after two steps I fell down and began writhing around on the floor. I was clutching my chest with both hands, I was struggling for breath, and Joyce was holding me in her arms, looking down at my face and telling me to hand in there.²

Unlike the sentence-long summary of the effects of his lung cancer, Glass gives a detailed corporeal account of the occurrence of his attack. The focus in this passage is on the suddenness of the attack. However, this disaster is trivialized just a page later: “I didn’t die. As it turned out, I didn’t even have a heart attack. An inflamed esophagus was the

1 *Invisible*, p. 77.

2 *Brooklyn Follies*, pp. 264-265.

cause of my agony [...].”¹ The occurrence of the attack now becomes its effect: “agony.” The disaster is no longer its occurrence, but rather an ongoing condition.

One question therefore arises for the reader: what is the point of dramatizing a seemingly trivial illness, and attenuating the surprise or “shock” of a more serious illness?

Although the text does not dramatize Glass’s lung cancer, it nevertheless presents it as a key element in the story. In opening the narrative with illness and (imminent) death, the narrator begins with the end. The beginning of the story pretends to kill any potential for a story, telling the reader that the narrator cannot imagine “how to go on.” In so doing, however, he only seems to pave the way for chance events and coincidences to occur, so that when they do occur (for instance, his meeting his nephew Tom), they appear in stark contrast to the lack of hope in the possibility of a future established at the beginning. Indeed, the narrative builds towards the reversal of the implausibility of chance events and coincidences. If the text does not build towards the disaster of illness, it builds towards the disasters of chance events and coincidences. What is also worth noting in the above passage is the fact that the protagonist (the narrator) does not distinguish between illness and death: the diseased body is the deceased body. He sees the diagnosis as the instance of death: “I had given myself up for dead.” A similar reaction to illness is to be found in *Oracle Night*. Like *Brooklyn Follies*, the text of *Oracle Night* opens with the homodiegetic narrator’s illness:

I had been sick for a long time. When the day came for me to leave the hospital, I barely knew how to walk anymore, could barely remember who I was supposed to be. Make an effort, the doctor said, and in three or four months you’ll be back in the swing of things. I didn’t believe him, but I followed his advice anyway. They had given me up for dead, and now that I had confounded their predictions and

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 266.

mysteriously failed to die, what choice did I have but to live as though a future life were waiting for me?¹

Sidney Orr's unnamed illness in *Oracle Night* is not dramatized – just like Nathan Glass's lung cancer in *Brooklyn Follies*. Although death is an inevitable experience in life, in the course of a healthy life, premature death becomes improbable – it is the unforeseeable, unexpected event, it is the disaster. Illness however reverses this law. It makes premature death probable, while life or survival is rendered unexpected, improbable. Survival thus becomes the disaster. In other words, illness makes life the disaster, the event, and death the normality, the expected.

In *Brooklyn Follies* as well as *Oracle Night*, following the Austerian pattern of the narration taking the least probable path, the narrators survive. The similarity of their respective situations is striking: both characters question the sovereignty of the doctor's prognosis (while Nathan Glass says: “[that] didn't mean I trusted him,” Sidney Orr says: “I didn't believe him.”), and refuse to believe in the possibility of survival (Glass “had given [himself] up for dead,” whereas in Orr's case, those around him “had given [him] up for dead,” and he accepts their verdict without conditions). It would appear that Glass and Orr are not so much dead as they are in denial of life, in denial of their survival. Yet, the two characters wind up embracing the reality of their survival at the end of their narratives.

Both novels further resemble each other in their emphasizing the survival of their respective narrators in the final lines of the narrative: “as I walked along the avenue under that brilliant blue sky, I was happy, my friends, as happy as any man who had ever lived” (*Brooklyn Follies*²); “I was happy, happier to be alive than I had ever been before. It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 1.

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 273.

world” (*Oracle Night*¹). If it is life (survival) that is unexpected when death becomes a foreseeable certainty – if not an actuality (“I had given myself up for dead,” “[they] had given me up for dead”), as suggested above, then *Brooklyn Follies* and *Oracle Night* both become narratives about how the characters unexpectedly *happen* to be alive. Indeed the term “happy” gestures towards a chance event. In naming his introduction to his work on the relationship between happiness and mourning² “Introduction: What Happened to Happiness,” Vivasvan Soni points out the relationship between “happy” and “happen.” Etymologically, “happy” and “happen” share the root “hap” which, according to the *OED*, signifies “good fortune” or “good luck.”³ In saying they are “happy to be alive,” Glass and Orr seem to say that they “happen to be alive” – that their survival is a chance event, a happenstance.

There, however, may be a different – contradictory – way to look at their proclamations of happiness. In the first chapter of his above-mentioned work, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*, Soni evokes a Solonian proverb: “From the brink of philosophy, a momentous utterance calls to us offering the chance of a future. The saying is a proverb usually attributed to the Athenian statesman and sage Solon: ‘Call no man happy until he is dead.’”⁴ In invoking Solon and his injunction, Soni emphasizes the paradoxical (“the paradox of Solon’s proverb”⁵) relationship between happiness and death, and insists on the notion of the finitude of life as the necessary condition for happiness: “Only death allows us to speak of a ‘whole’ life in a

1 *Oracle Night*, p. 207.

2 Soni, Vivasvan. *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

3 “hap, n.1.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 21 August 2014.

4 Soni, p. 27.

5 Soni, p. 27.

nonmetaphysical way.”¹ If death is indeed to be seen as the condition of possibility of happiness, then what is the reader to make of the characters’ placing the experience of happiness under the sign of life (of “[being] alive”)?

On looking closer, the reader may observe a contradiction within the two characters’ proclamations – even exclamations – of happiness: while they insist on being alive, the text reveals that they see themselves as being dead, as belonging to a world outside of life. Nathan Glass in *Brooklyn Follies* compares his own happiness to that of “any man who *had* ever lived.”² The use of the pluperfect formulation places the experience of life (of living) in the past, from the point of view of the moment of narration (the present of narration), and in so doing, implies the end of his life. Because he is able to view his life as having ended, and therefore as being whole, it is possible for him to experience happiness. Another character whose experience of happiness coincides with the end of life is Orr in *Oracle Night*. Orr states that his happiness was “beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and the beauty of the world,” in short, beyond the experience of the world, of life – as if he were speaking from the realm of an *after*-life, a world beyond the world he lived in. It could thus be said of Auster’s two characters that their experience of happiness does not coincide with life, with being alive, but rather with death. They view their lives as having ended, and therefore as totalities or “wholes” – finite and bounded. As a result, the narratives end just like they begin: with the death of the characters, with their giving themselves up for dead. If both writer-narrators present themselves as already being dead at the beginning of the narrative, then the stories they tell become tales from beyond the grave. They are not happy to be alive, as they claim; they are happy – rather, they *can be* happy – because they view themselves as dead. Ultimately,

1 Soni, p. 29.

2 Our emphasis.

the true element of surprise that outweighs the survival is this shift in the cause of death, or more precisely, the shift in the realm in which death occurs. Disease does not affect the body as much as it affects the psyche.

Thus far, we have seen how illness is narrativized in Auster's works. The "shock" of a fatal disease like cancer is narrated on a mode of description, summarized in a few lines, whereas a more trivial illness is made part of the plot of the story. Whereas the trivial illness is shown in the process of occurring, the fatal illness is presented as already having occurred. The instance of illness, whether fatal or trivial, operates a reversal: life becomes the unexpected disaster, and death the normality, the foreseeable outcome. It is worth observing that in all these instances, the ailing body is merely seen as something that determines life or death. The experience of the disease is focused on its long-term consequences, as the experience of a latent death. But what happens when Auster's writing focuses on the suffering itself, on its very corporeality – when characters are stuck in the present, experiencing the disease rather than reflecting on the state of life, or death, that it induces?

Illness is an experience in which the body (mal)functions independently of will. It becomes apparent in Auster's work that illness serves to insist on the arbitrary functioning of the body. Once again, as we will see, Nathan Glass (*Brooklyn Follies*) and Sidney Orr (*Oracle Night*) best demonstrate this point, but so does Mr. Blank (*Travels in the Scriptorium*).

The morning after the night Glass spends in the hospital in the wake of his "attack," he is seen reflecting on its occurrence, and comparing it to his other illness (his lung cancer):

The pain had vanished by then, and I was starting to feel more confident about my chances of getting out of there in one piece. I said: I didn't live through cancer in order to die from some dumb-ass coronary infarction. It was an absurd statement, but as the day wore on, and the blood tests continued to come in negative, I clung to it as logical proof that the gods had decided to spare me, that the attack of the previous night had been no more than a demonstration of their power to control my fate. Yes, I could die at any moment – and yes, I had been certain that I was about to die as I lay in Joyce's arms on the living room floor. If there was anything to be learned from this brush with mortality, it was that my life, in the narrowest sense of the term, was no longer my own. I had only to remember the pain that had ripped through me during the terrible siege of fire to understand that every breath that filled my lungs was a gift from those capricious gods, that from now on every tick of my heart would be granted to me through an arbitrary act of grace.¹

Glass sees his attack as confirming – if not revealing (to him) – the paradox of the human body. The body – the matter comprised of flesh and bone – while being a mark of the singularity of an individual, is subjected to the universal laws of physics and to the universal chronology of the arrow of time.

Jean-Luc Nancy articulates this problem in the thirty-first of his 58 (+1) indices on the body: “Corps cosmique: de proche en proche, mon corps touche à tout. [...] Corps mystique, substance universelle et marionnette tirillée par mille fils.”² The body cannot be entirely owned or controlled by the voice or soul to whom it (falsely) belongs. It is connected to the entire universe through many relationships of causality, which could be perceived as arbitrary and considered as “fate.” What makes an individual singular, is precisely what links them to the universal, and what ultimately makes them a space of chance, or disaster. It takes Glass a sudden illness to come to the realization that his body, the only thing that he can entirely claim as his own, is not even his. The experience of the body is exactly what takes an individual away from himself. The experience of the sovereignty of the body coincides with the loss of this sovereignty. For Glass, the hospital

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 269

2 Nancy, Jean-Luc. “58 indices sur le corps”. *Corpus*. Paris : Métailié, 2006. p. 151.

is the ideal place where this chasm inherent in every individual is laid bare, even performed:

That's what happens to you when you land in a hospital. They take off your clothes, put you in one of those humiliating gowns, and suddenly you stop being yourself. You become the person who inhabits your body, and what you are now is the sum total of that body's failures. To be diminished in such a way is to lose all right to privacy. When the doctors and nurses come in and ask you questions, you have to answer them.¹

A hospital is a place where the body no longer becomes the possession of an individual: it is entirely lost to otherness that is the medical staff. The condition of being a patient reduces an individual to the mere state of being a body – a body that has undergone disaster, a body as the site of disaster. The ailing body entails the loss of control, and as a result, the loss of self. Being a patient, indeed, implies passivity: the body no longer acts; it is acted upon. Glass's view of the patient seems to echo Blanchot's conception of passivity (which the latter equates with disaster²):

Passivity. We can evoke situations of passivity: affliction; the final, crushing force of the totalitarian State, with its camps; the servitude of the slave bereft of a master, fallen beneath need; or dying, as forgetfulness of death. In all these cases we recognize, even though it be with a falsifying, approximating knowledge, common traits: anonymity, loss of self; loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion (separation).³

Another situation of passivity that is not articulated in the above list, but seems to be implied, is that of the patient⁴ – the ailing body in the hospital, patiently experiencing

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 267.

2 For Blanchot, passivity is immanent in the disaster: "The disaster, whose blackness should be attenuated – through emphasis – exposes us to a certain idea of passivity. We are passive with respect to the disaster, but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date." (Blanchot, M. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. p. 3)

3 Blanchot, M. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. pp. 17-18.

4 If the notion of the patient does not appear explicitly in this particular fragment from Blanchot's work, it is mentioned several times in other surrounding fragments, in contexts that are not as appropriate to *Brooklyn Follies* as the quote above.

suffering. For Glass, what is disastrous is not the experience of the onset of the disease itself: for him, the disaster seems to be the experience of passivity, the complete loss of self. The experience of hospitalization for Nathan Glass in *Brooklyn Follies* is one of exile, as he is forced to leave the space of his home in order to receive treatment at the hospital.

Glass, however, is not the only Austerian character to mourn the loss of sovereignty in the situation of being a patient. Like Nathan Glass, Sidney Orr does not narrate the occurrence of the disease in which he “had been given up for dead,” but does narrate a more trivial affliction: the instance of a nosebleed (a condition related to his unnamed nearly-fatal illness) that abruptly interrupts his conversation with John Trause and Grace:

I was about to say something then, but just as I opened my mouth to offer my opinion, I got another one of my infernal nosebleeds. They had started a month or two before I was put in the hospital, and even though most of my other symptoms had cleared up by now, the nosebleeds had persisted – always striking at the most inopportune moments, it seemed, and never failing to cause me intense embarrassment. I hated not to be in control of myself, to be sitting in a room as I was that night, for example, taking part in a conversation, and then suddenly to notice that blood was pouring out of me, splattering onto my shirt and pants, and not being able to do a damn thing to stop it. The doctors had told me not to worry – there were no medical consequences, no signs of impending trouble – but that didn’t make me feel any less helpless or ashamed. Every time my nose gushed blood, I felt like a little boy who’d wet his pants.¹

The nosebleeds are disasters, occurring suddenly, and therefore subject the narrator to a situation beyond his control, and Orr admits to his “[hating] not to be in control of [himself].” This puts him in a situation similar to that of the patient, even without his having to go to the hospital to submit himself to the care of others. The term “helpless” (“that didn’t make me feel any less helpless or ashamed”) emphasizes his passivity. It is also interesting to note that this passage insists on the notion of embarrassment as a corporeal experience. What is common to both, experiencing a nosebleed and wetting

¹ *Oracle Night*, p. 35.

one's pants is the uncontrollable rush of fluid from the body. What is embarrassing is not only the undesirable moment of occurrence, but also the body's failure to act as a container. Both instances articulate the loss of control over one's body.

Another instance of fluid uncontrollably gushing out of the body would be the experience of vomiting, that Mr. Blank, for instance, undergoes in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. *Travels in the Scriptorium* tells the story of old Mr. Blank who had lost his memory, and is trapped in a room he can neither recognize nor get out of, but where he nonetheless receives certain visitors. The room is also under close surveillance, so every movement his body makes or every sound it emits is recorded through hidden cameras and microphones. Like Glass in the hospital, his privacy is violated;¹ his body is subjected to the violence of constant observation. Mr. Blank, like Glass and Orr, is essentially a patient. Whether the room is a hospital room or not is not specified, but his first visitor in that room happens to be Anna, a figure of the nurse, who brings him breakfast and medication, and later gives him a sponge bath, pleasures him in the process, dries him and finally clothes him. Noting Mr. Blank's resemblance to a baby, Marie Thévenon writes: "Mr. Blank, vieillard décrépit, doit se faire aider dans toutes ses tâches les plus quotidiennes (s'habiller, manger, se laver), comme un jeune enfant [...]."² Mr. Blank's passivity is now doubled: not only is he a patient, but he has also regressed to the situation of a baby.

When Anna visits Mr. Blank, the first gesture consists in her giving him three pills "one green, one white, and one purple,"³ without Mr. Blank's knowing why. This inevitably leads him to wonder whether he is suffering from an illness, to which Anna

1 As previously mentioned, Glass remarks: "To be diminished in such a way is to lose all right to privacy." *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 267.

2 Thévenon, p. 153. Comparing him to a baby, however, also implies the forbidden relationship between Mr. Blank and Anna as a figure of a nursing mother.

3 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 14.

replies: “No, not at all. [...] The pills are part of the treatment.”¹ This response only seems to magnify Mr. Blank’s passivity: not only is his body out of his control, but he is also receiving treatment for a phantom or non-existent illness. As Blanchot would have it, Mr. Blank experiences “loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination.” He is made to be a patient without his actually being one. His body is made to further undergo loss of control when he is overcome with nausea, alongside dizziness, as a side-effect of the medication he is administered:

The old dizziness has returned, and he clutches the sink with his left hand as he splashes water onto himself with his right. By the time he turns off the spigot and begins to reach for a towel, he is suddenly feeling worse, worse than he has felt at any moment of the day so far. The trouble seems to be located somewhere in his stomach, but before he can pronounce the word *stomach* to himself, it is traveling up his windpipe, accompanied by an unpleasant tingling in his jaws. He instinctively clutches the sink with both hands and lowers his head, bracing himself against the attack of nausea that has inexplicably overcome him. He fights against it for a second or two, praying he can ward off the coming explosion, but it is a hopeless cause, and an instant later he is vomiting into the sink.²

Passivity is emphasized by turning the body into a space – into a stage, rather than an actant. The body is where the trouble is “located,” where it “travels.” In general, the instance of vomiting, like the nosebleed, is not an illness in itself, but rather the consequence of an illness or an anomaly in the body – it is a symptom, a manifestation of the abnormal functioning of the body. The outward direction of these two similar instances of corporeal malfunction embodies the manifestation of the illness – the exteriorization of what is internal, latent. Like the nosebleed, it implies a corporeal loss: that of fluid from the body. The metaphor of “explosion” places the instance of vomiting under the sign of disaster. This passage displays the tension between Mr. Blank’s control and lack of control over his body. He tries to “fight” the imminent disaster, but his body exerts its own control

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 14.

2 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 106.

over him, leaving him with no choice but to submit to the bout of nausea. Like Glass's "attack" and Orr's nosebleed, Mr. Blank's sickness is sudden, and uncontrollable.

All of the above instances go to show how in the experience of an illness, the body is entirely subjected to chance. For Auster's characters, illness (or its symptoms or manifestations, like nosebleeds or vomiting) is a disaster, not only because it gestures towards mortality or speeds up, in certain cases, the occurrence of death, but because it is entirely out of the characters' control. It should be noted, however, that in the case of Mr. Blank, the instance of vomiting is not brought on by a latent illness. When the bout of nausea ends, Mr. Blank shouts: "They've poisoned me! [...] The monsters have poisoned me!"¹ Whether or not these words reflect Mr. Blank's paranoia,² they imply an act of aggression on the body: Mr. Blank is forced to take these pills. His passivity is the result of an act of violence on (or directed towards) the body.

8.3 Violence, or the maimed body

In illness, the disaster occurs from within the body. The onset of the disease can only be seen as a chance event, not the result of any character's will and actions. However, the Austerian corpus contains many instances of deliberate acts of aggression, from one character to another character, or even from one character to himself. The infliction of a physical injury involves an external force (an external body) acting on the body. Using Jean-Luc Nancy's metaphor from *Corpus*, the puppeteer pulling the strings of the body is no longer cosmic, but has a body and a will of his own. As such, acts of aggression could very well challenge what we have stated in the previous section about passivity and

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 106.

2 The reader is not given any indication about the purpose of the pills, nor the (phantom) illness they are supposed to treat.

chance. Would it imply, consequently, that Auster employs different mechanisms to orchestrate the disaster of an aggression?

First, one should observe that the territory of the aggression might not always be the physical body, but instead, a representation or a metaphor of the physical body. In such instances, the representation might be seen as an extension or substitution of the physical body. The very first instance of such a violent act appears at an extra-textual level. Auster excludes his first novel *Squeeze Play*, published under the pseudonym Paul Benjamin, from his corpus of texts – be it fiction, autobiography or critical essays. In an interview with Suzie Mackenzie for *The Guardian*,¹ Auster states his reason for writing *Squeeze Play*: “I just did it to make money, that’s all. It’s not a legitimate book.” With this violent verbal gesture, the author severs the novel from his body of work. The way in which the question of money can bias the very perception of a book – as a space or as a container – echoes M.S. Fogg’s and Chandler’s arguments on the value of a book discussed in the seventh chapter of our study. Consequently, *Squeeze Play* appears only once in Auster’s corpus, merely as an appendix,² and still under the *nom de plume* Paul Benjamin, as if to further insist on Auster’s rejection of this novel. The name “Paul Benjamin” reappears in Auster’s corpus, as the name of a (writer) character in his screenplay for the movie *Smoke*. This reinforces the fictional nature of this identity.

The first instance of physical violence in Auster’s corpus is to be found in his inaugural text, in which the author-narrator tells the reader that “[his] grandmother

1 Mackenzie, Suzie. “The Searcher.” *The Guardian* 29 May 1999.
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/may/29/travelbooks.paulauster>> Web. Aug 21, 2014.

2 Three appendices (Auster’s “minor” texts) appear in the 1997 publication of *Hand to Mouth* by Faber and Faber (London), the third of which is *Squeeze Play*.

murdered [his] grandfather.”¹ The scene of the murder is not narrated, although the spatio-temporal context of the murder is provided:

My grandfather [...] arrived at the house at six o’ clock [...] ‘while it was stated by witnesses Mrs. Auster was in the bedroom putting Sam, the youngest boy, into bed.’ [...]

It seems that my grandfather had then gone into the kitchen to repair an electric switch and that one of my uncles (the second youngest son) had held a candle for him to see by. ‘The boy declared that he became panic stricken when he heard the shot and saw a flash of revolver and fled the room.’²

This fragment appears to conform to the Austerian chronicle – characterized by a lack of dramatization. Instead of imminence, a sense of distance is indeed conveyed. The writing takes a form similar to a police statement or report, coldly emphasizing the source (“stated by witnesses,” “the boy declared”) and the possible unreliability (“it seems”) of the facts. Possibly unreliable witnesses create a distance between the reader and the disaster, blurring the event. It seems that this muted account of the event echoes Auster’s grandmother’s refusal to assume responsibility for the murder, as if a shadow of doubt on the actual events had to be maintained. The actual disaster of Auster’s grandfather’s death, in all its physicality, is played elsewhere, through an entirely different medium: that of a photograph. The author-narrator of “Portrait of an Invisible Man” prefaces his account of his grandfather’s murder with the description of an old family photograph:

Among the photographs I found in my father’s house last month there was one family portrait from those early days in Kenosha. [...] The first time I looked at the picture, I noticed that it had been torn down the middle and then clumsily mended, leaving one of the trees in the background hanging eerily in mid-air. I assumed that the picture had been torn by accident and thought no more about it. The second time I looked at it, however, I studied this tear more closely and discovered things I must have been blind to miss before. I saw a man’s fingertips grasping the torso of one of my uncles; I saw, very distinctly, that another of my uncles was not

1 *Invention of Solitude*, p. 37.

2 *Invention of Solitude*, p. 40.

resting his hand on his brother's back, as I had first thought, but against a chair that was not there. And then I realized what was strange about the picture: my grandfather had been cut out of it. The image was distorted because part of it had been eliminated. My grandfather had been sitting in a chair next to his wife with one of his sons standing between his knees – and he was not there. Only his fingertips remained: as if he were trying to crawl back into the picture from some hole deep in time, as if he had been exiled to another dimension.¹

In the first chapter of this study, we highlighted how in *Invention of Solitude* the writing – or more generally any record of a person's existence – equates with life. The disappearance, destruction or absence of a trace is synonymous with death. Whether the photograph was torn before or after the murder is not mentioned; nevertheless, the photograph seems to enact Paul Auster's grandfather's murder, in that the tearing of the photograph echoes the instance of physical violence to which his body was subjected. The torn photograph is the embodiment of Auster's grandfather's disappearance due to death – his being “exiled to another dimension.” It would appear that the photograph is an extension of his corporeal space, and that an act of violence on the image carries the same weight as physical violence. The photograph is (becomes) the actual representation of the disaster – as opposed to (and in place of) the missing verbal representation. This raises the interesting question as to how the features of the disaster could be rendered in the purely two-dimensional medium of photography. Since a photograph cannot capture the passage of time, an alternative mode of representation has to be found. Here, the suddenness of the disaster is conveyed by the sharpness of the cut. Disaster cuts through time as would a pair of scissors through a picture. The imminence, that is to say, the link between the realm of the disaster and what precedes it, the marker of a before and an after, are the fingertips – one of the boundaries of the body.

1 *Invention of Solitude*, pp. 35-36.

Even when the actual physical body (as opposed to a representation or metaphorical substitution of it) is aggressed, metaphor is not entirely absent from the picture. In *Invisible*, the narrator provides the reader with corporeal details of a murder he witnesses. However, the murder is preceded by another disaster: an assault. When walking together one night, Adam Walker and Born get mugged in the street by a “kid” with a gun:

The figure was coming toward us, unmistakably walking in our direction, and after a few more steps I saw that it was a black kid dressed in dark clothes [...]. The kid was holding a gun in his left hand. The gun was pointed at us, and just like that, with a single tick of the clock, the entire universe had changed. The kid wasn’t a person anymore. He was that gun and nothing else, the nightmare gun that lived in every New Yorker’s imagination, the heartless, inhuman gun that was destined to find you alone one night on a darkened street and send you to an early grave.¹

As this passage shows, the body of the mugger is subjected to an interesting transformation coinciding with the occurrence of the disaster. At first, and from a distance, the “kid” is no more than a “figure,” an abstraction. The figure then takes the shape of a person – the short body of “a black kid dressed in dark clothes” – as it nears Walker and Born. When he finally comes close enough, at the precise moment of the disaster (“a single tick of the clock”), at the precise boundary between a before and an after, the “kid” is reduced to a “gun.” He is no longer a body. Moreover, not only is he an object (the gun), but he becomes “a nightmare,” the embodiment of violence. He shifts from being a body to an object and an abstraction. Through this synecdoche, the aggressor loses his corporeality and becomes a mere instance of a disaster, a manifestation of fate.

The only way in which he finally becomes a person – with a body – is when Born brutally murders him:

With a hard, upward thrust, Born immediately stabbed the kid with the switchblade – straight in the stomach, a dead-center hit. The boy grunted as the

¹ *Invisible*, p. 63.

steel tore through his flesh, grabbed his stomach with his right hand, and slowly sank to the ground.

[...] The kid was moaning now, clutching his stomach with both hands and writing around on the pavement. It was too dark to make out much of anything, but after a few moments I thought I saw blood oozing onto the ground.¹

In this act, the aggressor becomes the aggressed, and it is in being the victim of the aggression that his humanity, and more importantly his corporeality – his “stomach,” “hands” and “blood” – are restored. This scene does not narrate an interaction between two bodies: it depicts two encounters between a body and an agent of the disaster.

Another instance of disintegration of the person, and then of the body through violence is narrated in *Man in the Dark*, with the gruesome account of Titus’s murder:

When the head is finally severed from the body, the executioner lets the hatchet fall to the floor. The other man removes the hood from Titus’ head, and then a third man takes hold of Titus’ long red hair and carries the head closer to the camera. Blood is dripping everywhere. Titus is no longer quite human. He has become the idea of a person, a person and not a person, a dead bleeding thing: *une nature morte*.²

One particularity of this act of violence is that it not only hurts the body, but explicitly breaks it down into parts. Fragmentation is no longer happening in the realm of language, or the memory of having witnessed the scene, but is literally (visually) taking place. The consequence of this fragmentation is the destruction of the victim’s humanity. For the narrator, humanity – as a quality – appears to rely on the integrity on the body. A fragmented body no longer belongs entirely to humanity – it becomes something that merely points to humanity, in the same way a signifier points to a signified. At the same time, a fragmented body loses its identity. It is no longer a totality. It no longer is an identifiable, specific instance of a human being: a severed body part is anonymous. The

1 *Invisible*, p. 65.

2 *Man in the Dark*, p. 176.

narrator's confusion as to whether Titus is still a person can be understood as the splitting – the cutting through – of pairs of dual concepts: the signifier and the signified, the instance and the concept, the mind and the body. All of these concepts are held together and made whole in a living person, but the disaster of the mutilation makes the separation obvious, and at the same time, confusing.

What is striking is how the resulting fragmented body parts are described as a *nature morte* (still life). As an artistic form, the still life embodies the contrast between the living and the dead (the French term emphasizes death while its English equivalent focuses on life), the organic and the mineral, nature and culture. When the body becomes the site of disaster, these conflicts are made apparent. The violence of the scene can only be assimilated by its comparison to a work of art – as if only the language of art allows the narrator to conceptualize and cope with violence. Titus's murder is actually not directly experienced, but watched as a video recording. One would wonder if this aestheticization of violence is the product of its staging by the terrorists, or the result of its experience through the medium of video.

One of the most striking occurrences of violence in *Leviathan* is the double murder scene involving Sachs, Dwight and Dimaggio. When Sachs loses his way one evening, he hitchhikes his way back to his house with the help of a young man named Dwight. As they drive through the woods, they come across a man who Dwight thinks might be in need of help. Dwight's act of benevolence is met with violence, as the man (later revealed to be Dimaggio) fires three gunshots at Dwight. Sachs intervenes and winds up killing the man with a baseball bat:

He rushed up behind the man just as the third shot went off, got a good grip on the handle of the bat, and swung for all he was worth. He aimed for the man's head –

hoping to split his skull in two, hoping to kill him, hoping to empty his brains all over the ground. The bat landed with horrific force, smashing into a spot just behind the man's right ear. Sachs heard the thud of impact, the cracking of cartilage and bone, and then the man dropped. He just fell down dead in the middle of the road and everything went quiet.¹

Dimaggio's killing Dwight is not so much an aggression on his body as it is a taking of his life, but Sachs's reaction, whether it is self-defense or revenge, is described in extremely gory, corporeal details. Sachs's idea of mutilation is reversing the image of the body as a container of organs, as he imagines killing the man by "[emptying] his brains all over the ground." In the end, what he imagines – rather, *desires* – seeing, is merely heard ("Sachs heard the thud of impact, the cracking of cartilage and bone"). At the site of disaster, whether in Sachs's imagination of the murder or its reality, the man's body is merely the sum of its parts: "skull," "brains," "ear," "cartilage," "bone." When disaster strikes, the body can no longer be considered as a whole: it becomes fragmented.

Sachs's death also occurs as fragmentation: "[his] body burst into dozens of small pieces and fragments of his corpse were found as far as fifty feet away from the site of the explosion."² Thus, Sachs's interchangeability with Dimaggio culminates in their undergoing a similar death – a death in which the integrity of their body is destroyed. Because Sachs is the agent of Dimaggio's death, his interchangeability with Dimaggio implies that he should be the agent of his own death. His death in a bomb explosion, by his own hands, reiterates the double death that took place the moment he stopped writing Dimaggio's elegy.

Another conjunction of violent, corporeal acts in Auster's corpus can be found in *Mr. Vertigo*. When Slim (Walt's uncle) manages to track down Master Yehudi and Walt,

1 *Leviathan*, p. 171.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 1.

they wind up in a car accident as Uncle Slim shoots Master Yehudi. Master Yehudi's injuries are severe, and he soon realizes that his chances for survival are slim to none. This realization leads him to ask Walt to shoot him, in order to accelerate the occurrence of his death. When Walt shuns the benevolent act disguised as a violent one, and refuses to kill his Master, the Master shoots himself: "[then], swallowing once, he shut his eyes and squeezed the trigger."¹ His body is revealed to be a site of disaster prior to the accident and his suicide: this pre-existing disaster takes the form of an illness. As he reveals to Walt, his suicide is therefore not only a means to relieve his body from the pain of the bullet that Uncle Slim lodged into his shoulder, but also to rid himself of his illness:

‘I’m not taking about the bullet. I’m talking about the cancer in my belly. We don’t have to fool each other about that anymore. My gut’s all mangled and destroyed, and I don’t have more than six months to live. Even if I could get out of here, I’m done for anyway. So why not take matters into our own hands? Six months of pain and agony – that’s what I’ve got to look forward to.’²

Master Yehudi's death appears to summarize all the forms of corporeal violence discussed in this chapter (disease, accident, aggression), and introduces a new one: suicide, the self-inflicted disaster. Because of this superposition, Master Yehudi cannot be said to be the sole agent of his death. Paul Auster highlights here the paradox of the suicide: the only way of preventing one's body from becoming the locus of unpredictable events, the only way of keeping it entirely in control, is to annihilate the body. This echoes, in Austerian characters, the troubled experience of the present in which the "now" and the "here" can only be experienced through distance, or the destruction of desires (as demonstrated in our second chapter).

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 211.

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 210.

A similar paradox is at play in *The Music of Chance*. When Nashe drives into the oncoming headlight in the final scene of *The Music of Chance*, he not only kills himself (if the reader were to assume he dies, since there is no explicit indication of his death), but also kills Murks and his son-in-law who are in the car with him, and who he thinks are responsible for killing Pozzi. It should also be noted that like Master Yehudi, Nashe welcomes the moment of death with closed eyes: “[and] then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore.” Their shutting their eyes could be seen as a way for them to sever their connection with the world outside of their bodies – as if, in order to meet their death, they were forced to reduce themselves to the experience of their bodies, and close in on themselves. In the case of Master Yehudi and Nashe, the self-inflicted disaster can be actualized only when the experience of the world is reduced to the experience of the body – the experience of the space of the body, as opposed to the experience of the body in space.

Thus, we have seen how the body is the site of the disaster in Auster’s work. It is a space in which chance events and coincidences actualize. The body neither belongs to the voice or the soul that inhabits it, nor to the aggressor that attempts to assault it – ultimately, only fate pulls the strings. In illness, the Austerian characters are made to submit to the force of their bodies: illness makes characters aware of their own corporeality, but in the same move, causes them to experience their body in passivity. When depicting an aggression, Auster carefully accumulates layers of metaphors: what harms or kills is the disaster or fate itself, not the aggressor. Or what is harmed or killed is a metaphor or synecdoche of the body. Characters’ inability to be in control of their bodies is summarized in the paradox of suicide: the only way of shielding one’s body against fate is self-destruction. But then, is the self-destruction itself not a disastrous, unavoidable, consequence of fate?

If Austerian characters find themselves caught in such a problematic relationship with their body, one might wonder how this affects their mind. Which states of mind or conditions can be derived from this experience of the alienation of the body?

Chapter 9

Transcending the Body: Emptiness, Nothingness, In-betweenness

“*The world is in my head. My body is in the world.* You still stand by that paradox, which was an attempt to capture the strange doubleness of being alive, the inexorable union of inner and outer that accompanies each beat of a person’s heart from birth until death.”¹

The numerous instances of death, accidents and other disasters that occur in Auster’s work, especially in the form of illness and mutilation, as seen in the previous chapter, go to show how the body is often imagined as the site of disaster. While the body is the interface between the mind and the world – the inner and the outer world – its being subjected to disasters may lead one to believe that in Auster’s work, the body appears as an obstacle in the experience of the world. But to believe this, is to be misguided.

The experience of the body is crucial to Auster’s characters. The most striking instance of this phenomenon is to be observed in *The Book of Illusions*. After the death of his wife and sons in a plane crash, the grieving David Zimmer dedicates his life to studying (and eventually writing a book about) the films of Hector Mann who was believed to have been dead. As it turns out, Hector Mann is alive (although he is on the verge of death), and having read Zimmer’s book, he insists on meeting him. Alma Grund, the daughter of Charlie Grund (Mann’s cameraman), forcefully brings the reluctant Zimmer to New

¹ *Report from the Interior*, p. 192.

Mexico to meet Mann. When Zimmer meets the bedridden and dying Mann for the first time, he is struck by Mann's body:

What astonished me most, I think, was the simple fact that he had a body. Until I saw him lying there in the bed, I'm not sure that I ever fully believed in him. Not as an authentic person at any rate, not in the way I believed in Alma or myself, not in the way I believed in Helen or even Chateaubriand. It stunned me to acknowledge that Hector had hands and eyes, fingernails and shoulders, a neck and a left ear – that he was tangible, that he wasn't an imaginary being. He had been inside my head for so long, it seemed doubtful that he could exist anywhere else.¹

Mann's having been for Zimmer no more than a construct or an abstraction, or even a myth, that existed only through his films, the sight of Mann's body is an event for Zimmer. Zimmer sees the body as the sign of existence, of life. In equating being (existing, living) with having a body, Zimmer seems to echo the narrator of "Portrait of an Invisible Man:" "In life, a man and his body are synonymous."² Thus, Hector Mann – who Zimmer was certain was dead – is resurrected through Zimmer's gaze. It could be said that this process, going from a collection of fragmented body parts, to the concept of a living person, through the gaze and perception of another person, is exactly the mirror image of Titus's gruesome death in *Man in the Dark* described in the previous chapter. Mann is at the frontier between the body and mind. In a single gaze, Mann goes from being a mental concept to a corporeal existence, and this newly found corporeal existence reinforces the mental concept. At the same time, in order to exist as a body, he has to exist first in the mind.

In this episode of seeing Mann for the first time, Zimmer goes to show how the experience of the body (although not his own) is subjected to the conflict between the body and mind. In Auster's work, the experience of the body, for many characters, is an

1 *The Book of Illusions*, p. 222.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 14.

experience of the mind-body duality – the body as existing relationally to the mind. In order to experience the fullness of this duality, they have to resort to seeking particular experiences that reflect that duality and ambivalence, if not articulate it. In addition to specific occurrences of illness or violence described in the previous chapter, the most striking of these particular experiences include the states of “nowhere,” “nothingness,” and “emptiness,” all three of which suggest negation of presence or of experience. A common thread between these three categories is that they simultaneously hint at spatiality – the absence of space, the absence of objects occupying space, an empty container – and at mental states. They can be felt by both, the body and the mind.

9.1 “Nowhere:” the body and the world

For many characters, the ideal experience of the body and the world – of the body in the world – is the experience of being “nowhere.” A recurrent term in Auster’s work, “nowhere” has been a topic of interest for a large number of Auster’s critics,¹ who for the most part, and rightly so, tend to relate the notion of “nowhere” to questions of identity and subjectivity. We will briefly revisit this Austerian nowhere in the third part of this study in the context of the relationship between the self and the other in Auster’s work. However, in this section of the chapter, we will consider the notion of nowhere in relation to the experience of the body and space, and discuss how, for many of Auster’s characters, being nowhere begins within the body.

While Auster’s short piece of poetic prose *White Spaces* is the first work to deal with the notion of “nowhere,” it comes to pervade his corpus of autobiographies and fiction. Not surprisingly, it is in the founding text of the Austerian corpus, *The Invention of*

1 As best illustrated by the title of Ilana Shiloh’s work *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere*.

Solitude, that the experience of “nowhere” is explicitly articulated. In its second section, “The Book of Memory,” the author-narrator A. establishes himself as the quintessential Austerian wanderer¹ in the search of nowhere. The narrator A. describes his exploring the city of Amsterdam on foot, as an experience of loss:

All during the three days he spent in Amsterdam, he was lost. The plan of the city is circular [...]. For three days it rained, and for three days, he walked around in circles. [...] He wandered. He walked around in circles. He allowed himself to be lost. [...] It occurred to him that perhaps he was wandering in the circles of hell [...]. 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 wandering inside himself, and he was lost. Far from troubling him, this state of being lost became a source of happiness, of exhilaration. He breathed it into his very bones. As if on the brink of some previously hidden knowledge, he breathed it into his very bones and said to himself, almost triumphantly: I am lost.²

For A., being “nowhere” seems to coincide with being at one with himself. It is in being lost, in being “nowhere,” that he can fully experience himself. The full experience of the self is one which occurs inside the body, and is made possible by the act of walking around in circles. Walking around in circles, isolation from familiar surroundings (“cut off from everything that was familiar to him”) and impossibility of orientation (“unable to discover even a single point of reference”) – essentially the “state of being lost” – seem to imply a certain madness in the experience of walking. But this experience of madness is a desirable one for the narrator. The text itself hypnotically “walks around in circles,” through the recurrence of leitmotifs. Added to that, the narrator’s allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* (“circles of hell”) may also appear to mislead the reader. A’s walking around in circles does not consist in his suffering, as the reference to “circles of hell” may imply. On

1 François Hugonnier’s thesis “Les Interdits de la représentation dans les œuvres de Paul Auster et de Jérôme Rothenberg” presents an interesting, pertinent and thorough discussion of the relationship between the Austerian wanderer and the figure of the “Wandering Jew” in the context of Auster’s “nowhere.”

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 90-91.

the contrary, wandering in circles and being lost is “a source of happiness, exhilaration,” for A. Being “nowhere” in this case is an instance of A.’s communion with himself.

In addition to A. in Auster’s first autobiographical work, the first character in his fiction to institute the importance of “nowhere” is Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass*.¹ For Daniel Quinn, just like for the narrator of “The Book of Memory,” it is the experience of walking that allows him to be “nowhere:”

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. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere.²

For Quinn, what seems to be most problematic is the cohabitation of body and mind, and walking is the tool he uses to cleave them. The experience of being “nowhere” for him is the pure experience of the body – the seeing body and the moving body. Quinn’s body is not so much a part of the world as it is an instrument with which he separates himself from the world. But there appears a paradox: in order to be “nowhere,” and in order to reduce himself to a mere body, the experience of the space of the world is just as necessary as the space of the body. A full experience of the body is only possible in relation to the outside world. At the same time, the difference between the body and the world is not reconciled in his experience of “nowhere,” and his experience of the body

1 In the first part of our study, we looked at Daniel Quinn’s experience of “nowhere” as a temporal experience – an experience of the present – in this chapter, we will look at it as a spatial experience.

2 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 4.

remains that of an empty interiority (“emptiness within”), separated from the world around him.

The reconciliation between the body and the world, the inside and the outside, that is impossible in *City of Glass*, seems to be realized in *Brooklyn Follies*, when Nathan Glass spends the night in a hospital after an attack. Recalling his unusual experience in the hospital, Glass says:

I don’t think I’ve ever been more numb to my surroundings than I was that night, more locked into myself, more absent. Nothing felt real to me except my own body, and as I lay there wallowing in my brokenness, I became fixated on trying to visualize the circuits of veins and arteries that criss crossed below my chest, the dense inner network of glop and blood. I was in there with myself, rooting around with a kind of scrambled desperation, but I was so far away, floating above the bed, above the ceiling, above the roof of the hospital. I know it doesn’t make any sense, but lying in that boxed-in enclosure with the beeping machines and the wires clamped to my skin was the closest I have come to being nowhere, to being inside myself and outside myself at the same time.¹

For Glass, unlike Quinn, being nowhere is a simultaneous experience of interiority and exteriority. Whereas Quinn has to reduce himself to his body in order to be nowhere, Glass has to transcend his body. Glass’s nowhere is not a space of neutrality implying his being neither here nor there: he is at once here and there, inside and outside, the body and the world. Quinn’s nowhere is the juxtaposition of the body and the world, while Glass’s nowhere is the superposition of the body and the world – the “here” of the body and the “there” of the world. For Glass, being nowhere, is in fact, paradoxically, being everywhere.

1 *Brooklyn Follies*, p. 267.

9.2 Levitating towards nothingness

Glass's out-of-body experience in *Brooklyn Follies* is not the only instance of corporeal transcendence in Auster's work. It appears most significantly in *Mr. Vertigo*. In fact, *Mr. Vertigo* is entirely articulated around Walt's learning to transcend his body, to "fly," seemingly under the training of Master Yehudi.¹ This transcendence is all the more striking, as its starting point is abjection. Indeed, studying the representation of abjection in *Mr. Vertigo* provides the background to understanding Walt's experience of transcendence.

First, it is interesting to note that it is Walt's corporeal features that make him the perfect candidate for "flying." "Master Yehudi chose me because I was the smallest, the dirtiest, the most abject. 'You're no better than an animal,' he said, 'a piece of human nothingness.' [...] 'You're no better than an animal. If you stay where you are, you'll be dead before winter is out. If you come with me, I'll teach you how to fly.'"² Walt's "nothingness" is the condition of his being neither human nor animal. While the term "abject" in its most common usage implies that which is extremely unpleasant, and as a result is "cast off, rejected,"³ it could also be seen as articulating a state of in-betweenness. For Julia Kristeva, abjection is indeed a state of in-betweenness: it is a state of being neither subject, nor object ("ni sujet, ni objet").⁴ Walt is abject, not only because he is vile, but also because he is neither human, nor animal, neither subject, nor object; he is in-

1 "Seemingly" in this sentence is to suggest that although Master Yehudi attempts to train Walt how to fly, Walt learns to fly on his own: "When I finally got off the ground for the first time, it wasn't because of anything he'd taught me." (p. 277)

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 3.

3 "abject, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. 21 August 2014.

4 Kristeva, Julia. "Approche de l'abjection." *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Paris: Seuil, 1980. p. 9.

betweenness, he is nothing, and Master Yehudi reminds him “you know nothing because you are nothing.”¹

For Master Yehudi, Walt’s worth lies in his abjection. His abjection is what makes him fascinating. Interestingly, in her first chapter on abjection in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, Kristeva observes that fascination is part of the experience of abjection: “Répulsion, haut-le-cœur qui m’écarte et me détourne de la souillure, du cloaque, de l’immonde. Ignominie de la compromission, de l’entre-deux, de la trahison. Sursaut fasciné qui m’y conduit et m’en sépare.”² Kristeva sees the abject as that which is at once repulsive and fascinating. Abjection is the feeling of simultaneous repulsion and fascination in the face of – among other things – in-betweenness (“Ignominie [...] de l’entre-deux”). It is, above all, a physical response, and Kristeva’s corporeal vocabulary (“haut-le-cœur,” “cloaque”) reinforces this. Master Yehudi is at once repulsed and fascinated by Walt’s state of in-betweenness. In fact, Master Yehudi only seems to be drawn to the abject.

In addition to Walt, and before Walt, Master Yehudi rescues³ Mother Sue, who is first described in the text as a “chunky figure in a wide-brimmed hat whose body was wrapped in blankets, and at first I couldn’t tell if it was a man, a woman, or a bear.”⁴ Like Walt, Mother Sue (who later comes to be called Mother Sioux) is described in terms of the in-betweenness of the abject: she is neither a man, nor a woman, neither human, nor animal. The other abject character that Master Yehudi takes under his wing is Aesop. When Walt sees Aesop for the first time, he reacts physically to Aesop’s appearance: “my heart just about stopped beating when I caught sight of him. He was a frail, scrawny fellow

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 3. In this sense, Walt is reminiscent of Peter Stillman Jr. in *City of Glass*. When introducing himself to Daniel Quinn, Peter says “But I know nothing. [...] My real name is Peter Nobody.” (*City of Glass*, p. 20) Like Peter, Walt could be seen as Walt Nobody.

2 Kristeva, p. 10.

3 Master Yehudi rescues Mother Sue/Sioux from domestic violence.

4 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 11.

with bulging eyes and those enormous lips, and as soon as he stood up from his chair to greet us, I saw that his bones were all twisted and askew, that he had the jagged, hunchbacked body of a cripple.”¹ Later, Walt adds: “It was in my blood to feel contempt for him, and given that he was the ugliest specimen of his kind I had ever had the misfortune to see [...].”² Thus, in *Mr. Vertigo*, Auster presents characters that are at once corporeally repulsive and fascinating. Their being abject is what makes Master Yehudi adopt them, as it were, and take responsibility for them. Walt, Mother Sioux and Aesop are figures of abjection, embodiments of misery, the lowest beings of society, and Master Yehudi makes it his mission to extract them from their misery and uplift them.

Determined in his altruism, Master Yehudi offers Mother Sioux a better, more comfortable life without violence. He educates Aesop and offers him the possibility of higher education at Yale, but Aesop dies before he gets the opportunity to study at Yale. In fact, Mother Sioux and Aesop are both killed in a disastrous attack by the Ku Klux Klan:

They dragged Aesop and Mother Sioux out of the burning house, put ropes around their necks, and strung them up to the elm tree by the side of the road, each one to a different branch. Aesop howled, Mother Sioux said nothing, and within minutes they were both dead. [...] The house was incandescent by then, a fireball of heat and roaring timbers, and by the time the last of the men was gone, the roof had already given way, collapsing to the ground in a shower of sparks and meteors. I felt as if I had seen the sun explode. I felt as if I had just witnessed the end of the world.³

It is interesting to observe that the disaster in this passage is expressed in the language of cosmic explosion – the disaster which kills Aesop and Mother Sioux and brings the house down, is literally a *dis-aster*. As for Walt, he is the only character that Master Yehudi succeeds in uplifting completely. The process of his uplifting is literal: he

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, pp. 12-13.

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 19.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, pp. 90-91.

“teaches” Walt to “fly,” to levitate, to literally lift himself off the ground. However, the act or the process of flying itself is imagined as a disaster. When, during the process of his rigorous – even torturous – physical training¹ Walt compares himself to birds and asks Master Yehudi why he has to experience suffering in order to fly whereas birds do not experience any, the Master responds: ““Because, my little pumpkin-head, you’re not a bird – you’re a man. In order to lift you off the ground, we have to crack the heavens in two. We have to turn the whole bloody universe inside out.””² The Master seems to imply that it would take an event akin to disaster in order for Walt to achieve flight. Cloaked as words of wisdom, and adorned with a patronizing tone (“my little pumpkin-head”), Master Yehudi’s utterance does no more than express a banality: if the experience of the body as an experience of gravity is what is normal, then the levitating body – the body against gravity – is an instance of disaster, and the Master’s cosmic vocabulary highlights this. This banality, however, turns into reality when Walt levitates for the first time.

Walt’s first flight occurs in the Master’s absence. In fact, it occurs because of his absence. When Master Yehudi happens to spend a night away from Walt, Mother Sioux and Aesop, Walt takes his absence as a disaster – as a sign of his betrayal, his having abandoned them: “The universe had gone up in smoke, and I was left to dwell among the ashes, alone forever among the smoldering ruins of betrayal.”³ Walt imagines himself as the lone survivor of a disaster. However, as if to prove the Master’s prediction that it would take a disaster for his disciple to lift himself off the ground, Walt’s first levitation occurs in the wake of what he (mis)takes to be a disaster (“[the] universe had gone up in smoke”):

1 As previously seen (in the final chapter of the first part), in order to teach him how to fly, Master Yehudi subjects Walt to a thirty-three step training program which consists in experiencing one physical (corporeal) ordeal after another. (Cf. *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 42)

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 38.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 58.

Presently I grew still, almost tranquil, and bit by bit a sense of calm spread through me, radiating out among my muscles and oozing toward the tips of my fingers and toes. There were no more thoughts in my head, no more feelings in my heart. I was weightless inside my own body, floating on a placid wave of nothingness, utterly detached and indifferent to the world around me. And that's when I did it for the first time – without warning, without the least notion that it was about to happen. Very slowly, I felt my body rise off the floor. The movement was so natural, so exquisite in its gentleness, it wasn't until I opened my eyes that I understood my limbs were touching only air. I was not far off the ground – no more than an inch or two – but I hung there without effort, suspended like the moon in the night sky, motionless and aloft, conscious only of the air fluttering in and out of my lungs. I can't say how long I hovered like that, but at a certain moment, with the same slowness and gentleness as before, I eased back to the ground. Everything had been drained out of me by then, and my eyes were already shut. Without so much as a single thought about what had just taken place, I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, sinking like a stone to the bottom of the world.¹

Walt's levitation, like disaster, strikes without warning. Walt experiences in flying what Quinn in *City of Glass* experiences in walking. Whereas Quinn names his experience "emptiness" ("a salutary emptiness within"), Walt calls his "nothingness." While Quinn's "emptiness" is related to his notion of "nowhere" and therefore to his experience of neutrality (*ne-uter*, neither here nor there), Walt's "nothingness" is pure indifference – the difference between neutrality and indifference being that neutrality implies equal preference (or lack thereof), while indifference implies a disregard towards the very notion of preference and the possibility of a choice.

In flight, Walt's nothingness is free of abjection – it is not the same nothingness that Master Yehudi confers on him on the opening page of *Mr. Vertigo*. Walt's flight, like Quinn's, is the pure experience of the body – the body as existing independently of the mind ("no more thoughts [...], no more feelings"). Levitation is doubly cleaving: it separates Walt from the world, and at the same time, it separates his mind from his body. His weightlessness, that is to say his experience of the body against gravity, is in fact the

¹ *Mr. Vertigo*, pp. 58-59.

experience of a body without the mind – as if his mind were weighing him down. Thus, the experience of levitation makes him aware that his mind, separated from his body, is indeed subjected to gravity. In this sense, what levitation challenges is not so much his experience of the body as it does his experience of the mind. Walt's levitation permutes the materiality of the body and the immateriality of the mind. In this chiasmus, the material body becomes immaterial the very moment it escapes gravity, and the immaterial mind becomes physical the very moment it stays bound on earth. Walt's return to the ground takes the form of a double fall, that does not allow mind and body to be reunited. His body becomes once again subjected to gravity as it eases back to the ground, but immediately after that, his mind is metaphorically pulled down below the ground "to the bottom of the world," as he falls asleep – an inverted image of the process of levitation. While the body appears to have recovered from the singular event of levitation, the mind does not return to its original state.

The interplay between mind and body in the act of levitation is further analyzed by Walt himself, at the end of the novel:

When I finally got off the ground for the first time, it wasn't because of anything [Master Yehudi had] taught me. I did it by myself on the cold kitchen floor, and it came after a long siege of sobbing and despair, when my soul began to rush out of my body and I was no longer conscious of who I was. Maybe the despair was the only thing that really mattered. In that case, the physical ordeals he put me through were no more than a sham, a diversion to trick me into thinking I was getting somewhere – when in fact I was never anywhere until I found myself lying face-down on that kitchen floor. What if it all came down to one moment – one leap – one lightning instant of transformation? [...] [W]hat if his way wasn't the only way? What if there was a simpler, more direct method, an approach that began from the inside and bypassed the body altogether? What then?¹

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, pp. 277-278.

In retrospect, Walt sees his first instance of levitation as an experience that had little to do with his body. “[Getting] off the ground” for him, is foremost, an experience of verticality, and an experience of loss. First, the loss of his soul from his body, which itself is the result of the loss of hope (“despair”). These two forms of loss entail a third: the loss of consciousness. In posing the rhetorical question “[what] if it all came down to one moment – one leap – one lightning instant of transformation,” Walt appears to overtly equate levitation with disaster – an idea that is hinted at from the beginning of the text. The “lightning instant of transformation” would be the sudden occurrence of a disaster that changes the course of history. As a disaster, then, levitation consists in the loss of self, and Walt insists on this idea in the final lines of the narrative:

Deep down, I don’t believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. [...] You must learn to stop being yourself. That’s where it begins, and everything else follows from that. You must let yourself evaporate. Let your muscles go limp, breathe until you feel your soul pouring out of you, and then shut your eyes. That’s how it’s done. The emptiness inside your body grows lighter than the air around you. Little by little, you begin to weigh less than nothing. You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground.

Like so.¹

From Walt’s perspective, levitation begins with loss, and in the end, it comes to bear much similarity to dying. Levitation, just like death, is possible only when an individual ceases to exist as the congruence of a body and a soul. While death is the ascent of the soul and the dissolution of the body, levitation is the ascent of the body and the evaporation of a soul weighed down by gravity, and as such, levitation appears as a mirror image of death. Both are experiences of disappearance, the ultimate experience of disaster. Whereas Walt merely describes his instances of levitation (or “levitation and locomotion” – once he starts to perform in public) in the rest of the narrative, he performs it in this final

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 278

passage: he details the step-by-step process of achieving flight, and actually initiates this process with the utterance that closes the novel: “Like so.”

This act of speech marks the sudden crossing of several boundaries, and is, as such, a disaster. First, Walt ceases to be just a narrative voice. By announcing that he will now perform the trick he has described, he interrupts the narration and shows that in addition to being a voice he is also in possession of a body. So far, his body and his ability to levitate existed only in the space and time of his story, but they now enter the space and time of the narration. In this instant, when both times (i.e. the time of the narration and the time of the story) meet and coincide, the newfound corporeal presence of Walt does not last long, because in this very utterance, Walt instantly levitates his way out of the narrative, marking its definitive end. The blank space on the remainder of the page that is the material limit of the narrative could also be seen as Walt’s “evaporation” from the text, if not the evaporation of the text itself. With the narrative voice disappears the body of the text: the letters, the printed text. What is left behind is a space of emptiness, of nothingness – a space not of neutrality, but of indifference.

The coincidence of Walt’s last levitation with the end of the text ultimately hints at his own fictionality, but his ability to perform his own disappearance reverses the relationship between the boundary of the text and the boundary of the story: narrative voices do not inhabit a pre-existing textual space, but the space of the text itself is defined *a posteriori* by the extent of the narrative voices of which it is made. Just like Nashe’s suicide at the end of *the Music of Chance*, Auster gives his narrative voices the freedom to decide when and how they exit the text.

9.3 The fall and the void: emptiness

In contrast to Walt's verticality in his experience of levitation into nothingness, Sachs's verticality involves his falling into oblivion. What Walt experiences in flying, Benjamin Sachs experiences in falling:

'It couldn't have taken me long to reach the ground,' [Sachs] said. 'Maybe a second or two, three at most. But I distinctly remember having more than one thought during that time. First came the horror, the moment of recognition, the instant when I understood that I was falling. You'd think that would have been all, that I wouldn't have had time to think of anything else. But the horror didn't last. No, that's wrong, the horror continued, but there was another thought that grew up inside it, something stronger than just horror alone. It's hard to give it a name. A feeling of absolute certainty, perhaps. An immense, overpowering rush of conviction, a taste of some ultimate truth. I've never been so certain of anything in my life. First I realized that I was falling, and then I realized that I was dead. I don't mean that I sensed I was going to die, I mean that I was already dead. I was a dead man falling through the air, and even though I was technically still alive, I was dead, as dead as a man who's been buried in his grave. [...] I had turned into a corpse, and by the time I hit the clothesline and landed in those towels and blankets, I wasn't there anymore. I had left my body, and for a split second I actually saw myself disappear.'¹

If, as suggested above, dying coincides with flying for Walt, for Sachs, it coincides with falling. The fall does not *result* in death – it *is* death. This experience of death, however, becomes more complex when Sachs cannot remove it from life. What he calls "[a] feeling of absolute certainty" about his death suggests, in fact, his being in denial of life, his unwillingness to accept life. He repeats "I was dead" and its variations ("I was a dead man," "I had turned into a corpse"), over and over, as if to convince himself into dying, as if to commit suicide before reaching the ground. Staunch in his determinism and unable to accept the randomness of the occurrence, he later admits to Sachs that he might

¹ *Leviathan*, pp. 130-131.

have “climbed onto the railing that night in order to kill [himself].” In so doing, he makes his accident an instance of self-destruction.

Besides, unlike Walt, who is devoid of thoughts and feelings in his experience of levitation, Benjamin Sachs’s fall does not prevent him from thinking – his mind does not empty itself. If anything, it only fills itself. Not only is Sachs able to think during his fall, but his thoughts multiply themselves. In fact, the fall severs the body from the mind. In the fall, it is the body that disappears whereas the mind (or consciousness) remains. Sachs evaporates or transcends his body in a downward movement. His mind, ridden with guilt for having adulterous thoughts, weighs him down to the point of obliteration. Comparing Walt’s levitation to Sachs’s fall seems to lead us to the conclusion that the experience of the mind is what anchors Auster’s characters to the ground.

In other words, the levitation and the fall embody the conflict between the body and the mind. These are the events through which the existence of a division between the two becomes apparent. To Auster, the experience of a conflict between the body and the mind starts with the disastrous event that initiates their separation. In other words, if the question of mind-body division is addressed in Auster’s writings, it is as a process, rather than as a state (one should observe here that “division” simultaneously means the state of being divided and the act of dividing).

In his repetition of the instance of the fall, Sachs experiences a cleaving of his mind: “‘Why did I do it? Why was I so eager to court that risk? I must have asked myself that question six hundred times a day, and each time I asked it, a tremendous chasm would open up inside me, and immediately after that I would be falling again, plunging headlong

into the darkness.”¹ This further emphasizes that Sachs’s disaster thus seems to occur within his mind, rather than in his body. The disaster is not so much his body’s falling from the fire escape, as it is the chasm that ruptures his mind. While characters like Quinn, Glass or Walt seek emptiness in order to experience peace, Sachs seeks the chasm in which to destroy himself. The other characters’ desired emptiness is the opposite of Sachs’s chasm. Emptiness is the body without the mind, the body without thoughts, without feelings, whereas the chasm is the mind without the body – the mind weighed down by self-destructive thoughts, falling into an abyss.

Thus far, we have seen how for several characters in Auster’s novels, the experience of emptiness begins within the body. Seeking and desiring emptiness, these characters take leave of their own body. Their body, through its own loss, makes the experience of emptiness possible. For other characters, however, the loss of the body as the condition of possibility of emptiness is experienced metaphorically. One such character is M.S. Fogg in *Moon Palace*.

Fogg’s experience of emptiness begins in the space outside of his body: in the space of his apartment. When he receives Uncle Victor’s books packed in boxes, he does not open them immediately, but arranges them in such a way that they serve as furniture in his apartment. However, when he finds himself in a desperate situation where he starts to run out of money, he opens these boxes, reads the books, and trades them in for money. As he sells these boxes one by one, his apartment gradually becomes bare:

As I sold off the books, my apartment went through many changes. That was inevitable, for each time I opened another box, I simultaneously destroyed another piece of furniture. My bed was dismantled, my chairs shrank and disappeared, my desk atrophied into empty space. My life had become a gathering zero, and it was a

1 *Leviathan*, p. 135.

thing I could actually see: a palpable, burgeoning emptiness. Each time I ventured into my uncle's past, it produced a physical result, an effect in the real world. The consequences were therefore always before my eyes, and there was no way to escape them. So many boxes were left, so many boxes were gone. I had only to look at my room to know what was happening. The room was a machine that measured my condition: how much of me remained, how much of me was no longer there. I was both perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one. I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear.¹

What may strike the reader most about this passage is the resemblance between the space of the room and the body (Fogg's body). The room is not so much a measuring instrument ("machine") that measures Fogg's physical condition, as it is a mirror that reflects it. If the room is the body, the different make-believe pieces of furniture are its members and its organs. While the relationship between the room and the body is implied for the most part, it is made explicit in certain cases. First, the verb "atrophy" (used in its preterit form, in the above passage) that, in an anthropomorphic instance, qualifies the desk, is specific to the vocabulary of anatomy. While the bed dismantles and the chair shrinks – dismantling and shrinking not being specifically anatomical processes – it is the desk that atrophies. This immediate link between the desk and the body, elevates the desk – above all other pieces of furniture – to the rank of an important part of the body, a vital organ. Then, the loss of the furniture is explicitly referred to as the process of "dismemberment." This suggests that the room does not simply mirror Fogg's body, but is an extension of his body – perhaps even *is* the body. For Marco Stanley Fogg, the loss of the body necessary to the experience of emptiness begins in the room. In the gradual loss of the various boxes serving as furniture, Fogg imagines the loss of the various parts of his body. Eventually he disappears, and this disappearance coincides with his experience of emptiness. As he tells the reader, a few pages later:

1 *Moon Palace*, pp. 23-24.

My apartment was bare now, but rather than discourage me as I had thought it would, this emptiness seemed to give me comfort. I am quite at a loss to explain it, but all of a sudden my nerves became steadier, and for the next three or four days I almost began to recognize myself again. It is curious to use such a word in this context, but for that brief period following the sale of Uncle Victor's books, I would even go so far as to call myself *happy*. Like an epileptic on the brink of a seizure, I had entered that strange half-world in which everything starts to shine, to give off a new and astonishing clarity.¹

Fogg's experience of emptiness resembles that of the other characters (with the exception of Sachs) discussed above: it is an experience of sudden serenity. Although he does not levitate like Walt in *Mr. Vertigo* or Nathan Glass who floats above his hospital bed in *Brooklyn Follies*, he is able to take leave of his body and transcend into the experience of emptiness. What Quinn or Glass call "nowhere," Fogg calls "that strange half-world." His emptiness, like theirs, is a state of in-betweenness, of neutrality – of being neither here, nor there. For Fogg, the loss of his body, resulting from the emptying out of the apartment, coincides with his recognizing (re-cognizing) himself. The loss of his body (although metaphorical) is necessary in order for him to find himself again. The emptiness, paradoxically, replenishes him.

The parallel between Fogg's body and his room, as seen above, is not the only instance of a metaphorical relationship between the room and the body in Auster's writings. The *Invention of Solitude* already inaugurates this relationship in the narrator's description of S.'s tiny Parisian room:

It was a shrine, hardly bigger than a body, in praise of all that exists beyond the body: the representation of one man's inner world, even to the slightest detail. S. had literally managed to surround himself with the things that were inside him. The room he lived in was a dream space, and its walls were like the skin of some second body around him, as if his own body had been transformed into a mind, a

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 31.

breathing instrument of pure thought. This was the womb, the belly of the whale, the original site of the imagination.¹

S.'s room is not the "nowhere" or the "half-world." It is not a space of neutrality, but of simultaneity. The room is at once the container and the content. It is both, the body and the mind, the inside and the outside, the material and immaterial. In the space of S.'s room, the body and the mind become interchangeable. The room becomes a space where the binary oppositions fuse into an indistinguishable whole of possibility. While Fogg's experience of his room is an experience of emptiness (although regenerative), S's room embodies a plenitude.

In all of the instances we have seen thus far, a common pattern emerges: the experience of "nowhere" and of emptiness, or, as seen in the last case, of plenitude, is desirable only in confined spaces. When the characters find themselves in open spaces or cities (like Quinn in New York or A. in Amsterdam), they sever themselves from the outside world and confine themselves to their bodies – to the inside of their bodies. Paradoxically, confinement seems to be desirable, regenerative, and liberating. As a corollary, open spaces are seen as threatening, destructive, disastrous. This can also be seen in Nashe's experiencing the vastness of the United States while remaining within the confines of the closed space of his car – which acts like a shell, almost a protective extension of his body.

Rare is the Austerian character who shuns emptiness. In *Moon Palace*, the reader encounters this rarity in the character of Thomas Effing. Effing's experience of wilderness occurs during the time he spends in the American west – in the Great Salt Desert, in the

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 94.

vast American wilderness near Nevada or Utah. For him, unlike the other Austerian characters above, emptiness is threatening:

That was the trouble. The land is too big out there, and after a while, it starts to swallow you up. I reached a point when I couldn't take it in anymore. All that bloody silence and emptiness. You try to find your bearings in it, but it's too big, the dimensions are too monstrous, and eventually, I don't know how else to put it, eventually it just stops being there. There's no world, no land, no nothing. It comes down to that, Fogg, in the end it's all a figment. The only place you exist is in your head.¹

The emptiness of the American wilderness is treacherous. The space engulfs the body, ingests it. Whereas the experience of emptiness of the other Austerian characters (like Quinn or Walt) is an experience free of the mind, that is to say, free of all mental processes, Effing's experience of emptiness is an experience purely of the mind, of the imagination ("figment"). Emptiness, in Effing's case, becomes undesirable when the experience of the body becomes impossible; emptiness, for him, is corporeal absence.

Moreover, for Effing, vastness is to be equated with nothingness. Indeed, nothingness manifests itself in or as boundlessness, limitlessness. In order to exist in the body – as the body – Effing has to experience limits. Through Effing's experience of the endless expanse of nothingness that is the American west, Auster seems to highlight the importance of boundaries and limits in his narratives.

Thus, in this chapter, we have seen how the experience of the body for Auster's characters is also an experience of the conflict between the body and the mind. Negative spatial and grammatical categories like "nowhere", "emptiness" or "nothingness" are related to neutrality, simultaneity or in-betweenness. In all cases, they present ambiguities. A large number of Austerian characters desire the experience of such spatially ambivalent

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 152.

states, and this leads to the blurring of the boundaries between the body and the world, the body and the mind, the interior and the exterior, the material and the immaterial. When the boundaries become problematic and uncertainty prevails, characters like Effing intervene to remind us of the importance of limits necessary for experience.

THIRD PART:

EXPERIENCE OF THE DISASTER –

BOUNDARIES, LIMITS AND POETICS

Chapter 10

Boundaries.

“I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there.”¹

The notions of boundary and limit, which are implied in the very definition of disaster, are among Paul Auster’s major concerns. A significant portion of the author’s work is driven by the desire to explore the relationship between the beginning and the end, be it the beginning and the end of life, of the narration, or of the text. In Auster’s narratives, boundaries coincide with each other, more often than not in a chiastic manner: the beginning of a story coincides with the end of a life, a loss coincides with the beginning of a quest, or the end of a text marks the beginning of a life. As if to preface Auster’s main career-long concerns, the author-narrator of *The Invention of Solitude* notes that “for a man to die of no apparent cause, for a man to die simply because he is a man, brings us so close to the invisible boundary between life and death that we no longer know which side we are on. Life becomes death, and it is as if this death has owned life all along.”² If living is slowly dying, certain questions arise for Auster: what is the relationship between the beginning and the end? What marks the boundary between life and death? Is there even such a boundary to begin with?

Our focus, in this chapter, will be to study how Auster’s characters experience these precarious boundaries, and how they are pushed towards it. Our starting point will be the

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 1.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 5

central trope of the quest, which illustrates the interchangeability of the notions of beginning and end.

10.1 Quest and narration, death and life, beginning and end

In Auster's work, problematic boundaries are, for the most part, experienced by the characters, within the realm of the quest: the quests of Auster's characters being defined by their constantly exploring and challenging boundaries. In the manner of a leitmotif in the work of Paul Auster, each quest and every urge to challenge boundaries or question delimitations is either born of or occurs in anticipation of a loss, and more often than not, as we have seen thus far, this loss is presented in the form of death. Further, two of the major means by which these quests are executed include narrating (written and/or oral) and traveling.

As previously discussed in this study, the author-narrator of the *Invention of Solitude* embarks on the quest of recording – through writing – the life of his father as soon as he learns of his father's death: "I knew that I would have to write about my father. I had no plan, no precise idea of what this meant. I cannot even remember making a decision about it. It was simply there, a certainty, an obligation that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news. I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him."¹ While writing in this case is a reaction to a sudden death, in *Moon Palace*, it is carried out in the expectation of an impending death – that of Effing's ("A hundred little signs have told me. I'm running out of time, and we've got to get started before it's too late. [...] My obituary. We have to start putting it together

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 6.

now.”¹). Similarly, the author-narrator of *Winter Journal*, who is also approaching death, urges himself on to narrate the story of his life: “Speak now before it is too late, and then hope to go on speaking until there is nothing more to be said. Time is running out, after all.”². Such instances in which the quest, triggered by the imminence of the disaster, consists in writing or narrating have been studied in our first chapter. The other major mode of the Austerian quest involves physical displacement. For instance, the protagonist of *Moon Palace* initially finds himself wandering the streets of New York City and then Central Park after the death of his uncle, Uncle Victor. Then, after the death of his father, Solomon Barber, he travels westward from New York, until he reaches the Pacific coast in the town of Laguna Beach in California. It is interesting to observe, however, that in *Man in the Dark*, Auster combines the two major modalities of the quest: narrating and traveling. The old and ailing August Brill, in his continued grief over the death of his wife Sonia, lies in bed, immobile, narrating stories to himself, creating an alternate world in which his character, Owen Brick, travels across a war-stricken America.

A common pattern emerges in all of the above instances. Whether narration occurs before or after a death, it establishes a relationship between narration and the end. We discussed in the first part of this study how narration, for Auster, like it was for Scheherazade in *Thousand and One Nights*, is a means of delaying the end, of deferring death, whose shadow looms over the life of his characters, as well as that of the narrative itself. As the narrator of “The Book of Memory” in *The Invention of Solitude* reminds us, “The invention of solitude. Or stories of life and death. The story begins with the end. Speak or die. And for as long as you go on speaking, you will not die.”³ Thus, Auster reinforces the blurring of the boundary between life and death, between the beginning and

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 124.

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 1.

3 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 160.

the end. He suggests that the end of life marks the beginning of a story, but also that the end of the story will imply the end of life.

Indeed many of Auster's novels end in death, or metaphorically, in darkness. Mr. Blank sleeps at the end of *Travels in the Scriptorium*: "Sleep well, Mr. Blank. Lights out."¹ Having reached the end of his quest, Fogg experiences darkness at the end of *Moon Palace*: "I kept my eyes on [the full moon] as it rose into the night sky, not turning away until it had found its place in the darkness."² Walt levitates out of the text of *Mr. Vertigo*: "You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground. Like so."³ Nashe crashes his car in *The Music of Chance*: "And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore."⁴ Finally, in *Timbuktu*, Mr. Bones commits suicide: "He ran toward the noise, toward the light, toward the glare and the roar that were rushing in on him from all directions. With any luck, he would be with Willy before the day was out."⁵

Exceptions exist, however, perhaps to further highlight the interchangeability of the notions of beginning and end: in the eighth chapter of this study, in which we discussed the condition of ailing characters in *Brooklyn Follies* and *Oracle Night*, we saw how these novels end with the survival of their protagonists, rather than their death. But if we were to accept Vivasvan Soni's reading of the notion of happiness – as a state of being "already dead" – these instances of exception reinforce the rule rather than contradict it.

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 130.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 298.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 278.

4 *The Music of Chance*, p. 198.

5 *Timbuktu*, p. 186.

10.2 From melancholia to limit-experience

In *Moon Palace*, the end of the life of Uncle Victor marks the beginning of a quest, and eventually, of a new life for M.S. Fogg. Compared to the quests of the host of other protagonists in Auster's work, Fogg's experience of the quest has the peculiarity of being extreme, and violent. Describing in retrospect the experience of his quest, Fogg says: "In the end, the problem was not grief. 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."¹ This account summarizes, in somewhat abstract terms, M.S. Fogg's experience of mourning his uncle's death by willingly exposing himself to a life of vagrancy. Although we have briefly touched upon Fogg's mourning in a few of the previous chapters of this study, we must observe here that Fogg makes a distinction between the experience of grief and an experience that goes beyond grief. This distinction seems to echo the distinction made by Freud between mourning and melancholia, and it is this very distinction that interests us in this section of our chapter. As an introductory definition of melancholia – which by no means is an exhaustive one – Freud writes:

The correlation between melancholia and mourning seems justified by the overall picture of the two conditions. Further, the causes of both in terms of environmental influences are, where we can identify them at all, also the same. Mourning is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on. In some people, whom we for this reason suspect of having a pathological disposition, melancholia appears in place of mourning.²

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 19.

2 Freud, Sigmund. *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin Books, 2007. p. 203.

Freud thus attempts to define melancholia through its differential relationship to mourning. Just like the boundary between the beginning and the end, or that between life and death, is not clearly discernible for Auster, the boundary between mourning and melancholia is also not clearly marked. If one were to rephrase Freud's statement that "melancholia appears in place of mourning," without deviating from its original sense, it could be said that mourning *gives way* to melancholia in those people who have a pathological disposition to it. Such a rephrasing serves to highlight M.S. Fogg's own evaluation of his condition as being seemingly characterized by melancholia: "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."¹ It could thus be construed that Fogg's grief, that is a part of his mourning his uncle's death, or rather, his grief, of which mourning is a modality, transforms or develops into melancholia. As a result, his "[beginning] to wobble" and ultimately "[spinning] out of orbit" could be read as a metaphor for his melancholic state in that it seems to express his being "incapable of functioning."²

However, whether or not Fogg is really melancholic is not easy to determine. While Freud himself admits to the difficulty in the diagnosis of melancholia, in Fogg's case, this task is rendered far more difficult. This is due, in part, to his excessive self-involvement following Uncle Victor's death, rather than his experiencing an "impoverishment of the ego"³ which, for Freud, is one of the key aspects of melancholia.

In the period that follows his uncle's death, M.S. Fogg chooses for himself an extreme or violent life, a life that verges on death: "I wanted to live dangerously, to push

1 Our emphasis.

2 *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 206.

3 *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 205.

myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there. As it turned out, I nearly did not make it. Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets. If not for a girl named Kitty Wu, I probably would have starved to death.”¹ Unlike a melancholic who, according to Freud, “expects ostracism and punishment,”² Fogg chooses to live dangerously not because he has lost his sense of self-worth and believes he deserves to be punished, but he does so for the sake of experiencing extreme conditions:

I did nothing to help myself, refused even to lift a finger. God knows why I behaved like that. I invented countless reasons at the time, but in the end, it probably boiled down to despair. I was in despair, and in the face of so much upheaval, I felt that drastic action of some sort was necessary. I wanted to spit on the world, to do the most outlandish thing possible. With all the fervor and idealism of a young man who had thought too much and read too many books, I decided that the thing I should do was nothing: my action would consist of a militant refusal to take any action at all. This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition. I would turn my life into a work of art, 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, and grope as I did for another reading, the image of that darkness gradually lured me in, seduced me with the simplicity of its design. I would do nothing to thwart the inevitable, but neither would I rush out to meet it. If life could continue for the time being as it always had, so much the better. I would be patient, I would hold fast. It was simply that I knew what was in store for me, and whether it happened today, or whether it happened tomorrow, it would nevertheless happen. Total eclipse. The beast had been slain, its entrails had been decoded. The moon would block the sun, and at that point I would vanish. I would be dead broke, a flotsam of flesh and bone without a farthing to my name.³

Fogg’s decision does not so much reveal the self-flogging tendency of a melancholic as it points towards his choosing actively (paradoxically, by being passive) to dive headlong into abject misery as a means to discover unknown aspects of himself, and “turn [his] life into a work of art.” As the story unfolds, we learn that Fogg’s life as a

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 1.

2 *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 206.

3 *Moon Palace*, p. 20.

vagabond is centered around a paradox which further blurs the boundary between life and death: he adopts a way of life that makes it impossible for him to go on living. He lives a life in which he chooses not to live. To read this as M.S. Fogg's attempting suicide would be to misread it. He lives by not living, by refusing to live. This, it could be said, consists in his seeking what Foucault calls a "limit-experience."

In an interview with Duccio Trombadori, Michel Foucault explains:

The phenomenologist's experience is basically a way of organizing the conscious perception (*regard réflexif*) of any aspect of daily, lived experience in its transitory form, in order to grasp its meaning. Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, on the contrary, try through experience to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme. They attempt to gather the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time. The work of the phenomenologist, however, essentially consists of unfolding the entire field of possibilities connected to daily experience.¹

From this, it could therefore be inferred that Auster's notion of experience is not a phenomenologist's experience, but appears to be aligned with that of Nietzsche, Bataille and Blanchot. What for Foucault amounts to a limit-experience, is what Auster calls "nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proportion." M.S. Fogg indeed tries "to reach that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme." After having failed a medical examination due to his weakened condition, Fogg is required to consult a psychiatrist, to whom he explains his actions:

Two years ago, for reasons both personal and philosophical, I decided to give up the struggle. It wasn't because I wanted to kill myself – you mustn't think that – but because I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself. [...] If I came close to dying, I nevertheless believe that I'm a better person for it.²

1 Foucault, M., Trombadori, D. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Trans. R. James Goldstein & James Cascaito. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1991. p. 31.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 78.

This summary is a twofold attempt to reinforce his seeking a limit-experience and to instruct the psychiatrist (and the reader) not to misconstrue such a choice as a desire to commit suicide.

What could be (mis)interpreted as M.S. Fogg's melancholic psychic state seems in fact to be part of his work of mourning the loss of Uncle Victor. Experiencing the limit of life for him does not consist in the "impoverishment of the ego," as it might be suggested ("I was in despair," or, "I would be dead broke, a flotsam of flesh and bone without a farthing to my name."), but rather appears to be a way to invest further in the ego ("I'm a better person for it"). The paradox is striking: the seeming impoverishment of the ego, and the subjecting of the self to extreme and violent – almost fatal – conditions is necessary for the replenishment of the ego. For the protagonist of *Moon Palace*, abandoning of the self to harsh situations is a form of excessive self-involvement. As Fogg admits to himself apologetically, after his friends David Zimmer and Kitty Wu save his life, "I felt a need to purify myself, to repent for all my excesses of self-involvement. From total selfishness, I resolved to achieve a state of total selflessness."¹ For Marco Stanley Fogg, losing himself is a way to "penetrate [himself]," to find himself. This, however, is by no means a new idea explored by Auster.

10.3 The tearing of the self from itself, and the question of the subject

The idea of losing the self as a means of finding the self appears as early as Auster's first (autobiographical) work, *The Invention of Solitude*. The narrator of the second section, "The Book of Memory," remarks to himself, "A. realizes, as he sits in his room writing 'The Book of Memory,' he speaks of himself as another in order to tell the

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 71.

story of himself. He must make himself absent in order to find himself there. And so he says A., even as he means to say I.” (*Invention of Solitude*, 165) In the “The Book of Memory,” “he” emerges as the “(an)other” of “I”. In fact, it seems to be a mark of Auster’s autobiographical writing to avoid the first-person narrative voice. *Winter Journal*, his most recent autobiographical work, is narrated entirely in the second-person narrative voice: “you.” To talk about an “I,” he uses a “you.” “You” appears as the other of “I.” The “he” in the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* seems to have been replaced by a “you” in *Winter Journal*. While the initial gap remains, it would appear that in doing so, the distance between the self and the other has been narrowed down. In the relationship between “I” and “you,” “he” holds the place of exclusion. “He” is the distant other. “He” is the outside(r) in this “I - you” relationship. Put differently, since “you” implies proximity and inclusion in its relationship to “I,” “he” is more distant to “I” than “you.” However, “you” and “he” both relate to “I” as the other. In fact, Benveniste addresses this same problematic relationship between personal pronouns in his article “La Nature des pronoms.” For Benveniste, “I” determines the position of “you” and “he:” “C’est en s’identifiant comme personne unique prononçant *je* que chacun des locuteurs se pose tour à tour comme ‘sujet’”¹ (original emphasis). The self, for Auster, can be made to exist only in and *as* otherness. “He” and “you,” (i.e. the other) emerge from “I” (i.e. the self), and completely dominate “I.” This “other” that takes over the self, completely destroys the self along its way. The self is ruptured from itself.

In *The Invention of Solitude*, and *Winter Journal*, Auster explores the idea of loss of the self by deviating from the norm of the first-person narrative that generally (but by no means necessarily) characterizes an autobiography, whereas in *Moon Palace*, there is a

1 Benveniste, Émile. “La Nature des pronoms”. *Problèmes de linguistique générale, I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966. p. 254.

mise en action of this idea – it is orchestrated at the level of the plot, thereby rendering the notion more dynamic, and its violence more palpable. In all of these cases, Auster stages a separation – a rupture – of the self that is indispensable to existence and experience. This further corresponds to, and continues with Foucault’s definition of a “limit-experience” as opposed to a phenomenological experience:

Moreover, phenomenology tries to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience of Nietzsche, Blanchot, and Bataille has rather the task of “tearing” the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely “other” than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.

It is this de-subjectifying undertaking, the idea of a “limit-experience” that tears the subject from itself, which is the fundamental lesson that I’ve learned from these authors. And no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to “tear” me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same.¹

Auster’s narrating subject breaks away from itself and loses itself completely and imperceptibly to alterity. The rupturing of the self from itself, as witnessed in the tumultuous relationship between the narrating personal pronouns in Auster’s autobiographical works could be seen as an instance of what Foucault calls “de-subjectification.” But this notion of “de-subjectification” has an ancestor. It seems clear that Foucault derives the term “de-subjectifying” from Blanchot’s notion of the “unsubjected:”

In the relation of the self (the same) to the Other, the Other is distant, he is the stranger; but if I reverse this relation, the Other relates to me as if I were the Other and thus causes me to take leave of my identity. Pressing until he crushes me, he withdraws me, by the pressure of the very near, from the privilege of the first person. When thus I am wrested from myself, there remains a passivity bereft of

1 *Remarks on Marx*, pp 31-32.

self (sheer alterity, the other without unity). There remains the unsubjected, or the patient.¹

It is through the “annihilation” or “dissociation” of the self that Paul Auster’s narrators or characters exist and experience life and the world. The self can only be made to exist paradoxically through its complete obliteration, and therefore as the “other.” This “other” is what corresponds to the “passivity bereft of self,” which for Blanchot is the disaster. In Auster’s work, disaster is not played out merely on a thematic level, but is also to be observed in the very instance of narration: through the problematic narrating pronouns; the disastrous loss of the narrating “I.” The notion of disaster seems to be rooted in the notion of limit-experience. Moreover, the prefix *dis* in “disaster” implies “removal, aversion, negation, reversal” (*OED*), and the “wresting” of the self from self or the “tearing of the subject from itself,” therefore bears this image of a violent removal: the self is removed from itself. Auster vividly depicts such a disastrous removal in *Moon Palace*:

Several days after my visit to the music store, a minor disaster nearly drowned me. The two eggs I was about to place in a pot of water and boil up for my daily meal slipped through my fingers and broke on the floor. Those were the last two eggs of my current supply, and I could not help feeling that this was the cruelest, most terrible thing that had ever happened to me. The eggs landed with an ugly splat. I remember standing there in horror as they oozed out over the floor. The sunny, translucent innards sank into the cracks, and suddenly there was muck everywhere, a bobbing slush of slime and shell. One yolk had miraculously survived the fall, but when I bent down to scoop it up, it slid out from under the spoon and broke apart. I felt as though a star were exploding, as though a great sun had just died. The yellow spread over the white and then began to swirl, turning into a vast nebula, a debris of interstellar gases. It was all too much for me – the last, imponderable straw. When this happened, I actually sat down and cried.²

The breaking of the eggs, that Auster himself explicitly qualifies as a “disaster” depicts a double movement of removal, separation or rupture. First of all, their falling on

1 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 18

2 *Moon Palace*, pp. 41-42.

the floor causes the insides of the eggs to be removed from their shells. Then, there is also the added removal of the egg-yolk from the egg-white. The egg-yolk violently separates, tears, removes, wrests, itself from its whole self – the egg-white – in the manner that the self tears away from itself, completely destroying itself in the process, leaving behind “a vast nebula, a debris of interstellar gases,” akin to “passivity bereft of self.” Auster resorts to the use of a vocabulary of a cosmic order, thereby literalizing and reinforcing, to the extent of magnifying and hyperbolizing, the disaster of the experience, disaster (*dis* + *aster*) being the removal of stars from themselves.

In seeking and undergoing a limit-experience through their quests, Auster’s characters not only question or challenge the existing material and immaterial boundaries, but also find themselves redefining these boundaries, or, at times, even creating new ones. However, the material and immaterial boundaries are not mutually exclusive, and seem to be rather closely linked. In certain cases, for instance, the redefinition of spatial boundaries is a means of redefining spiritual boundaries. The most striking instance of this is to be found in *Moon Palace*. Once Fogg is evicted from his apartment from West 112th street, his period of homelessness begins as he finds himself living in and wandering the streets of New York City at the beginning. Later, in search of solitude, he comes to redefine the spatial boundary of his life on the streets by confining himself to the space within Central Park:

There is no question that the park did me a world of good. It gave me privacy, but more than that, it allowed me to pretend that I was not as bad off as I really was. The grass and the trees were democratic, and as I loafed in the sunshine of a late afternoon, or climbed among the rocks in the early evening to look for a place to sleep, I felt that I was blending into the environment, that even to a practiced eye I could have passed for one of the picnickers or strollers around me. The streets did not allow for such delusions. Whenever I walked out among the crowds, I was quickly shamed into an awareness of myself. I felt like a speck, a vagabond, a pox of failure on the skin of mankind. Each day I became a little dirtier than I had been

the day before, a little more ragged and confused, a little more different from everyone else. In the park, I did not have to carry around this burden of self-consciousness. It gave me a threshold, a boundary, a way to distinguish between the inside and the outside. If the streets forced me to see myself as others saw me, the park gave me a chance to return to my inner life, to hold on to myself purely in terms of what was happening inside me. It is possible to survive without a roof over your head, I discovered, but you cannot live without establishing an equilibrium between the inner and outer. The park did that for me. It was not quite a home, perhaps, but for want of any other shelter, it came very close.¹

Central Park and New York City, together and in relation to each other, first and foremost evoke the problem of delimitation that pervades Auster's work. Although the park distinguishes itself from the rest of the city through a more or less clearly marked boundary, the park remains very much a part of the city, and this could be seen as the blurring of the geographical boundary between Central Park and the rest of New York City. It would therefore appear that alternating between the streets of the rest of New York City and Central Park, allows the protagonist to alternate between two psychic states: between awareness or acceptance and denial, between melancholia and seeming normalcy. Fogg wanders the city streets with the self-reproach, self-criticism, sense of moral inferiority and the general reduction in self-esteem of a melancholic man ("I felt like a speck, a vagabond, a pox of failure on the skin of mankind") but seems to gain a sense of normalcy (although illusory) when in the park: "There is no question that the park did me a world of good. It gave me privacy, but more than that, it allowed me to pretend that I was not as bad off as I really was." As a result, it allows him to distinguish between two worlds, two realities. Central Park thus gains a uchronic dimension. It represents a fictional world – a world of theater or masquerade that makes it possible for Fogg to "pretend," to take on a role other than his own. Fogg's denial of his reality – his being a vagabond – thus manifests itself through role-play. This further serves to blur the boundary between the park and the rest of the city, not in geographical terms, but rather in terms of the

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 56.

protagonist's psychic state. The experience in the city streets is indispensable to the experience in the park. Fogg's experience of worthlessness in the streets of New York City is necessary in order for him to experience the sense of contentment in the park. The terrible experience outside the park provides him with something to bypass, making the illusion – the sense of seeming happiness – that much more striking, and perhaps even tangible, in contrast.

Moreover, Central Park, like its name suggests, lies at the heart – the very center – of New York City. Limiting himself to the park consists in his moving from the circumference, the margin, the boundary of the city, to its center, its very core. This narrowing down or contraction of space, allows Auster to present the park as a world within the world. Indeed, through Fogg, he portrays Central Park as a microcosm of the world: "I liked wandering back and forth among these different sectors, for it allowed me to imagine that I was traveling over great distances, even as I remained within the boundaries of my miniature world."¹ Similarly, in *City of Glass*, through the secondary fictional character, Henry Dark, Auster attempts to conceive of America, and eventually New York, as a Tower of Babel of sorts, and thus, as a microcosm of the world. What is specific to *Moon Palace*, is that the idea of a microcosm is narrowed further down to Central Park. And this *mise en abyme* is further accentuated by Fogg's "crawling" into a cave:

"[...] at a certain point, I found a cluster of large rocks surrounded by overgrown foliage and trees. The rocks formed a natural cave, and without stopping to consider the matter any further, I crawled into this shallow indentation, pulled some loose branches in with me to block up the opening, and promptly fell asleep."²

1 *Moon Palace*, p. 61.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 67.

As we learn a few pages later, it is inside this cave that Fogg's limit-experience reaches its extreme, before David Zimmer and Kitty Wu come to his rescue. A flagrant paradox seems to be at work here: in *Moon Palace*, Auster's narrowing down of the spatial boundary and confining it not only to Central Park, but rather a very specific cave at the heart of Central Park, seems to be a way to expand and magnify the boundaries of this small space in which to experience the quest, as it allows Fogg to be under the impression that he is "traveling over great distances." Put differently, Auster seems to employ contraction of space as a means of expansion of its limits – of the expansion of the experience of its limits. It would therefore appear that, the smaller the confines of a space, the more consequential and satisfying the limit-experience. The author takes this idea even further, and reinforces it by way of reduplication through Effing's experience of the cave. Thomas Effing, who turns out to be Fogg's grandfather and whose story is embedded in and told within M.S. Fogg's own story, also chooses to live in a cave in the middle of a desert and subjects himself to all the possible dangers of living in such conditions. Auster therefore seems to narrow down the generational gap or the genealogical space by subjecting Effing and Fogg to similar modalities of limit-experience.

The narrowing down of space also implies an inward movement. Fogg's "crawling" into a cave coincides with his experiencing the very extreme limit of life, but it is also the space where he is "saved" by his friends. Likewise, Effing escapes death by a narrow margin during his stay in the cave, but his retreating into a cave also saves him from the extremely violent conditions of his expedition and eventually plateaus into a period of creative and artistic fertility during which he finds the inspiration to pursue his work as a painter. There seems to be a distinct pattern at work where Fogg's and Effing's experiences of limits of life are concerned. After the limit-experience, in which the self is separated from itself and becomes the "other," and the inside becomes the outside, the

characters seem to want to reverse this experience by retreating, moving inwards, as if to attempt to return to the self from which they were torn apart, severed.

10.4 Paradoxes and the uncanny

Auster also engages in a seemingly exhaustive exploration of the possibilities of embedded patterns and narratives. If limit-experience by definition consists in an impossibility, Auster finds a way to include further impossibilities within the realm of limit-experience. An instance of this phenomenon are the various paradoxes that have been discussed thus far in this section. These paradoxes could be considered as expressions of that which is logically unacceptable – indeed, as expressions of logical impossibility. Auster’s use of paradoxes could thus be seen as a manifestation of literary or poetic limit-experience. The author supplements these paradoxes with other incongruities and impossibilities within the characters’ limit-experience. For instance, Fogg’s description of his retreating into the “natural cave” in Central Park ascribes to him the image of a creature – a wounded animal – crawling into a cave to die. Such a description obscures the boundary between the human and the animal. In fact, it reveals a transgression, perhaps even a regression: the human becomes the animal. The identity of the character, Thomas Effing, also seems to be marked by a blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal, the human and the supernatural, and the living and the (un)dead. When Fogg meets Effing for the first time, he describes his appearance in the following terms: “my first reaction was to think he was dead”¹ Auster highlights Effing’s consistency in his lack of resemblance to a human being, when, towards the end of Effing’s life and Fogg’s time with him as a result, he sets out to give away money to people in New York City at random (although there is careful planning behind the randomness): “He was wearing his dark

¹ *Moon Palace*, p.97.

glasses that day, and with his two arms wrapped around the bag and clutching it to his chest, he looked even less human than he usually did, as though he were an overgrown hummingbird who had just arrived from outer space.”¹ Effing seems to follow a pattern of transgressing from the human realm into the animal, and finally into the surreal realm of a creature from outer space.

From this, it would appear that Auster exposes, although not in explicit terms, a certain “uncanniness” (“*Unheimlichkeit*”) that surrounds all of Fogg’s encounters with Effing, especially the very first:

I felt I had an ally in [Mrs. Hume], and that served as a kind of protection against whatever strange thing was about to happen... Mrs. Hume announced that I had arrived, that ‘Mr. M.S. Fogg is here for the interview,’ but [Effing] did not say a word to her, did not even stir a muscle. It was a supernatural inertness, and my first reaction was to think he was dead... It was remarkable how quickly [he] transformed his appearance. He was no longer a comatose semi-corpse lost in a twilight reverie[...].²

Fogg’s description of Effing as resembling a dead man, or his referring to him as a “comatose semi-corpse,” insists on the strangeness or the “supernatural inertness” of his first encounter with Effing. If Fogg’s feeling of strangeness is brought on by the experience of seeing what resembles a dead body or a ghost-like figure – a figure belonging neither to life, nor death – then one way to name this strange feeling would be to call it the uncanny. In his essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud indeed relates the uncanny with death, dead body or ghosts – the uncanny being the feeling of fright which most people experience to the greatest degree in relation to “anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts.”

1 *Moon Palace*, p.198.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 97.

In the first place, if psychoanalytical theory is right in asserting that every affect arising from an emotional impulse – of whatever kind – is converted into fear by being repressed, it follows that among those things that are felt to be frightening there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny, and it would be immaterial whether it was itself originally frightening or arose from another affect. In the second place, if this really is the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why German usage allows the familiar (*das Heimliche*, the ‘homely’) to switch to its opposite, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, the ‘unhomely’) [...], for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed. The link with repression now illuminates Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as ‘something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open’.

[...]

To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts.¹

It could be said that Fogg experiences the feeling of fear that uncanniness tends to trigger when he comes face-to-face with Effing, who is nothing short of ghastly and ghostly. What could also be interesting to consider is Freud’s emphasis on the idea of recurrence or return: that the fright experienced when faced with the uncanny comes from “something that has been repressed and now returns.” The notion of recurrence is central to *Moon Palace*, and manifests itself in various forms, the most striking of which is the reduplication of Fogg’s limit-experience in the narrative of Effing’s limit-experience, or vice versa, for the sake of chronological precision. In both cases, their experience involves escaping death by a narrow margin. Fogg becomes violently ill and nearly starves to death, whereas Effing’s limit-experience leaves him handicapped. At a certain point, they both resemble “semi-corpses” – they are neither alive, nor dead – although in Effing’s case this state of ghostly in-betweenness seems to perpetuate. Thus, Fogg’s experience of the uncanny on his first encounter with Effing could be seen as the “[coming] into the open” or

1 Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny.” *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. London: Penguin, 2003. pp. 147-148.

recurrence of his own repressed state of being half-dead, of having experienced the limit of life in the past, but having chosen to repress it after meeting Kitty Wu. What Fogg is unaware of when he first meets Effing (but will find out towards the end of the book), is the fact that Effing is his grandfather. If the uncanny is, by definition, something familiar, Effing's character could then be seen as representing a familiarity in a literal sense, given their familial ties.

While the experience of the uncanny is presented implicitly in *Moon Palace*, Auster makes an explicit use of the term in *City of Glass*:

He heard the sound of someone entering the room behind him. Quinn stood up from the sofa and turned around, expecting to see Mrs Stillman. Instead, it was a young man, dressed entirely in white, with the white-blond hair of a child. Uncannily, in that first moment, Quinn thought of his own dead son. Then, just as suddenly as the thought had appeared, it vanished.

[...] Quinn had never seen anyone move in such a manner, and he realized at once that this was the same person he had spoken to on the phone. 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 conscious 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.¹

In Quinn's experience of the uncanny, Auster articulates the instance of recurrence that is at work in the above passage. The reader learns on the very first page of *City of Glass* that Quinn's wife and son are both dead. On meeting Peter Stillman Jr., he experiences fear, a strange familiarity, as if he had seen a ghost. The element that was once concealed, but now resurfaces – recurs, returns – is his dead son. This in turn places Stillman Jr. within the supernatural realm of the undead – a state in between life and death

1 *The New York Trilogy*, 14-15.

that also characterizes Effing. This state is further reinforced by Quinn's noticing "that Stillman's body had not been used for a long time and that all its functions had been relearned." As if to say that Stillman had experienced some form of death and had been reborn – as if to say, he were a ghost. Besides, like Effing, Stillman also seems to transgress other boundaries. He is a hybrid between a man (an adult) and a child ("white-blond hair of a child"), between a human being and a machine, between a human being and a "marionette," between the animate and the inanimate. The simile that compares him to a "marionette" is particularly interesting in that a marionette – a puppet – is nothing other than a miniature, inanimate human being. It is the representation of a human being. It bears an uncanny resemblance to a human being. Freud himself, in his essay on "The Uncanny," evokes a similar figure – the figure of the doll – as an example of that which can arouse a "sense of the uncanny."

If we now go on to review the persons and things, the impressions, processes and situations that can arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny in us, we must clearly choose an appropriate example to start with. E. Jentsch singles out, as an excellent case, 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate.' In this connection he refers to the impressions made on us by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata.¹

The form of a marionette, or more generally, a doll, is familiar yet strange. Moreover, the reader of Auster's works, depending on the order in which he reads them, also tends to experience the uncanniness that links the two characters, Effing and Stillman. The reader of *Moon Palace* is bound to catch a glimpse of Peter Stillman Jr. in the character of Effing, and the reader of *City of Glass* who has read *Moon Palace* before is likely to find hints of Effing in Auster's presentation of Stillman Jr.

¹ Freud, S. *The Uncanny*, p. 135.

Through his use of paradoxes, impossibilities, incongruities, as well as his presentation of characters that transgress the boundaries that define life or humanity, Auster succeeds in maintaining a state of in-betweenness. As a result, Auster's work as an author seems to consist in sowing the seeds of uncertainty in his works. Nothing is given. Nothing is to be taken for granted. This serves to amplify the significance of all elements of his writing, and the reader is invited to follow the Nabokovian instruction to "caress the details, the divine details."¹ This aspect of Auster's work is highlighted and fictionalized in *City of Glass*:

What he liked about these books [mystery novels] was their sense of plenitude and economy. In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so – which amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes the 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.²

Although Auster's claim appears to be specific to mystery novels in general, it could be seen as applying to his own works that may not always be classified entirely as such. This claim however gains a metatextual dimension in *City of Glass*, since this text is intended to be a mystery novel, although a subversive one: it borrows the framework of an American hardboiled novel, and subverts it in such a way that not only is the "mystery" one that cannot be solved, but is one whose very existence can be called into question. The dream that Quinn has one night in which he "found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall," before he sets out to solve the Stillman case, serves as a metaphor

1 This quote appears in a collection of Nabokov's lectures (*Lectures on Literature*) and is often attributed to Nabokov who instructed his students to "caress the details" when reading. (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. Orlando: Mariner Books, 1982.)

2 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 8.

for the aimlessness of the case. It seems to be an instance of dramatic irony in the guise of a proleptic dream that reveals the futility of the case and the mystery. However, Auster also resorts to the use of other techniques in order to create and maintain uncertainty. One among them is the technique of what could be called removal: the narrator makes a statement and immediately withdraws it, negates it, counters it, denies it, as Freud would have it. For instance:

As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance. We know, for example, that he was thirty-five years old. We know that he had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead. We also know that he wrote books. To be precise, we know that he wrote mystery novels. These works were written under the name of William Wilson, and he produced them at the rate of about one a year, which brought in enough money for him to live modestly in a small New York apartment.¹

And thus, resorting to the use of apophasis (preterition), the narrator continues his description of Quinn, providing further details with each new sentence. The same narrator opens the paragraph by stating that “[who] he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance.” Yet, the rest of the paragraph describes with increasing precision (“To be precise”) who Quinn was and what he did. What is said is immediately subverted, through a mechanism of contradiction. The narrator’s unreliability thus seems to set the tone for the rest of the narrative. Nothing he says is certain. Another similar technique of contradiction or dismissal is at work when Quinn first meets and sees Peter Stillman Jr.:

Stillman settled slowly into his chair and at last turned his attention to Quinn. As their eyes met, Quinn suddenly felt that Stillman had become invisible. He could see him sitting in the chair across from him, but at the same time it felt as though he was not there. It occurred to Quinn that perhaps Stillman was blind. But no, that did not seem possible. The man was looking at him, even studying him, and if

1 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 3.

recognition did not flicker across his face, it still held something more than a blank stare. Quinn did not know what to do.¹

Aside from the uncanny similarity between the description of Quinn's first meeting with Stillman and Fogg's first meeting with Effing in *Moon Palace*, this passage serves to emphasize the general lack of certainty. Once again, the narrator makes a statement that is immediately negated, dismissed by what comes after. Two possibilities are juxtaposed: Stillman's being visible and invisible; his being blind and his ability to see. However, it could also be said that the uncertainty of Stillman's presence is, in fact, Quinn's denial of his presence, his refusal of Stillman's ability to see. The ambivalence and uncertainty here seems to be presented through the modality of (the character's) denial, as if Quinn had suddenly become aware of what remained hidden or repressed within him. According to Freud, denial or "negation" is the process by which the subject hardly recognizes (recognizes and de-cognizes) what has been repressed, without necessarily accepting that which is repressed.² As stated previously, in Quinn's case, what seems to be repressed is the death of his son. Refusing to accept the return of his dead son in Stillman Jr.'s resemblance to him, Quinn appears to be in denial of Stillman's presence.

Quinn's denial institutes and amplifies the uncertainties in the text. Although the reader might perceive the lack of a well-defined mystery in terms of the plot of *City of Glass*, he nonetheless experiences a heightened curiosity, a heightened sense of suspense, as a result of the techniques employed to subvert or contradict statements and affirmations, to sow uncertainties. A narrative riddled with contradictions or uncertainties demands careful consideration of all of its elements, and as a result, invites the reader to take on the

1 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 15.

2 In his essay on "Die Verneinung" ("Negation"), Freud writes: "Negation is a way of taking account of what is repressed; indeed, it is actually a removal of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed." (Freud, Sigmund. "Negation." *Collected Papers*. ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1959. p. 182.)

role of a detective. A “mystery novel” whose narrator cannot be relied upon and whose detective seems borderline incompetent, a text where nothing is given, where every fact and every clue is misleading or leads nowhere, in short, a text whose “centre, then, is everywhere,”¹ demands that the reader invest himself further, intellectually, and become the detective himself. One would expect Auster to liken the figure of the detective to that of the reader. Yet, Quinn provides us with another comparison, in which the detective and the writer are assimilated – “interchangeable:”

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. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective’s eye, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. He has become awake to the things around him, as if they might speak to him, as if, because of the attentiveness he now brings to them, they might begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence.²

This hints at a more complex relationship, resulting in a blurring of identities between the writer, the reader, and the detective. In what way does the figure of the detective fuse the writer with the reader?³

First, this interchangeability could be seen as an emphasis on the very process of narration. The detective, as a protagonist of a detective story, is given a voice by the writer – in other words, the writer lends his voice to the detective, a process sometimes facilitated, or mediated, by the use of a pseudonym which serves as an antechamber to the

1 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 8.

2 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 8.

3 This question is infallibly addressed by critical works focusing on “City of Glass” as an instance of postmodern fiction, or as a subversion of the detective genre. We will only attempt here to summarize the main arguments put forward. Among other works, these two articles provide a comprehensive study of the relationship between the act of detecting, writing, and reading:

Nealon, Jeffrey T. “Work of the Detective, Work of the Writer: Paul Auster’s City of Glass.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. 42.1, 1996. pp 91-110. Project MUSE. Web. 30 Aug. 2014.
<<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

Sorapure, Madeleine. “The Detective and the Author: City of Glass” *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 1996. pp. 71-88.

narrative (an instance of which being the “triad of selves”¹ between Quinn, his pseudonym Wilson, and the protagonist Work). In all of Auster’s novels, and in contrast to his autobiographies, the narrative mode is conducive to the identification of the reader with the narrator: Auster’s novels follow the same pattern of a single point of view, that of a central character narrating in the first or third person – a pattern which is also the predominant narrative strategy deployed in detective fiction. As a result, the reader can make the voice of the protagonist – the detective – his own, he can “see the world through the detective’s eye.” Reader and writer meet when they inhabit the voice of the character, and find themselves in his point of view. One way in which this superposition occurs is by accurately narrating the process of deduction, the solving of the crime. If the writer of crime fiction can be so successful at retracing this process, it might also be because a writer of crime fiction is a reader of crime fiction. What informs his choices, as a writer, are constraints imposed by the genre of crime fiction itself – constraints which have been passed on to him through the reading of other detective novels. The genre speaks for itself, and speaks itself through the writer.

But more relevant to the notion of uncertainty and boundary which is the focus of this chapter, the figure of the detective unites the writer and the reader as a metaphor for the very process of writing and reading – a metaphor which transcends the boundaries of detective novels and applies to any work of fiction. A detective defines himself as a reader of signs, clues or details. The reader, like a detective, is presented with mysteries: not just those of the crime narrated in a detective novel, but also, irrespective of literary genre, those of the meaning of the text itself. Reading is a navigation through the space of the text – the network of signs of which it is made. When making sense of the text, the reader becomes a producer of meaning, and as such, the writer of the text – a process discussed by

1 *The New York Trilogy*, p. 6.

Barthes in the essay “De l’oeuvre au texte.”¹ Ultimately, every reader is a writer, and both reader and writer are simultaneously the producers of the mystery, and of one of its possible solutions.

As seen in the first section of this chapter, and on numerous occasions throughout the previous chapters, Auster’s writing constantly places itself at the boundary of dual notions such as life and death, beginning and end, mind and body. The blurred boundary between life and death is explored through the concept of the uncanny and the figures of in-betweenness. This emphasis on the boundary not only puts the Austerian characters in extreme situations, but results in numerous paradoxes – some of them even conveyed at the meta-textual level through a blurring of literary genres and expectations. As a result of this extremeness verging on impossibility, it could be said that for the Austerian character, the experience of the disaster coincides with what Foucault would call the limit-experience. Limit-experience is characterized by a tearing of the self from itself – one of the many figures of dissociation at work in Auster’s texts.

1 “le Texte ne s’éprouve que dans un travail, une production.” Barthes, Roland “De l’oeuvre au texte”. *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984.

Chapter 11

Dissociation and Reappropriation

“Si le désastre signifie être séparé de l'étoile (le déclin qui marque l'égarement lorsque s'est interrompu le rapport avec le hasard d'en haut), il indique la chute sous la nécessité désastreuse.”¹

11.1 Dissociation

The above quote from Blanchot's *L'Écriture du désastre* calls our attention to the fact that the notion of dissociation is inherent to disaster. As previously stated, the etymologically of “disaster” implies removal or separation from the star (*dis*-aster). Separation or dissociation further implies a rupture within what was once whole. Dissociation therefore calls upon the notion of boundaries or limits, insofar as the rupture in disaster, in dissociation, institutes new boundaries and redefines limits. The loss of unity that the instance of dissociation entails, coincides with the emergence of otherness.

Otherness is a key component of Auster's fiction and autobiographies. As seen in the previous chapter, one of the ways in which Auster treats otherness in his texts is through the dissociation of the narrative voice in his autobiographies. The narrating “I” in his autobiographical texts (“The Book of Memory” in the *Invention of Solitude*, *Winter Journal*, and more recently, *Report from the Interior*) is swallowed by the “he” (“The book

1 Blanchot, Maurice. *L'Écriture du désastre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980. p. 9.

of Memory”) or the “you” (*Winter Journal, Report from the Interior*). The story of the self is narrated as the story of the other. As Marc Chénétier notes in his essay “Paul Auster’s Pseudonymous World:” “[Auster’s] taste for storytelling is nourished by the conviction that, outside the Other, there is no definition of the self.”¹ In other words, otherness in Auster’s works is not a relational phenomenon: the self does not define itself *in relation to* the other, but *as* the other. The other is reappropriated by the self, as the self.

But what is the origin of this separation within the self? From where does the dissociation of the self originate for Auster? A possible answer to this question seems to lie at the epitextual² level of Auster’s corpus of texts. In an interview with Paul Holdengräber at the New York Public Library, Auster’s interviewer draws attention to a discarded passage from the manuscript of *The Invention of Solitude*. This fragment articulates the otherness that for Auster is intrinsic to the self:

Even alone, in the silence of his room, in the four walls that enclose him on himself, he has only to speak to find the other inside him. At the moment he speaks, he discovers he is two. That is to say: the one who speaks and the one who hears what is spoken. For even when there is no answer, it cannot be said that the voice that speaks is heard by no one, even when no one else is there.³

For Auster, the very act of speaking engenders the dissociation of the self from itself, and divides it into the self and the other, because speech entails not only the act of speaking, but also of listening and understanding. At a physiological level, listening is part of the process of phonation, as one unconsciously controls and adjusts one’s own voice in

1 Barone, D. *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, p. 38.

2 In *Seuils*, Gérard Genette defines “épitexte” as all of the elements related to a book which lie outside of its text. Epitextual elements may include, among other things, interviews, correspondences, journal entries (p. 11).

3 Manuscript of “The Book of Memory” (*The Invention of Solitude*), revealed in Paul Holdengräber’s conversation with Paul Auster on the topic of Auster’s autobiographical work *Winter Journal*. “Winter Journal: PAUL AUSTER in conversation with Paul Holdengräber.” *New York Public Library*. Oct. 1, 2012. Web. Aug. 21 2014. <<http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/winter-journal-paul-auster-conversation-paul-holdengr%C3%A4ber>>

reaction to hearing oneself speak. As this process becomes conscious, one's voice strangely starts feeling foreign – a first dissociation. But more importantly, speaking is making use of language and as a means of communication, language implies the existence of a receiver. One speaks not only to be heard, but also to be understood¹ and in order to be understood, one needs to be able to project oneself as the other that listens. Using language is finding and separating in oneself what is irreducible to the experience of the self, from what could be a common ground for communication with the other. Through language, one becomes aware of the split between that which is experienced and that which can be expressed. The “I” who speaks, and who can be heard and understood by a “you,” is only an approximation of the self, if not its shadow cast within the realm of language. Thus, from the moment Auster (or the narrator) speaks, two irreconcilable dissociations are taking place: between the “I” (“The one who speaks”) and “the one who hears” (or *the one who is spoken to*, i.e. the referent of the pronoun “you” in Auster's autobiographies); but also between the “I” who speaks and the self. Auster thus seems to see the instance of speech and language as the original (originary) disaster that splinters the self into “I,” “you,” (or “he” in “The Book of Memory”), and a remainder that escapes language. The “I” is neither the “you” to whom it can relate through language while still being distinct from it, nor the self, irreducible to language.

This original disaster which dissociates the self, paves the way, in Auster's work, for the interplay between the self and the other, or self and otherness. One consequence among others of this interplay is the expansion of the possibilities of narration as well as of the potentiality of the text, by opening up the text to otherness, and making possible the reappropriation of this otherness. This reappropriation of otherness is first (and most

1 The French “entendre” fuses these two purposes. One might be reminded of Lacan at the October 13th 1972 conference in Louvain: “Puisqu'on a eu la bonté de me présenter, je vais entrer dans la difficile tâche de vous faire entendre ce soir, disons, quelque chose [...] On entend ? On n'entend pas !”

explicitly) instantiated by *The Invention of Solitude*, where other texts become part of Auster's own. Quotations from other texts dominate *The Invention of Solitude* – especially its second section, “The Book of Memory.” “The Book of Memory” is the site of the fusion and confusion of a multitude of texts and voices that, initially, are not Auster's own. As previously discussed, Sophie Vallas argues in her essay “‘All the others inside me’: les enjeux ambigus de la citation dans ‘The Book of Memory’ (*The Invention of Solitude*) de Paul Auster” how Auster's text and Auster's voice do not lose themselves to these other texts and voices, but in fact reappropriate them as their own. Otherness (that is the result of the dissociation of the self) in Auster's first autobiography opens up the possibility for reappropriation. Reappropriation resulting from a dissociation, however, is not specific to – or limited to – Auster's autobiographies. Dissociation and reappropriation are also at work in his fiction.

The most common figure of dissociation is fragmentation. While fragmentation appears most explicitly and strikingly in *The Invention of Solitude* (the text of this work being a patchwork of Auster's own prose interlaced with fragments of a myriad of other texts¹), Auster's works of fiction employ it in a more subtle – perhaps even banal – manner. As mentioned previously in this study, a large number of his novels rely on analepsis in order to dramatize chance events, and this creates, above all, a temporal fragmentation in his narratives – the present of narration being interrupted by past events. In certain novels, like *Oracle Night*, *Travels in the Scriptorium* or *Man in the Dark*, the present of narration is not interrupted by analepses, but by the protagonists' engaging in improvised storytelling. In *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr improvises Nick Bowen's story; in

1 First, *The Invention of Solitude* is divided into two distinct sections: “Portrait of an Invisible Man” and “The Book of Memory.” The “Book of Memory” itself is splintered into thirteen main (numbered) sections “books of memory,” and between these sections are interspersed other fragments of text such as “Possible epigraph(s) for The Book of Memory,” “Concluding sentences for The Book of Memory,” “Further commentary on the nature of chance,” to name but a few.

Travels in the Scriptorium, Mr. Blank improvises the rest of Graf's story; in *Man in the Dark*, August Brill improvises Owen Brick's story. Such instances of analepses and *mises en abyme* define the most common and elementary forms of fragmentation on the structural level in Auster's work.

In *Oracle Night*, however, Auster toys with the structure of the narrative in a more inventive way. This structural game in *Oracle Night* takes the shape of footnotes. Although not a new phenomenon in literature or novels in general,¹ this text is his only work of fiction to resort to the use of this particular paratextual element as part of the narration. The instance of the footnotes in *Oracle Night*, ruptures the narration, as well as the narrative. Gérard Genette confirms in *Seuils* that, "Originale, ultérieure ou tardive, l'annotation auctoriale d'un texte de fiction ou de poésie marque inévitablement, par son caractère discursif, une rupture du régime énonciatif qui rend tout aussi légitime son assignation au paratexte."² A footnote could therefore be seen as a way in which a text dissociates itself from itself. The footnote in *Oracle Night* splits the novel into the text and paratext. However, by resorting to the use of footnotes in this novel, the writer-narrator, Sidney Orr, does not so much interrupt the narrative as he continues it – even nourishes it.

Genette further points out that an authorial note bears the status of optional reading: "Il faut surtout observer que, plus encore que la préface, les notes peuvent être statutairement de lecture facultative, et ne s'adresser par conséquent qu'à certains lecteurs : ceux qu'intéressera telle ou telle considération complémentaire, ou digressive, dont le caractère accessoire justifie précisément le rejet en note."³ The footnotes in *Oracle Night*

1 In contemporary American literature, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is perhaps the most striking instance of a work of fiction in which footnotes participate in the task of narration, without necessarily coinciding with the ongoing narration in the main text.

2 Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil, 1987. p. 334.

3 Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil, 1987. p. 334.

are not subordinate to the story, but are, in fact, part of the story. Not only are these footnotes part of the story, but they hold the key to the interpretation of the text. As seen in the previous part of our study, it is in the footnotes that Orr hints subtly at the love affair between his wife, Grace, and his good friend John Trause. Placing this information in the paratextual space of the footnote, and therefore rejecting it (“rejet en note”), seems to be a mechanism by which Sidney Orr represses the knowledge of this information. In continuing the narration in the footnotes in *Oracle Night*, the text not only dissociates itself from itself, but also reappropriates that which it rejects.

Through the instance of footnotes in *Oracle Night*, we have seen how the mechanism of disassociation and reappropriation is at work in the very technique and form of narration in Auster’s fiction.¹ We will now see how the characters and the plots of his fiction are also involved in this process.

11.2 Reappropriation as an instance of disaster or a response to disaster?

In *Leviathan*, the two mechanisms of dissociation and reappropriation are doubly at work: they are to be observed first in the relationship between Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs, and then in the relationship between Sachs and Dimaggio. Meeting Ben Sachs changes the course of Peter’s life, destabilizes him, and more importantly, changes the way Peter relates to himself. As a result, the boundary between the two entities becomes blurred. The meeting itself is merely what sets the process of destabilization in motion. The

¹ It should be noted that among Auster’s autobiographical works, *Report from the Interior* is the only text which resorts to the use of footnotes. There is, however, no consistency to be observed in their use in this text: they provide references to the films he narrates, allusions to the author-narrator’s works of fiction, and in the third section entitled “Time Capsule,” the epistolary narration is interrupted by the frame-narrative with digressive footnotes.

first instance that changes everything, that actualizes the disorder, is Peter's sleeping with Ben's wife Fanny: "Everything had changed, and like it or not, our friendship had lost its innocence. Because of Fanny, we had each crossed over into the other's life. Had each made a mark on the other's internal history, and what had once been pure and simple between us was now infinitely muddy and complex."¹ Prior to Peter's affair with Fanny, Ben and Peter represented two distinct entities. Peter's sleeping with Fanny, however, operates a chiasmus in which Peter and Ben "each crossed over into the other's life." Indeed, sleeping with Fanny is the disaster that splits Peter in two. Peter goes from being a totality to being a duality. The other (Ben) becomes part of the self (Peter). Put differently, Fanny institutes the rupture within Peter. Peter's dissociation from himself coincides with his reappropriation of the other: Ben. As a result, Peter relates to himself as the other; he defines himself as Ben.

Peter's reappropriation of Ben is also reinforced in two other instances, the first of which is mediated by the act of writing. Peter reappropriates Ben Sachs's unfinished book by naming his own book after Ben's: "To mark what will never exist, I have given my book the same title that Sachs was planning to use for his: *Leviathan*."² The *Leviathan* that winds up in the hands of the reader is authored, at once, by Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs. The other instance in which Peter reappropriates Ben, is when he agrees to keep Ben's secret about his devising and orchestrating the "Phantom of Liberty" attacks: "But Sachs was still out there, a solitary speck in the American night, hurtling toward his destruction in a stolen car. Wherever he was, I was with him now. I had given him my word to say nothing, and the longer I kept his secret, the less I belonged to myself."³ In this particular case, Peter Aaron's reappropriation of Ben Sachs is actualized through a speech

1 *Leviathan*, p. 110.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 159.

3 *Leviathan*, p. 266.

act: through Peter's promising Ben to keep his secret. This passage, presents the speech act of promise as a literal act of speech: Peter *gives* Ben his word, his speech ("I had given him my word"). It is through the speech act that Peter loses himself to his other – Ben – and becomes this other. Thus, when Ben Sachs "[hurtles] toward his destruction," so does Peter Aaron. The process of reappropriation of the other, in this case, is born of disaster, and leads to disaster.

In *Leviathan*, reappropriation resulting from a dissociation is also to be observed in Sachs's relationship with Dimaggio. It is interesting to note that the relationship between Sachs and Dimaggio begins with Dimaggio's death – when Sachs kills him. After this incident, Sachs takes leave of himself, of his own life, and heads out to Berkeley in order to seek some measure of redemption for having murdered Dimaggio by offering to help Lillian (Dimaggio's widow):

That was the reason he had come to California in the first place: to reinvent his life, to embody an ideal of goodness that would put him in an altogether different relation with himself. But Lillian was the instrument he had chosen, and it was only through her that this transformation could be achieved. He had thought of it as a journey, as a long voyage into the darkness of his soul, but now that he was on his way, he couldn't be sure if he was traveling in the right direction or not.¹

Sachs makes Lillian the agent of his dissociation from himself. He reinvents his life by reappropriating Dimaggio's: he worms his way into Dimaggio's house, his household, and eventually into his bed as Lillian's partner. He starts out by living Dimaggio's domestic life. Then, he further reappropriates Dimaggio when he reads the latter's dissertation on Alexander Berkman, and inspired by his political convictions, executes a series of bombings under the pseudonym "Phantom of Liberty." In short, Ben Sachs becomes Dimaggio. The "altogether different relation with himself" that the narrator

¹ *Leviathan*, p. 222.

mentions in the above passage is one of dissociation. In his killing Dimaggio, Sachs is dissociated from himself, and eventually loses himself to Dimaggio. In this case, Sachs's reappropriation of Dimaggio is a response to a disaster (his murder of Dimaggio), and eventually leads to other disasters: the loss of his identity (the loss of himself to the other: Dimaggio), and finally, the loss of his life, in the accidental explosion.

The instance of a rupture within a character also occurs in *Oracle Night*. Unlike *Leviathan*, the instance of dissociation in *Oracle Night* takes place in the realm of fiction. Eager to inaugurate the newly purchased blue notebook with a new story, Sidney Orr – the writer-narrator – creates his character – Nick Bowen – in relation to himself:

As for Bowen, however, I expressly made him someone I was not, an inversion of myself. I am tall, and so I made him short. I have reddish hair, and so I gave him dark brown hair. I wear size eleven shoes, and so I put him in size eight and a half. I didn't model him on anyone I knew (not consciously, at any rate), but once I finished putting him together in my mind, he became astonishingly vivid to me – almost as if I could see him, almost as if he had entered the room and were standing next to me, looking down at the desk with his hand on my shoulder and reading the words I was writing... watching me bring him to life with my pen.¹

Bowen is essentially Orr's other. He is all that Orr is not. It is through writing that Sidney Orr splits into two: himself and his other (Bowen). Although Bowen is merely Orr's fictional other, the writer imagines his coming to life, making him, in a metafictional move, the spectator of his own birth. Orr literally juxtaposes himself with Bowen when he imagines this figment of his imagination "standing next to [him]." Moreover, the point of departure of Orr's story about Bowen is another story: Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Upon John Trause's suggestion, and their discussion about a particular passage from this

¹ *Oracle Night*, p. 15.

piece of fiction,¹ Orr reappropriates the story of Flitcraft and transforms it into the story of Nick Bowen:

In the two weeks since John and I had discussed that passage, it hadn't once crossed my mind that I might want to take up the challenge of fleshing out the story. I agreed that it was a good premise – good because we have all imagined letting go of our lives, good because at one moment or another we have all wanted to be someone else – but that didn't mean I had any interest in pursuing it.²

Yet, reluctantly, Orr starts to rewrite Hammett's story. The rupture within Orr that causes himself to divide into himself and Bowen is thus the result of a form of reappropriation. The reappropriation itself is born of a desire for alterity – unlike the work of reappropriation (textual and otherwise) undertaken by Peter Aaron and Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, which is born of a disaster. Whereas the other is reappropriated by the self in *Leviathan*, in *Oracle Night*, the other never becomes a part of the self. Nick Bowen remains separated from Sidney Orr, and finally, Orr winds up locking Bowen in a fallout shelter without a key for him to get out of it on his own, and without a plot to help him get out of it. Bowen's being locked up coincides with the end of Orr's reappropriated story. In *Oracle Night*, the birth of the other opens up the possibility of fiction, of storytelling, and when the other dies, the story dies with him.

In *Man in the Dark*, August Brill's other – Owen Brick – is born of disaster. August Brill lies in bed every night, "alone in the dark"³ and unable to sleep, as a result of a recent disaster that has struck his family. His granddaughter's partner, Titus, has been slaughtered near Baghdad, and Brill, along with his daughter and granddaughter, having watched a video recording of Titus's death, tells himself stories in an effort to repress the memory of

1 "He was referring to the Flitcraft episode in the seventh chapter of *The Maltese Falcon*, the curious parable that Sam Space tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy about the man who walks away from his life and disappears." (*Oracle Night*, p. 11)

2 *Oracle Night*, p. 12.

3 *Man in the Dark*, p. 1.

Titus's death: "as long as I'm inside [the stories], they prevent me from thinking about things I would prefer to forget."¹ Inhabiting the stories is only possible through his separating himself from himself, through his character Owen Brick:

I put him in a hole. That felt like a good start, a promising way to get things going. Put a sleeping man in a hole, and then see what happens when he wakes up and tries to crawl out. [...] In other words, the man in the hole will be unable to extricate himself from the hole once he opens his eyes. Unless he is equipped with a set of mountaineering tools – a hammer and metal spikes, for example, or a rope to lasso a neighboring tree – but this man has no tools, and once he regains consciousness, he will quickly understand the nature of his predicament.

And so it happens. The man comes to his senses and discovers that he is lying on his back, gazing up at a cloudless evening sky. His name is Owen Brick, and he has no idea how he has landed in this spot [...].²

In this particular case, Brill's separation from himself is a response to disaster, and it is the instance of storytelling that institutes the separation or dissociation. Brill seems to subject Brick to his own condition. Indeed, in addition to (and prior to) the disaster of Titus's death, Brill experienced another disaster. A car accident has left him nearly immobile, confined to his bed. Putting Owen Brick in a hole seems to be a way for Brill to repeat his own confinement, his inability to escape his situation. The other, in this case, mirrors the self: Owen Brick appears to be August Brill's twin.³

The other's mirroring the self is also at work in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The narrator tells us at the beginning of the story that Mr. Blank, like his name suggests, has lost his memory:

It is unclear to him exactly where he is. In the room, yes, but in what building is the room located? In a house? In a hospital? In a prison? He can't remember how long he has been here or the nature of the circumstances that precipitated his

1 *Man in the Dark*, p. 2.

2 *Man in the Dark*, pp. 2-3.

3 We will further comment on the figure of the twin in Auster's work in the final section of this chapter.

removal to this place. Perhaps he has always been here; perhaps this is where he has lived since the day he was born. What he knows is that his heart is filled with an implacable sense of guilt. At the same time, he can't escape the feeling that he is the victim of a terrible injustice.¹

Mr. Blank's memory loss has led to his disorientation. It has become impossible for him to position himself in time and space. If all of Auster's characters experience the world through the prism of time and space in order to define themselves, then Mr. Blank's spatio-temporal disorientation leads to the loss of his sense of self. Despite his loss of self, he seems to encounter what could be called his double, and this encounter is instituted by the act of reading the manuscript of a story that Mr. Blank finds lying on his desk. As Mr. Blank reads Graf's story, it becomes clear that Graf's condition is a reflection of Mr. Blank's own situation: "They have kept me in this room ever since. [...] My first days in the cell were interrupted by numerous beatings, and because I can't remember how many times I lost consciousness – nor how long the oblivions lasted when I did – it is possible that I lost count somewhere and failed to notice when a particular sun might have risen or another might have set."² Like Mr. Blank, Graf experiences confinement in the room, and this is coupled with the experience of "oblivion," of loss of consciousness. Whereas Graf's story articulates his experience of violence ("numerous beatings"), Mr. Blank's experience of violence is insinuated ("he can't escape the feeling that he is the victim of a terrible injustice"). But Graf does not merely mirror Mr. Blank's situation – he also contrasts it. Mr. Blank's reading about Graf's experience makes certain portions of his own identity clearer to him. For instance, when he learns that Graf is in a place called "Confederation," it reminds him that he is in a different country:

Mr. Blank has stopped reading. His fear has been replaced by confusion, and while he has grasped every word of the text so far, he has no idea what to make of it. Is it

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 2.

2 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, pp. 8-9.

an actual report, he wonders, and what is this place called the Confederation, with its garrison at Ultima and its mysterious Alien Territories [...]? Mr. Blank is well aware of the fact that his mind is not all it should be, that he is entirely in the dark about where he is and why he is there, but he is reasonably certain that the present moment can be situated sometime in the early twenty-first century and that he lives in a country called the United States of America.¹

The further he reads, the more Mr. Blank's relationship of specularity transforms into a relationship of otherness. It is through the experience of the other that Mr. Blank is able to define himself: reading about Graf tells Mr. Blank what he (Mr. Blank) is not. At some point, however, Graf's story abruptly comes to a halt. Dissatisfied by the abrupt end of the story, Mr. Blank later reappropriates Graf's role as the storyteller and improvises Graf's story. The other is thus made to become a part of the self through the act of storytelling. But this reappropriation of the other ends in disaster when Mr. Blank kills Graf, by staging his suicide in his improvisation of the story: "That evening, in the darkness of his empty house, [Graf] picks up a loaded revolver and fires a bullet through his skull. And that's it. End of story. *Finità, la commedia*."² The death of the other, however is not specific to the novella *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

Every instance of dissociation and reappropriation discussed above ends in disaster: in *Leviathan*, Aaron's other, Sachs, eventually dies in the accidental explosion; Dimaggio, who is Sachs's other, dies before he is even reappropriated by Sachs; in *Oracle Night*, Sidney Orr locks Nick Bowen inside the fallout shelter without giving him a way out, and the reader is led to assume that Bowen eventually dies; in *Man in the Dark*, August Brill winds up killing his fictionally dissociated self, Owen Brick. What is common to all of these relationships with the other(s) or the double(s) – including the relationship between Mr. Blank and Graf – is that the boundary between the self and the other or the self and the

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 11.

2 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 115.

double, and as a consequence, the boundary between the other and the double is blurred. In fact, in the wake of the dissociation of the self into the self and the other, the other winds up dying when he becomes the double – when the relationship of otherness becomes a relationship of specularity.

11.3 The double as a figure of dissociation

A large number of readers and commentators of Paul Auster's work have studied the figure of the double in his texts, although most of these studies focus on *The New York Trilogy*.¹ Most of these critics, whether or not they explicitly evoke Freud's notion of the "double" ("*Doppelgänger*") developed in his essay on "The Uncanny," have rightly pointed out how, in *The New York Trilogy*, the double inevitably winds up dying as soon as he is recognized as the double². In "The Uncanny," taking up the notion of the double elaborated by Otto Rank, Freud writes that "[the] double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, 'an energetic denial of the power of death,'" but when reality sets in and the phase of the "boundless self-love and primordial narcissism" is surmounted, "the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death."³ This phenomenon of the double as the "harbinger of death" is also strikingly at work in *Man in the Dark*.

As discussed above, August Brill, the narrator of *Man in the Dark*, creates Owen Brick as a response to two disasters: Titus's death, and Brill's own brush with death. At

1 Matthias Kugler's dissertation *Paul Auster's "The New York Trilogy" as Postmodern Detective Fiction* (1999), Chris Tysh's article "From One Mirror to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation in *City of Glass*," (1994), Roberta Rubenstein's essay "Doubling, Intertextuality, and the Postmodern Uncanny: Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*" (1998), are three pieces of scholarship among a large number of criticism produced around the notion of the double in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*.

2 As pointed out by these critics, the most striking instance of this phenomenon is to be observed in *Ghosts*, in which Blue recognizes Black as his double and therefore kills him.

3 Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny (1919)" *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. London: Penguin Books, 2003. p. 142.

first, Brick could be seen as the “insurance against the extinction of the self” for Brill who narrowly escapes death in a road crash and is now nearly immobile in his bed. Brick’s condition first mirrors Brill’s (and their names being nearly homophonic and homographic reinforces the mirroring) when Brill puts him in a hole from which it is difficult to get out. However, their specularity is threatened when August Brill himself enters the story as a character who has to be killed by Brick for having started the war. As Frisk tells Brick: “[Brill] didn’t invent this world. He only invented the war. And he invented you, Brick. Don’t you understand that? This is your story, not ours. The old man invented you in order to kill him.”¹ However, before Brick can kill Brill (the character in the story), Brill (the storyteller, the creator of the fictional Brick and the fictional Brill) kills Brick, in the immediate wake of the explosion. When Brill enters the story, the possibility of his facing his double, Brick, opens up. As a result, Brick, who was once a way for Brill to keep himself alive, now literally – through his being assigned the mission of killing Brill – becomes the “harbinger of death.” As soon as Brill’s double threatens to destroy him, the double has to die.

The double as a figure of dissociation also appears in *Mr. Vertigo*, and is to be observed in the relationship between Walt and Aesop. At the beginning, Walt feels nothing but contempt for Aesop, despite the latter’s kindness towards him:

The only one who showed me any genuine kindness was Aesop, but I was against him from the start, and there was nothing he could say or do that would ever change that. I couldn’t help myself. It was in my blood to feel contempt for him, and given that he was the ugliest specimen of his kind I’d ever had the misfortune to see, it struck me as preposterous that we were living under the same roof. It went against the laws of nature, it transgressed everything that was holy and proper, and I wouldn’t allow myself to accept it. When you threw in the fact that Aesop talked like no other colored boy on the face of the earth – more like an English lord than an American – and then threw in the additional fact that he was

1 *Man in the Dark*, p. 70.

the master's favorite, I couldn't even think about him without succumbing to an onslaught of nerves.¹

This passage seems to present Aesop as Walt's other, and their otherness is mediated by Master Yehudi. It is through his relationship with the Master that Walt sees Aesop as his other: Walt's desire to be the sole object of the Master's affections is rendered impossible by Aesop's being the Master's "favorite," and this places him in direct conflict with Aesop. However, what starts out as hatred or "contempt," and the resulting difference (otherness) between Walt and Aesop, soon turns into a desire for specularity. This desire for specularity is born of a "disaster:" after Aesop cuts his finger when trying to open a can of cling peaches, his finger becomes affected with gangrene.² When Master Yehudi decides to sever the infected finger, Aesop "moans" that he "[does not] want to lose [his] finger,"³ to which Walt replies: "I ain't got but nine and a half fingers myself, and it don't bother me hardly at all. Once you lose yours, we'll be just like twins. Bonafide members of the Nine Finger Club, brothers till the day we drop – just like the master always said."⁴ Aesop eventually winds up losing his finger and Walt's desire for specularity seems to be fulfilled. The shift from the relationship of otherness to that of specularity ("twins") occurs as a result of a disaster. However, if this shift towards specularity is born of a disaster, it also ends in a disaster: once Walt relates to Aesop as a twin, Aesop dies in a disastrous attack by the Ku Klux Klan.

After Aesop's death (as well as that of Master Yehudi), Walt goes on to find a new twin, when he starts his new life in Chicago: Dizzy Dean – the former pitcher for the St.

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 19.

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 54.

3 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 55.

4 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 55.

Louis Cardinals and later for the Chicago Cubs. When Dizzy Dean's career goes downhill, Walt decides to "rescue" him by convincing him to commit suicide:

I planned to rescue him: by talking him into his own murder. [...] I'd latched onto Dizzy because he reminded me of myself, and as long as his career flourished, I would relive my past glory through him. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if he'd pitched for some town other than Saint Louis. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if our nicknames hadn't been so similar. I don't know. I don't know anything, but the fact was that a moment came when I couldn't tell the difference between us anymore. His triumphs were my triumphs, and when bad luck finally caught up with him and his career fell apart, his disgrace was my disgrace. I couldn't stand to live through it again, and little by little I began to lose my grip. For his own good, Dizzy had to die, and I was just the man to urge him into making the right decision. Not only for his sake, but for my sake as well. I had the weapon, I had the arguments, I had the power of madness on my side. I would destroy Dizzy Dead, and in so doing I would finally destroy myself.¹

Walt loses his identity when he starts to identify with Dizzy Dean. He enters into a metaphorical relationship with Dizzy – a relationship based not merely on resemblance, but on specularly ("a moment came when I couldn't tell the difference between us anymore"). However, Walt's identifying with Dizzy Dean is born of a desire not for specularly, but for self-mutilation. This passage highlights how, in Auster's work, the self can only identify itself through the other, can only exist *as* the other. As a corollary, in order to destroy itself, the self has to destroy the other.

It should be noted that Walt's "[latching] onto" Dizzy is not because of a perceived similarity between the two, just like Walt's desire for specularly with Aesop is also not an attempt to achieve sameness. In order to be one with Dizzy or to be Aesop's twin would imply that Walt exists independently prior to existing in relation to Dizzy or Aesop – that his identity precedes the possibility of its reflecting into Aesop's or merging with Dizzy's.

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, pp. 252-253.

But the first page of the novel tells us that Walt is “nothing.”¹ It is Master Yehudi who makes possible the development of Walt’s identity as “Walt the Wonder Boy.” Without the Master, Walt is nothing, and Walt himself is aware of this: “I strutted around Chicago as if I were going places, as if I were a regular Mr Somebody, but underneath it all I was no one. Without the master I was no one, and I wasn’t going anywhere.”² Walt is a lack, and sees himself as a lack. Walt without Master Yehudi is nothing or no one, and because he is no one, he can be anyone – Walt is an empty signifier. Because he is no one, and in order to be someone – in order to have an identity – he latches onto Dizzy Dean and desires to be Aesop’s twin. Walt had an identity only so long as he is “Walt the Wonder Boy,” only so long as he can levitate.

It should therefore further be noted that when Walt expresses to Aesop his desire for specularly with him, he has not yet had his first experience of levitation, and is not yet “Walt the Wonder Boy.” At the moment of Aesop’s death, Walt is already a fairly regular practitioner of levitation. Thus, it could be concluded that Aesop’s death is not due to his becoming the double that threatens – “the harbinger of death” (like Owen Brick in *Man in the Dark*) – but because Walt gains an identity and no longer needs Aesop to reflect it. In the wake of the Master’s death (at a moment when Aesop is long since dead), Walt relinquishes his career as “Walt the Wonder Boy,” and with it, his identity. Whence it follows that he latches onto Dizzy Dean in Chicago. Dizzy Dean and Aesop are therefore not doubles – although Walt seems to see them (or desire them) as such – but are, in fact, the possibility of identification for Walt. Their function is not so much to reflect or represent, as is it to articulate.

1 “[A] piece of human nothingness’,” “‘You know nothing [...]. You know nothing because you are nothing’” (*Mr. Vertigo*, p. 3)

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 229.

Thus, we have seen how dissociation and reappropriation are often at work in Auster's novels. While at times these operations are born of disaster, at others, they lead to disaster. As a result, we saw through the various figures of dissociation how the self is in constant negotiation with the other or at times, with the double, and in certain cases (for instance, that of Dizzy Dean and Aesop), with the possibilities of identification disguised as doubles. As Marc Chénétier puts it: "Mirrors, twins, innumerable fathers and sons, reflections, ghosts, and eponyms are all instruments that enable one 'to understand the connectedness of inner and outer,' 'to bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness' [...]. No one can face himself anywhere but outside of himself [...]." ¹ In all of the instances discussed above, the self is inevitably lost to the other, and can only be conceived of as otherness, as the other. One question then remains: how is this loss of self reconciled, if such a reconciliation is at all possible?

1 Chénétier, Marc. "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World." *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*. Ed. Dennis Barone. Philadelphia: Upenn Press, 1995. p. 38.

Chapter 12

Remembering: experience of memory

“At least you think you can remember, you believe you can remember, but perhaps you are not remembering at all, or remembering only a later remembrance of what you think you thought in that distant time which is all but lost to you now.”¹

In an interview with NPR about his most recent memoir, *Report from the Interior*, Paul Auster says about his autobiographical writings:

All through my writing life I’ve had this impulse to write autobiographical works. This is really the fifth one I’ve done, and I think I’ve done it because I’m interested in talking about what it means to be a human being, what it means to be alive. I really have no interest in myself. I find it a very boring topic, but what I’m interested in is trying to remember things from my life that will somehow connect with things that other people have experienced.²

Auster’s being the author of five autobiographical works to date (*The Invention of Solitude*, *The Red Notebook*, *Hand to Mouth*, *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*), not counting *The Art of Hunger*, where the focus is mostly, though not entirely, on the literary works of writers other than himself, the reader of Auster’s works cannot help but take his claim of “really [having] no interest in [himself]” with a grain of salt. Despite his feeble attempt to justify his cause for writing autobiographies as being driven by some form of altruism (“what I’m interested in is trying to remember things from my life that

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 4.

2 National Public Radio. *A Personal ‘Report From The Interior’ Of Author Paul Auster*. NPR Dec. 13, 2013. Web. Jan. 26 2014.

will somehow connect with things that other people have experienced.”), Auster cannot escape the fact that he – his own self – remains the central interest and the subject of these autobiographies. With the publication of *Report from the Interior* in November 2013, the same question reemerges: why the need to repeatedly devote multiple narratives to the self?

In this chapter, we will analyze Auster’s autobiographical writings, within the conceptual framework introduced in the previous chapters. In the tenth chapter of this study, the notion of tearing of the self away from itself was introduced, in the context of the limit-experience. In chapter eleven, further modalities of dissociation, and their possible reconciliation (through reappropriation) were presented. In this chapter, we will focus on the dissociation stemming from the difficulty – or impossibility – of remembering. After exposing different ways in which the experience of the past (through memory) can lead to dissociation, we will attempt to illustrate two strategies used by Auster to attempt to reverse this process: involving and invoking the figure of the other, through the use of collective memory, or through personal correspondences. Whether they succeed in reconstructing a coherent picture of the self is the subject of the final section of this chapter and its conclusion.

12.1 Recollecting and forgetting as a tearing of the self from itself

Within Auster’s repertoire of autobiographies, a first instance of dissociation can be experienced through the indirect identification between the ego or the self (i.e. the subject of the autobiography) and the speaker (i.e. the narrative voice). The self is not always the narrator. In fact, in most instances, the relationship between the self and the narrator is obliquely established, through the use of personal pronouns of alterity – pronouns other

than “I:” the narrator of the second section of *The Invention of Solitude*, “The Book of Memory” uses the third-person pronoun in place of “I” (“And so he says A., even as he means to say I.”¹); the narrators of both *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior* use the second-person pronoun “you.” *The Red Notebook* and *Hand to Mouth*, on the other hand, are both first-person narratives. What, the reader may then wonder, is the difference between these two modes of addressing the self? An initial hypothesis may be posited: the difference between using “I” to speak about the self, and using “he” or “you” to speak about the same self depends on the degree of intimacy with which the ego engages with itself. But what is surprising in Auster’s corpus is that the relationship between the use of pronouns and intimacy appears to be reversed: the more intimately the ego engages with itself, the more likely it is to avoid using “I.”

While the question of memory is central to all of his autobiographies, as it is central to all autobiographies in general (how to narrate the memories of one’s life?), in *The Invention of Solitude*, *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*, Auster not only simply recounts anecdotes, memories and incidents of his life, as he does in *The Red Notebook* and *Hand to Mouth*, but also attempts to investigate his own process of remembering, thus engaging more intimately with the functioning of his own memory and the process of recording it. In *Report from the Interior*, he writes:

Your earliest thoughts, remnants of how you lived inside yourself as a small boy. You can remember only some of it, isolated bits and pieces, brief flashes or recognition that surge up in you unexpectedly at random moments – brought on by the smell of something, or the touch of something, or the way the light falls on something in the here and now of adulthood. At least you think you can remember, you believe you can remember, but perhaps you are not remembering at all, or remembering only a later remembrance of what you think you thought in that distant time which is all but lost to you now.

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 165.

January 3, 2012, exactly one year to the day after you started composing your last book, your now-finished winter journal. It was one thing to write about your body, to catalogue the manifold knocks and pleasures experienced by your physical self, but exploring your mind as you remember it from childhood will no doubt be a more difficult task – perhaps an impossible one.¹

Winter Journal and *Report from the Interior* seem to operate on the basis of the Cartesian mind-body duality. Since the mind and the body are two distinct entities, two distinct memoirs are dedicated to the two aspects of the duality. Yet, for Auster, memory is linked with physical, sensorial, sensual experience (“smell,” “touch,” sight: “the way the light falls on something”). Despite his effort to separate – physically, materially – the two, the frontier between the two becomes blurred in the functioning of memory. Besides, since there is bound to be a discrepancy between what actually occurred and what is remembered (“remembrance of what you think you thought”), the act of remembering is not entirely divorced from the act of inventing, perhaps *ex nihilo*, the events which took place and the author-narrator’s response to and memory of them. Here, memory seems to fulfill a fictional purpose. Furthermore, it would seem that for the author, memory has its roots in the realm of the present, instead of the past: “brought on by the smell of something, or the touch or something, or the way the light falls on something *in the here and now of adulthood*” (emphasis is ours). The narration of the memories of his life, therefore, is as much the narration of the present as it is the narration of the past. The problem of memory is at once a problem of the past, as well as of the present. Additionally, remembrance is not only the remembrance of the past, but also the remembrance of that which is “all but lost.” Memory, for the author, seems to be intimately tied with the idea of loss. Is remembering, then, a way for him to prevent a loss? Or is it instead a response to a loss?

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 4.

Of all of the different types of losses that have been at the origin as well as at the heart of Auster's writing, be it the loss of loved ones, of relationships, of material objects or even abstractions, one type of loss emerges as central and recurrent: the loss of the self. This could perhaps be seen as one way of justifying his writing not one, not two, but several autobiographies. The writing of his autobiographical works is born of this loss:

You thought you had left no traces. All the stories and poems you wrote in your boyhood and adolescence have vanished, no more than a few photographs exist of you from your early childhood to your mid-thirties, nearly everything you did and said and thought when you were young has been forgotten, and even if there are many things that you remember, there are more, a thousand times more, that you do not. (...) For a person born in the mid-twentieth century, the era of the inexpensive camera, the postwar boom days when every middle-class American family was gripped by shutterbug fever, your life is the least documented of anyone you have ever known. How could so much have been lost? (...) [Things] were inevitably ignored or forgotten, and bit by bit nearly every trace of your early existence was wiped out. You wish now that you had kept a diary, a continuous record of your thoughts, your movements through the world, your conversations with others, your response to books, films, and paintings, your comments on people met and places seen, but you never developed the habit of writing about yourself.¹

The loss of the self (which is always already lost, ungraspably) is, in fact, for Auster, the consequence of another loss: the loss of the text, the loss of the documentation of his life. It is in writing that the identification between the writer and what is written is established or materialized. Therefore, the loss of the written or photographic record of his early life – the text of his early life – leads to the impossibility of identification. As a result, the self is lost. The loss of self for Auster is perhaps the greatest form of loss, because for him, as he – his young(er) self – mentions in a letter to his first wife, Lydia Davis, “the problem of the world is first of all a problem of the self, and the solution can be accomplished only by beginning within and then... moving without. Expression, not

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 177-178.

mastery, is the key.¹” It is important to note that in *Report from the Interior*, Auster is concerned with remembering only a certain part of his life: his early years. With the loss of the self that corresponds to his early childhood, the object of memory here becomes not that which he can recall, but precisely that which cannot be remembered. Memory, in *Report from the Interior*, is concerned with what is lacking, missing – what is “all but lost.” Moreover, the solution that the young Auster proposes to the “problem of the world,” that is, the movement from the interior to the exterior (“beginning within and then... moving without”), although naïve, seems to be an important one, because it is what defines the gesture of writing for him, and problematizes the writing of a journal, in particular:

You tried to start a journal when you were eighteen, but you stopped after just two days, feeling uncomfortable, self-conscious, confused about the purpose of the undertaking. Until then, you had always considered the act of writing to be a gesture that moved from the inside to the outside, a reaching toward an other. The words you wrote were destined to be read by someone who was not yourself, a letter to be read by a friend, for example, or a school paper to be read by the teacher who had given you the assignment, or, in the case of your poems and stories, to be read by some unknown person, an imaginary anyone. The problem with the journal was that you didn’t know what person you were supposed to be addressing, whether you were talking to yourself or to someone else, and if it was yourself, how strange and perplexing that seemed, for why bother to tell yourself things you already knew, why take the trouble to revisit things you had just experienced, and if it was someone else, then who was that person and how could addressing someone else be construed as keeping a journal?²

It could be said that in addressing himself as another, that is to say, in using the second-person pronoun “you” instead of the first-person “I” to narrate the memories of his life, Auster is erasing the possibility of (self-) identification, and in so doing, is challenging the conventions of the intimate literary genre of the journal or the memoir. Thus, in *The Invention of Solitude*, *Winter Journal* as well as *Report from the Interior*, Auster winds up addressing the self as the other. But, as seen in the previous chapter, Auster’s addressing

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 260.

2 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 178-179.

himself as the other is symptomatic of his view of the self's existing through the other, in fact, *as* the other: the self being an imaginary construct, it is the other, in a way.

12.2 Reconstructing the past through the other

We have seen, thus far, several ways in which the experience of recollecting, or forgetting the past, leads to a dissociation of the self: in recollection, it evokes a conflict between the self from the past and the self from the present; in forgetting, it evokes the loss of the part of the self associated with lost documents or traces of the past. The loss of the self can however be reversed through a reconstruction of the past, and this process involves the figure of the other.

If the writing of *The Invention of Solitude* is for Auster a means to prevent the complete loss of his father's life, and *Winter Journal* an attempt to record every significant bodily sensation by recalling, remembering (re-mem-bering) it, *Report from the Interior* could then be seen as a way for Auster to recover, rather than prevent, the loss of his early psychic self. *Report from the Interior* opens with Auster's trying to remember his earliest thoughts and closes, unexpectedly with the section "Album," where he presents black and white photographs of elements evoked in the narratives of his childhood that precede the final section. In the album, where one would normally expect to see personal photographs documenting aspects and moments of an individual's life, Auster offers a collection of images that document his personal life in the most oblique manner. Indeed, these images belong to the realm of national or collective history, rather than personal history. They are, for the most part iconic images – images that belong to nobody in particular, but may be familiar to anybody, if not everybody; images that are part of a common culture. But Auster does not stop there. He provides captions for most of these images, and the captions

are none other than fragments from the narrative that precedes the album: each image corresponds to an element narrated in the first three sections of the memoir. In so doing, it would appear, the author-narrator is placing personal or individual memory on the same plane as collective memory. First of all, such a maneuver could be read as an instance of self-appropriation of a collective history, erasing the frontier between an individual and a nation or the world, as if to suggest that individual memory is never a singular entity, but exists in relation to the larger domain of collective memory; as if to suggest that there is no such thing as a purely individual memory, and that individual memory is necessarily collective memory. An individual is the product of all that he has experienced within his own culture and within the world. Auster seems to want to highlight the idea that personal memory is not innate, does not come from within the self, but is rather the culmination of outside influences. Self is a construct, an artifice. It is impossible to report from the interior without reporting from the exterior. In addition to it, this reconstruction of personal memory from what is outside oneself serves to reinforce his belief that personal memory, and consequently identity, is an act of invention, similar to writing fiction, as opposed to being a natural or innate instance. Or as John Barth puts it in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*:

[I]n order to make sense of and to navigate through the onstreaming flood of signals deluging all our senses, our brains posit the useful fiction of a Self that attends, selects from, organizes, considers, speculates, and acts upon that data – an “I” who invents and edits itself as it goes along, in effect telling stories to itself and to others about who it is. Indeed an I whose antecedent is, finally, nothing other than those ongoing ever-evolving stories, their center of narrative gravity.¹

The self, which is a fictional construct, can exist only relationally to what is outside of it. For Auster, however, it would seem that the “I” “who invents and edits itself as it goes along” gets lost, imperceptibly, in this process of self-invention. In trying to invent

1 Barth, John. *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, p. 97.

itself through the external, through a contact with the other, this “I” itself becomes the other: “he,” in *The Invention of Solitude* or “you” in *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*.

In *Report from the Interior*, Auster goes even further in presenting the self as a product of a contact with the other. As we have already seen, *Report from the Interior* is a heterogeneous work in that it employs two modes of narration that interact with each other: verbal narration and pictorial narration. Also at work in the autobiography, however, is the significant presence of a third mode of narration: the epistolary narration. Indeed, the third section of the memoir entitled “Time Capsule” is comprised largely of some of the letters he had written as a young adult, while an undergraduate student at Columbia, to his first wife, Lydia Davis, to whom he was not yet married. These letters are interwoven with Auster’s own comments about them. While Auster’s writing of *Report from the Interior* also constantly incorporates the metatextual aspect of writing a memoir, a “journal,” (“It was one thing to write about your body, to catalogue the manifold knocks and pleasures experienced by your physical self, but exploring your mind as you remember it from childhood will no doubt be a more difficult task – perhaps an impossible one;”¹ “The problem with the journal was that you didn’t know what person you were supposed to be addressing [...]”²), it is in this section, owing to the annotations that accompany the letters, that the metatextual dimension of the work is most conspicuous. In the manner of a preface to the letters that he is about to incorporate into the text of his journal, the author-narrator explains in this section how his former wife sent him all of the letters he had written to her, in order to gain his approval before having her “papers” (correspondences, manuscripts,

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 4.

2 *Report from the Interior*, p. 179.

among others) transferred to a research library, and how it turned out to be a useful resource to him in the composition of his latest journal-in-progress:

[...] you understood that this massive pile of paper was the journal you hadn't been able to write when you were eighteen, that the letters were nothing less than a time capsule of your late adolescence and early adulthood, a sharp, highly focused picture of a period that had largely blurred in your memory – and therefore precious to you, the only door you have ever found that opens directly onto your past.

[...] It is the stranger who intrigues you, the floundering boy-man who writes letters from his mother's apartment in Newark [...] – for you have lost contact with that person, and as you listen to him speak on the page, you scarcely recognize him anymore [...]¹

Thus, the letters allow Auster to retrieve a part of lost memory, to compensate for what is lacking. But the letters are a particularly interesting medium. They originate from – or are at the very least authored by – the self, and in addition to being destined to the other, they become the property of the other. This other (the addressee of the letters), as a consequence, takes on the role of a witness to the events occurring in the life of the letter-writing self. The self becomes the possession of the other: it is thus lost to the other. It is interesting to note that it is through the act or the medium of narration, made possible by the space of the letter, that the self is lost. Recovering the letters from his first wife therefore allows the author-narrator to recover a part of himself that he lost to his former significant other. In handing the letters back to the narrator, his former wife is (re)telling, (re)narrating memories of his life to him, and as a result, is participating in the reconstruction of his lost memory. Memory, in *Report from the Interior*, then takes the form of a narrative (an epistolary narrative, in this case) told by a witness. Memory of the self is reconstructed through the narrative of the other, and this process is doubly reconstructive, since the self narrates moments of its life to the other, and in doing so loses

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 181-184; original emphasis.

them, and these narratives are recovered when the self regains possession of its own narrative, and therefore its own memory. The letters open up the possibility of self-identification and allow him not only to (re)invent himself, but also to become familiar with himself, to no longer be a stranger to himself: “It is the stranger who intrigues you, the floundering boy-man who writes letters from his mother’s apartment in Newark [...] – for you have lost contact with that person, and as you listen to him speak on the page, you scarcely recognize him anymore”. The loss of the self to the other, or the loss of contact with the self, is, above all, a temporal loss, and the use of the temporal adverb “anymore” reinforces this. But Auster goes even further, and at a certain point, early on in the narrative, spatializes this loss of the self:

Even now and then, for no apparent reason, you would suddenly lose track of who you were. It was as if the being who inhabited your body had turned into an impostor, or, more precisely, into no one at all, and as you felt your selfhood dribble out of you, you would walk around in a state of stunned dissociation, not sure if it was yesterday or tomorrow, not sure if the world in front of you was real or a figment of someone else’s imagination. [...] An uncanny sense of having fallen asleep with your eyes open, but at the same time knowing you were fully awake, conscious of where you were, and yet not there at all somehow, floating outside yourself, a phantom without weight or substance, an uninhabited shell of flesh and bone, a nonperson. The dazes continued throughout your childhood and well into your adolescence [...] and even now, at your advanced age, the feeling still comes back once every four or five years, lasting for just fifteen or twenty seconds, which means that you have never completely outgrown this tendency to vanish from your own consciousness. Mysterious and unaccountable, but an essential part of who you were then and occasionally still are now. As if you were slipping into another dimension, a new configuration of time and space, looking at your own life with blank, indifferent eyes – or else rehearsing your death, learning what happens to you when you disappear.¹

This account reinforces the idea that the memory of the self, for Auster, is the memory of the other; it is, to be precise, the memory of the self-as-other, made possible through the experience of dissociation of self from its body. The experience of self is not

1 *Report from the Interior*, pp. 44-45.

necessarily an experience of the body. The body is at the interface of the self and the world, the interior and the exterior. It acts as a container from which the self is able to escape, to “dribble out.” For Auster, then, the “uncanny” state of being in a daze, as he puts it, is achieved when the self takes leave of its body. Besides, this account serves to highlight that the experience of self is rooted in the experience of time and space. The author-narrator of *Report from the Interior* experiences the world, like anyone else, through the prism of time and space. So when time and space become difficult to perceive (“not sure if it was yesterday or tomorrow,” “conscious of where you were, and yet not there at all somehow”), the experience of self becomes impossible, and the self (“selfhood”) is lost. But does this loss of self coincide with the loss of consciousness? His ability to recall this state of experience suggests that – and the narrator himself articulates this (“conscious of where you were”) – consciousness is not totally lost during an episode of his being in a “daze.” Indeed, he is in a state between reality and illusion (“not sure if the world in front of you was real or a figment of someone else’s imagination”), between sleep and waking life (“dream-like interludes”), between consciousness and unconsciousness (“conscious of where you were, and yet not there at all somehow”), between life and death (“a phantom,” “[as] if you were [...] rehearsing your death”), between visibility and invisibility (“looking at your own life,” “learning what happens to you when you disappear”). Given his state of intermediacy, his claim to “vanish from [his] own consciousness,” which suggests a state of complete absence, then runs counter to his experience of in-betweenness. This contradiction, this anomaly in the narration of an experience resembling a dream seems similar to what Freud calls the “weak spot”¹ that

1 For Freud, the key to the interpretation of a dream lies in the manifestation of what he calls the “weak spot” in a patient’s narration: “In analyzing the dreams of my patients I sometimes put this assertion to the following test, which has never failed me. If the first account given me by a patient of a dream is too hard to follow I ask him to repeat it. In doing so, he rarely uses the same words. But the parts of the dream which he describes in different terms are by that fact revealed to me as the weak spot in the dream’s disguise: they serve my purpose just as Hagen’s was served by the embroidered mark on

holds the key to exploring the possibilities of sense that the account of the narration provokes, calls upon. This incongruity in his narration testifies to his inability to make sense of the recurrent episode, even in the present moment (i.e. the moment of narration). The experience is characterized by its ineffability: not only does it escape comprehension and is unnamable, unrepresentable (“Mysterious and unaccountable”), but it cannot even be reconstructed *après coup* with exactitude. And if this experience cannot be known, the narrator suggests that it can still be felt (“It wasn’t a good feeling,” “the feelings still comes back”). However, the seeming certainty of its being felt is soon dispelled when the narrator introduces “indifference:” “As if you were [...] looking at your own life with blank, indifferent eyes.” This hesitation between feeling and indifference – between feeling and lack of feeling – is the very locus of impossibility. What we have referred to as the “experience” of the daze, is in fact the very lack of experience; the impossibility of experience. The impossibility of knowing, the impossibility of feeling – the pure indifference, as it were – entails the impossibility of experiencing, and this, as Blanchot suggests, is a modality, if not the essence, of disaster.

12.3 Memory as a disastrous process

The disaster does not put me into question, but annuls the question, makes it disappear – as if along with the question, “I” too disappeared in the disaster which never appears. The fact of disappearing is, precisely, not a fact, not an event; it does not happen, not only because there is no “I” to undergo the experience, but because (and this is exactly what presupposition means), since the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it.¹

Here, disaster for Blanchot is the very impossibility of its experience. It erases the possibility of making sense of the self with regard to its existence. The self does and does

Siegfried’s cloak. That is the point at which the interpretation of the dream can be started.” (Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1965. pp. 553.)

1 *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 28.

not exist; it lies outside of existence, outside of being: it disappears without encountering the possibility of its disappearance. Disaster is when the self is a nonbeing, a nonperson, and indeed, for Auster, as we just saw, the daze turns him into “an uninhabited shell of flesh and bone, a nonperson.” Furthermore, in *Report from the Interior*, as in *Winter Journal*, the disappearing of the “I” is the foundation upon which the narrative of the same “I” is built. And when there is no “I” to undergo the experience (not only that of disappearing, but any experience), Auster resorts to the use of “you.” The daze is then essentially the disaster; it is pure passivity. It cannot be known, nor felt, and therefore cannot be remembered with exactitude. Consequently, it cannot be made to cohere through the process of narration; it escapes narration. The problem of disaster, for Auster, we may then infer, is the problem of memory, and Blanchot also seems to lead his reader in this direction:

Passivity is not simple receptivity, any more than it is formless and inert matter *ready* for any form. Passive are the throes of dying (dying, silent intensity; that which cannot be welcomed, which is inscribed wordlessly; the body in the past, the body of no one, of the interval: being’s suspense, a seizure like a cut in time, which we cannot evoke except as wild, unnarratable history having no meaning in any present). Passive: the un-story, that which escapes quotation and which memory does not recall – forgetfulness as thought. That which, in other words, cannot be forgotten because it has already fallen outside memory.¹

One must observe that for Blanchot, death and dying are not to be confounded. Life and death are intimately tied to each other in a relationship of continuity. Life cannot be separated from death; death is experienced within life: life – living – is dying. Indeed, the use of “dying” instead of “death,” serves to highlight the importance of continuity; the emphasis is on *process* rather than *state*. Then, the daze, as Auster attempts to describe it, is not so much a state of being as it is a process. Auster’s daze is his “being’s suspense, a seizure like a cut in time, which [he] cannot evoke except as wild, unnarratable history

1 *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 28.

having no meaning in any present.” The narration of the daze in *Report from the Interior* is then unnarration; the story of that particular part of his life is “un-story.” The problem of the narration of *Report from the Interior* is the problem of recalling that which escapes memory: how to remember that which cannot be remembered; how to narrate that which cannot be narrated? Auster’s “daze” indeed seems to lie outside memory. Any attempt to narrate it, to reverse its ineffability, is bound to be fraught with contradictions. Remembering is forgetting: the two cannot be separated. The story of the author-narrator’s childhood is not so much the story of living as it is the story of dying. The very act of narration of the un-story, the non-memory, then takes the self even further away from itself; narration becomes an instance of “limit-experience,” “this de-subjectifying undertaking, the idea of a ‘limit- experience’ that tears the subject from itself.”¹

The correspondence, if not the equivalence, between remembering and forgetting, however, is not a new idea in Auster’s writing. It seems, in fact, to be a central concern in his autobiographical writing, and appears as early as *The Invention of Solitude*, in its second section entitled “The Book of Memory.” Being particularly struck by Ponge’s ability to recall with precision their first meeting even three years later, the narrator of “The Book of Memory,” A., remarks:

For a man to remember so precisely things he had seen only once, things which could not have had any bearing on his life except for a fleeting instant, struck A. with all the force of a supernatural act. He realized that for Ponge there was no division between the work of writing and the work of seeing. For no word can be written without first having been seen, and before it finds its way to the page it must first have been part of the body, a physical presence that one has lived with in the same way one lives with one’s heart, one’s stomach, and one’s brain. Memory, then, not so much as the past contained within us, but as proof of our life in the present. If a man is to be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees. He must forget himself in order to be

1 *Remarks on Marx*, pp. 31-32.

there. And from that forgetfulness arises the power of memory. It is a way of living one's life so that nothing is ever lost.¹

In this passage, the reader is presented with three conceptions of memory, gradually converging towards the notion of disaster. Firstly, the very fabric of memory is the word; and words have a material, corporeal presence. For the narrator of "The Book of Memory," the word is perceived as nothing less than a vital organ, like the heart, stomach, brain: "it must first have been part of the body, a physical presence that one has lived with in the same way one lives with one's heart, one's stomach, and one's brain." The word is not merely a tool to structure one's thoughts, an instrument to materialize, externalize what is internal to the self. It is the body, the container, the very essence of the self: the self is composed of the word. For Auster, writing begins in the body, and this is an idea that also recurs and is reinforced in *Winter Journal*: "Writing begins in the body, it is the music of the body, and even if the words have meaning, can sometimes have meaning, the music of the words is where the meanings begin."² Not only does writing begin in the body, but it is the music of body, and if music can be described, in its most obvious level, as being the repetition of sounds over time, then words are nothing other than the repeated sounds that the body makes. Auster thus highlights the euphonic dimension of writing. For him, the relationship a writer seems to have with language is a primitive one, where the sound of words precedes their sense. This is reminiscent of Freud's discussion of the experience of language in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. For Freud, the infant enters into language through the primitive pleasure of the repeated sound, and meaning is only secondary to the pleasure of the repeated sound.³ Auster's experience of writing is similar,

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 148

2 *Winter Journal*, p. 225.

3 "From suitable examples of innocuous jokes, where there was no risk that either content or intention would upset our judgement, we were obliged to conclude that the technical devices of jokes were themselves sources of pleasure, and we shall now examine whether this pleasure could perhaps be traced back to economizing on psychical expenditure. In one group of these jokes (word-play) the technique

sense (meaning) is only subordinate to sound, what prevails is the music of the words. This idea will be further developed in the last chapter of our study, addressing the question of Auster's poetics and the musicality of his writing.

Secondly, memory is constructed through forgetting. The suggestion of this equivalence between forgetting or forgetfulness and memory, seems to bear resemblance to one of the ways in which Blanchot conceives of the disaster in *The Writing of the Disaster*: "The disaster is related to forgetfulness – forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps. To remember forgetfully: again, the outside."¹ "To remember forgetfully" – "*se souvenir par oubli*"² – suggests that forgetting ("oubli") is the modality for memory; forgetting is re-membering, re-collecting, and this "remembering forgetfully" is disastrous. For A., in "The Book of Memory," remembering forgetfully "is a way of living one's life so that nothing is ever lost." Remembering forgetfully places life – living – and disaster not only on the same plane, but as being indissociable from each other: remembering forgetfully prescribes a disastrous living. This superposition of memory and forgetting, of life and disaster – of living and the impossibility of living – can be seen as another instance of limit experience.

Thirdly, memory does not deal with experiences of the past, but reveals a certain relationship of the self to the present (as A. puts it: "Memory, then, not so much as the past

consisted of drawing the attention of our psyche to the sound of a word instead of to its sense, making our (acoustic) representation of the word [Wortvorstellung] itself take the place of its meaning as conferred on it by its relations to the representations we make of the thing [Dingvorstellungen]. [...] We can observe that pathological states of thought-activity, in which the possibility of concentrating psychical expenditure on one point is probably limited, do in fact bring this kind of representation of a word's sound to the fore more than its meaning, and that when they are speaking, such pathological cases proceed according to the 'external' instead of the 'internal' associations of the word-representation, as the formula has it. In the case of children too, who are of course still used to treating words as things, we note their inclination to look for the same sense behind the same or similar sound, which becomes the source of many of the mistakes that grown-ups laugh at." (Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. Joyce Crick. London: Penguin, 2003. pp. 115-116)

1 *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 3

2 *L'Écriture du désastre*, p. 10.

contained within us, but as proof of our life in the present”). In other words, A. seems to suggest that memory is at work even in the present of experience, and in so doing, he aligns himself with Hegel’s understanding of memory and recollection as discussed in *Philosophy of Mind*. For Hegel, in the process of experience, intuition becomes a representation, a recollection: “Representation is this recollected or inwardized intuition.”¹ In other words, for Hegel, the process of experience is recollection. It is the interiorization of the exterior. The exterior or the sensual experience is reduced to representation, and is therefore internalized or recollected. And this, for Hegel, is the first kind of memory: the involuntary memory. But in internalizing the external, the specific of the sensual experience is lost; it is generalized. Thus, memory deals with the generalization of the specific, and for A., seeing is the process by which the generalization of the specific is possible. So what the narrator calls “forgetfulness,” “forgetting himself,” is not so much the loss of the self, or loss of memory or consciousness, but it could be seen as referring to the loss of the specific that a sensual experience involves, entails. In this case, the sensual experience that trumps all other sensual experiences, and that is dear to Auster, is seeing: “he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees.” As a consequence, it is the very loss of the specific that paradoxically ensures that “nothing is ever lost.” In *City of Glass*, Quinn attempts, just like the narrator of “The Book of Memory,” to obstruct the process of thinking by privileging the immediate sensual experience of seeing, by “reducing himself to a seeing eye.”² But Quinn adds to the experience of seeing, another experience: the experience of the body in motion. Therefore, in Quinn’s case, it is the experience of seeing and the experience of walking that lead, literally, physically, to the generalization of the specific: “By wandering aimlessly, *all places became equal* and it no longer mattered

1 Hegel, Georg W.F. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. Trans. William Wallace and A.V. Miller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 201.

2 *City of Glass*, pp. 3-4.

where he was.” (emphasis is ours) Like Quinn, the author-narrator of *Winter Journal* also identifies his spatial position as essentially being nowhere:

Nothing is more disconcerting to you than the ride in the plane itself, the strange sense of being nowhere that engulfs you each time you step into the cabin, the unreality of being propelled through space at five hundred miles an hour, so far off the ground that you begin to lose a sense of your own reality, as if the fact of your own existence were slowly being drained out of you, but such is the price you pay for leaving home, and as long as you continue to travel, the nowhere that lies between the here of home and the there of somewhere else will continue to be one of the places where you live.¹

Being nowhere is therefore the ideal state of being, because not only does it imply being in *no particular* place, but it also suggests being *everywhere*. It makes possible the simultaneity of being both nowhere and everywhere. The nowhere “that lies between the here of home and the there of somewhere else” is not entirely detached from “here” nor “there.” Nowhere is not to be understood as the negative of somewhere. Nowhere *is* somewhere, it is a particular place, and this somewhere is *both* “here” and “there.” Nowhere is predicated on the simultaneity of “here” and “there.” However, its simultaneity robs it of its particularity. Quinn’s walking, wandering entails the loss of the spatial particular, as does the author-narrator of *Winter Journal*’s “essentially being nowhere.” There is no difference between here and there. While this suggests a universality, a lack of particularity, it also suggests neutrality. And for Blanchot, neutrality is disastrous; it is the disaster. The only way to live, for Quinn as for the narrator of *Winter Journal*, is to live a life stripped of all particularity, to live disastrously, to live a life that verges on the impossibility of living. For Auster’s characters², it would appear, the only way to experience life coincides with limit-experience: the ideal life is a disastrous life.

1 *Winter Journal*, p. 115.

2 While M.S. Fogg’s way of life in *Moon Palace* is the quintessential limit-experience as Foucault understands it, Effing, who turns out to be Fogg’s grandfather, the narrator of “The Book of Memory,” A., Quinn, and the author-narrator of *Winter Journal* all seem to favor a life that borders on the

There is another way in which Auster attempts to orchestrate the loss of the particular in his autobiographical work, and that is through the loss of the grammatical and autobiographical subject “I.” The speaking “I,” which for Auster seems to be a mark of particularity, is lost when it is replaced by “he” / “A.” in “The Book of Memory,”¹ or “you” in *Winter Journal*² and *Report from the Interior*³. In avoiding the use of “I,” especially in *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*, Auster attempts to break away from specificity, from singularity. However, in resorting to the use of the deictic “you,” it should be noted that Auster does not gain much, for “I” itself is already capable of expressing generality. In his reading of Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Paul de Man writes:

Hegel goes on to discuss the logical difficulty inherent in the deictic or demonstrative function of language, in the paradox that the most particular of designations such as “now,” “here,” or “this” are also the most powerful agents of generalization, the cornerstones of this monument of generality that is language – a paradox perhaps inherent in the Greek word *deiktik-os*, which means “to point to” as well as “to prove” (as in the French word *démontrer*). If this is so for adverbs or pronouns or time and place, it is even more so for the most personal of personal pronouns, the word “I” itself. “All other humans have in common with me to be I, as all *my* feelings, representations, and so on, have in common with each other to be distinctively *my own*. The word “I” is the most specifically deictic, self-pointing of words, yet it is also “the most entirely abstract generality.”⁴

impossibility of living: a life of disaster, a life that *is* disaster.

- 1 “A. realizes, as he sits in his room writing *The Book of Memory*, he speaks of himself as another in order to tell the story of himself. He must make himself absent in order to find himself there. And so he says A., even as he means to say I. For the story of memory is the story of seeing.” “*The Book of Memory*.” *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 165.
- 2 “You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else.” *Winter Journal*, p. 1.
- 3 “It was one thing to write about your body, to catalogue the manifold knocks and pleasures experienced by your physical self, but exploring your mind as you remember it from childhood will no doubt be a more difficult task – perhaps an impossible one. Still, you feel compelled to give it a try. Not because you find yourself a rare or exceptional object of study, but precisely because you don’t, because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone.” *Report from the Interior*, p. 4.
- 4 De Man, Paul. “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*.” *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis, MN: U. Of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 98.

What Paul de Man seems to highlight is the paradoxical idea that in using deictics, we attempt to say a sensuous (concrete) thing, but we utter something more general. A deictic is an abstraction, and as such it is capable of engendering a plurality of meanings when the original utterance is placed in another context. In other words, De Man reminds us that for Hegel, there is a limit to language: it can never name the sensuous particular; it names something more general or universal (“generality that is language”). So, if “[all] other humans have in common with me to be I, as all *my* feelings, representations, and so on, have in common with each other to be distinctively *my own*” and “[the] word “I” is the most specifically deictic, self-pointing of words, yet it is also “the most entirely abstract generality,” then why does Auster feel the need to use “you” to generalize the already general, already universal “I?” A possible answer could be that for Auster, “you” and “I” communicate a relationship of unity: they are indissociable. Perhaps for him, “you,” does not entirely, not only express alterity (“you” as the other of “I,” as we have seen previously), but is also meant to include “I.” “You” then seems to express, simultaneously, identity and alterity.

However, we also saw that for Auster, when identity (sameness) and alterity meet, when the possibility for them to relate to each other opens up, it leads to the loss of identity. The coincidence of identity and alterity is traumatic. As soon as the “Other” enters into a relationship with the self, the self is lost; it is “crushed” by the other. Auster’s writing, consisting in “reaching out toward an other,”¹ attempts to redefine the self through the inclusion of the other, through the use of “you,” but this inclusion of the other winds up being a self-destructive maneuver. The self is lost to the Other, and what remains is what Blanchot calls “passivity bereft of self (sheer alterity, the other without unity).”² Therefore,

1 *Report from the Interior*, p. 179

2 Blanchot, p. 18.

an autobiography, which is supposed to be a means for the self to pattern its life, to make sense of itself, in other words, to bring cohesion to a life that is otherwise subjected to the arbitrariness of chance, becomes the very vessel through which the self is lost, destroyed, imperceptibly and irreversibly. Auster's writing his autobiography could then be seen as his writing of the disaster.

Chapter 13

The disaster of the other

“[...] and yet somehow we felt we had to be there with Titus, to keep our eyes open to the horror for his sake [...]”¹

Thus far, our reading focused on disasters directly experienced by the most prominent subject in the narrative – either by the homodiegetic narrator, or a protagonist of the story – embedded or framing. Moving away from the idea of the self as being the site, victim, or recipient of the disaster, we may wonder what, if anything, could be said about the experience of the disaster of the other.

Indeed, Auster’s work is not always articulated around first-hand or first-person experiences of a disaster. Disasters also strike in the lives of the characters who are not necessarily the protagonists of the narratives in which they appear. In this chapter, we will posit that although disaster is at times experienced by the other(s), the narrating self nevertheless winds up becoming implicated in the experience of the disaster. Ultimately, witnessing the disaster of the other is, in itself, a disaster for the witness. Through this process, disaster propagates or ripples through the text.

The two most striking modalities of an indirect experience of disaster in Auster’s work are the instance of being a spectator (witnessing – seeing – the occurrence of

¹ *Man in the Dark*, p. 175.

disaster), and the instance of being a listener (having the experience of a disaster orally narrated by another character). We will therefore study, for each of these two modalities of the disaster, whether the indirect experience of the disaster shares the same features as the first-hand experience; and whether Auster's writing employs the same narrative patterns.

13.1 The spectator: seeing the disaster

The most striking instance of seeing the disaster in Auster's work is to be found towards the end of *Man in the Dark*. The narrator explains at the beginning of this narrative that the starting point of his story – and his storytelling – is the death of his granddaughter's partner Titus Small near Baghdad. The struggle of the narrator and his granddaughter to recover from the trauma associated with this event serves as a backbone for the entire narrative. However, despite its central role, the depiction of Titus' horrifying slaughter is deferred till the very end of the narrative. The disaster is witnessed via a video recording diffused across the Internet:

Mercifully, there is no sound.

Mercifully, a hood has been placed over his head.

He is sitting in a chair with his hands tied behind him, motionless, making no attempt to break free. The four men from the previous video are standing around him, three holding rifles, the fourth with a hatchet in his right hand. Without any signal or gesture from the others, the fourth man suddenly brings the blade down on Titus's neck. Titus jerks to his right, his upper body squirms, and then blood starts seeping through the hood. Another blow from the hatchet, this one from behind. Titus's head lolls forward, and by now blood is streaming down all over him. More blows: front and back, right and left, the dull blade chopping long past the moment of death.

[...]

When the head is finally severed from the body, the executioner lets the hatchet fall to the floor. The other man removes the hood from Titus's head, and then a third man takes hold of Titus's long red hair and carries the head closer to

the camera. Blood is dripping everywhere. Titus is no longer quite human. He has become the idea of a person, a person and not a person, a dead bleeding thing: *une nature morte*.

The man holding the head backs away from the camera, and a fourth man approaches with a knife. One by one, working with great speed and precision, he stabs out the boy's eyes.¹

The anaphoric construction of the opening lines of the passage draws the attention of the reader to two peculiarities of the scene that simultaneously transform and amplify the experience of the beheading.

Firstly, the disaster of the other (Titus) is experienced in the purely visual mode, and this experience of seeing is “mercifully” devoid of sound – the visual is uninterrupted by the phonic. The adverb “mercifully” (“[mercifully] there is no sound”) implies that the experience of sound would have magnified the disaster, or maybe altered its nature. The key to a possible justification for this implication is to be found in the narrator's description of the scene as a *nature morte* (still life). As exposed in the eighth chapter of our study, what allows Brill to deal with the trauma of witnessing the scene is its reinterpretation or reimagining as a work of art. In other words, the narrator escapes trauma by deliberately constructing a framework in which he can ascribe a new meaning to the visual stimuli cast upon his eyes, or maybe in which he can infinitely postpone the process of ascribing meaning. What he sees is no longer a beheading but pictures that have to be perceived either for what they are – raw visual stimuli – or what they cause – a feeling of being overwhelmed – rather than what they actually represent. The process at work here is similar to that of the sublime². It nevertheless differs from the romantic sublime – the ideal

1 *Man in the Dark*, pp. 175-176.

2 An analysis of this passage exploring the concepts of the sublime and trauma can be found in François Hugonnier's thesis “Les Interdits de la représentation dans les œuvres de Paul Auster et de Jerome Rothenberg”, pp 406-407. The focus of our analysis is not on the aestheticization process itself, but its conditions of possibility.

of mixing horror and beauty in a work of art – insofar as the narrator is not in the process of creating a work of art. Instead, Brill tricks himself into perceiving reality as if it were a work of art. This deliberate change in the modality of experiencing reality causes a shift in which the medium of video progressively erases itself to become a still (and dead, *morte*), painting: first, by the absence of sound, and then by the freezing of time, and thus motion. Initially a sequence of moving images, the scene ultimately becomes a freeze-frame shot, in which time no longer exists: “Impossible to know how long it has lasted. Fifteen minutes. A thousand years.” If sublimation is the process by which the narrator copes with trauma, it is only made possible by a substitution of the medium of video by the medium of the still image. The absence of sound is what initiates and eases this transformation.

The scene’s being silent also implies a lack of words and language, of narration accompanying the video images. It excludes the possibility of words (and thus names) being attached to the scene. Through this absence of sound, the experience of the beheading forcefully becomes an experience of the unnameable. What the narrator feels as merciful seems to be the congruence between the unnameability of the beheading itself, and the forced silence, which, indeed, prevents the scene from leaving the realm of the unnameable. It creates a void that has to be filled by the voice and the writing of the narrator.

Secondly, it is important to note that in the narrator’s description of the act of violence in the above passage, Titus’s murderers make sure to cover his face for the duration of his beheading. For Levinas, the experience of the face is at once an invitation to an act of violence (perhaps an “invitation to beheading,” to borrow Nabokov’s words¹), as

1 First published in English in 1959, *Invitation to a Beheading* is the title of a novel by Nabokov centered around the beheading of its protagonist, Cincinnatus, where the instance of the actual beheading (like in *Man in the Dark*) is placed at the end of the novel.

well as that which makes the act of violence impossible. In a conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas says: “Le visage est exposé, menacé, comme nous invitant à un acte de violence. En même temps, le visage est ce qui nous interdit de tuer.”¹ Covering Titus’s head therefore becomes necessary in order to kill him. Titus’s hood is removed and his face is revealed only once the beheading is complete, and his head is severed from the rest of his body. It is at this point, when the features of Titus’s face are revealed, that Titus becomes an object, “a dead bleeding thing.” For Levinas, the experience of the different, distinct and individual features of the face of the other is the experience of that face as an object. More than that, for him, to observe the specificities of the features of the other’s face (for instance, the color of the other’s eyes) is to cease to exist in a social relationship with the other:

C’est lorsque vous voyez un nez, des yeux, un front, un menton, et que vous pouvez les décrire, que vous vous tournez vers autrui comme vers un objet. La meilleure manière de rencontrer autrui, c’est de ne pas même remarquer la couleur de ses yeux! Quand on observe la couleur des yeux, on n’est pas en relation sociale avec autrui. La relation avec le visage peut certes être dominée par la perception, mais ce qui est spécifiquement visage, c’est ce qui ne s’y réduit pas.²

When the narrator perceives the color of Titus’s hair (“a third man takes hold of Titus’s long red hair and carries the head closer to the camera”), he does not see Titus’s face as a totality, and Titus thus ceases to exist in a social relationship with the narrator, August Brill, and becomes an object (“he has become the idea of a person [...] a dead bleeding thing”). The second instance of the adverb “mercifully” (“[mercifully], a hood has been placed over his head”) implying the narrator’s preference of a covered face over a naked face during the beheading thus could be seen as suggesting the narrator’s wish to exist in a social relationship with the other – to see the other as a person, rather than an

1 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Éthique et infini*. Paris: Fayard, 1982. p. 80.

2 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Éthique et infini*. Paris: Fayard, 1982. pp 79-80.

object. Titus's objectification is further emphasized when his eyes – the distinct features of a face – are stabbed out. In this particular instance of *Man in the Dark*, the seeing of the disaster of the other coincides with the disaster of seeing – the disaster of seeing the face of the other as an object, rather than as a person or a socially relatable totality.

It should also be noted that the narrator of *Man in the Dark* (along with his granddaughter Katya, and his daughter Myriam), feels obligated to see Titus's execution:

I still don't understand why the three of us felt driven to watch the tape – as if it were an obligation, a sacred duty. We all knew it would go on haunting us for the rest of our lives, and yet somehow we felt we had to be there with Titus, to keep our eyes open to the horror for his sake, to breathe him into us and hold him there – in us, that lonely, miserable death, in us and in no one else, so as not to abandon him to the pitiless dark that swallowed him up.¹

Seeing the other's disaster is also a means to participate in it, to undergo the experience with the victim. The disaster becomes a collective experience. The trauma experienced by the narrator and Katya is no longer that of being a witness of the disaster, but that of being embroiled with it, as subjects. Seeing the other is also making the other part of the self. This passage raises the following question: should the disaster be seen? The narrator's answer is that the need for seeing the disaster is a law, of an almost religious ("sacred") kind. Not seeing the disaster would have been far more traumatic than becoming part of it by seeing it.

While the experience of the other's execution is a purely visual experience in *Man in the Dark*, in *Mr. Vertigo*, it combines the two modalities: seeing and hearing. Indeed, in *Mr. Vertigo*, the narrator, Walt, relates his experience of witnessing – by seeing and hearing – the execution of Aesop and Mother Sioux by the Ku Klux Klan:

¹ *Man in the Dark*, p. 175.

So we stood there helplessly behind the trees, watching the Ku Klux Klan do its work. A dozen men on a dozen horses pranced about the yard, a mob of yelping murderers with white sheets over their heads, and we were powerless to thwart them. They dragged Aesop and Mother Sioux out of the burning house, put ropes around their necks, and strung them up to the elm tree by the side of the road, each one to a different branch. Aesop howled, Mother Sioux said nothing, and within minutes they were both dead. My two best friends were murdered before my eyes, and all I could do was watch, fighting back tears as Master Yehudi clamped his palm over my mouth.¹

In this passage, it is the executioners (rather than the victims) whose faces are covered. For Walt and Master Yehudi, watching the execution of the other(s) is made doubly disastrous, not only through the obligation of seeing, but also through the obligation of having to remain silent and passive. Just like Titus's beheading in *Man in the Dark*, the scene is forcefully kept in the realm of the unnameable as it is experienced. Words are only possible *a posteriori*.

This experience of disastrous passivity in the face of the disaster of the other is repeated in the scene of Master Yehudi's death (suicide):

But [Master Yehudi] wasn't listening anymore. Still looking into my eyes, he raised the pistol against his head and cocked the hammer. It was as if he was daring me to stop him, daring me to reach out and grab the gun, but I couldn't move. I just sat there and watched, and I didn't do a thing.

His hand was shaking and sweat was pouring off his forehead, but his eyes were still steady and clear. [...] Then, swallowing once, he shut his eyes and squeezed the trigger.²

In order to kill himself, Master Yehudi has to first obstruct his sense of hearing and reduce his sensory perceptions to the sole experience of seeing. Then, as previously stated, he completely shuts himself off from any perception by closing his eyes, as if to anticipate

1 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 90

2 *Mr. Vertigo*, p. 211.

death. It would seem that Master Yehudi wants to avoid dissociating himself into a witness of his own death.

Walt construes his being looked at as the Master's appeal for action, but this appeal is met with pure passivity ("I couldn't move"). Once again for Walt, the disaster of the other is experienced as the inability to act. In the third chapter of this study, we have highlighted how disaster can take the form of a chance event – an event happening independently of the actions of the subject. Or, in the eighth chapter, how illness is disastrous in its being experienced in passivity. Disaster is the experience of the absence of causality, or determinism. Thus, seeing the disaster of the other (and the other is a disaster, *per se*) becomes a disaster in itself because it reinforces the observer's inability to influence the course of events.

In *Man in the Dark* as well as in *Mr. Vertigo* (as seen in its two separate instances), witnessing the disaster of the other is a passive experience. In *Leviathan*, seeing the other's disaster (Sachs's fall) is the result of being implicated in it: "Only two people actually saw Sachs fall: Maria Turner, who was standing next to him on the fire escape, and a woman named Agnes Darwin, who inadvertently caused him to lose his balance by tripping into Maria from behind."¹ It would seem that it is Agnes Darwin who plays a major role in Sachs's disaster: her tripping causes the fall in the first place. However, she is given only a minor role in *Leviathan*, as she is never mentioned again in the rest of the novel. This hints that Maria Turner truly is the agent of disaster – even if she is, at first, given as a mere witness. As the narrator, Peter Aaron, puts it: "Maria was the embodiment of his catastrophe, the central figure in the drama that had precipitated his fall, and therefore no

1 *Leviathan*, p. 119.

one could have been as important to him.”¹ Maria’s implication in the disaster is three times related to seeing, to the gaze. First, she is seen: Sachs’s lusting for her body is what caused him to join her on the fire escape. Secondly, she sees the fall. Thirdly, her practice of photography is what eventually leads Sachs to his rebirth, a rebirth that she witnesses. Having lost sight of himself as a result of his fall, Sachs turns towards Maria to help him re-encounter himself through photography:

When he came to visit her in October, he had withdrawn so far into his pain that he was no longer able to see himself. I mean that in a phenomenological sense, in the same way that one talks about self-awareness or the way one forms an image of oneself. [...] Every time Sachs posed for a picture, he was forced to impersonate himself, to play the game of pretending to be who he was. After a while, it must have had an effect on him. By repeating the process so often, he must have come to a point where he started seeing himself through Maria’s eyes, where the whole thing doubled back on him and he was able to encounter himself again. They say that camera can rob a person of his soul. In this case, I believe it was just the opposite. With this camera, I believe that Sachs’s soul was gradually given back to him.²

If looking at Maria causes Sachs to fall, literally and metaphorically (taking into account his carnal, adulterous pursuit – the fact that he, being married to Fanny, is irresistibly attracted to and aroused by Maria), it is through Maria’s gaze that Sachs can find himself. If Sachs’s performative gaze is disastrous, then Maria’s is regenerative. The above passage suggests that in order to see himself again, Sachs has to see himself as another. As demonstrated in the previous chapters of this part of our study, the self is regained only when it first takes a certain distance from itself. The self is replenished only through the gaze of the other. The effect of Maria’s gaze on Sachs is therefore one of those rare instances in which the disaster can be undone.

1 *Leviathan*, p. 141.

2 *Leviathan*, p. 145.

All of the above instances present characters as witnesses: it is the occurrence of the other's disaster that is witnessed by the observing characters. Whether through a video recording or through their presence at the scene of the disaster, the characters see the victims undergo disaster. There are, however, other instances in Auster's works in which the experience of seeing the disaster is more oblique. The most striking occurrence of this phenomenon is to be observed in *The Invention of Solitude*.

The recurring theme in the first section of *The Invention of Solitude*, "Portrait of an Invisible Man" is the death of the father – not only the death of the narrator's father, Samuel Auster, but also that of his father's father, Harry Auster. While Samuel Auster dies of a sudden cardiac arrest, Harry Auster is murdered by his own wife. In both cases, the act of seeing their death becomes one of the central concerns of the narrative. In Harry Auster's case, there was one witness to his murder: his second youngest son – the narrator's uncle. According to the account of the murder published in the headlines of a newspaper, "[t]he boy declared that he became panic stricken when he heard the shot and saw a flash of a revolver and fled the room."¹ It is interesting to note that the sole witness does not directly see the occurrence of the disaster, except as the flash and the remote sound of the gunshot. The direct experience of the disaster is replaced by the experience of two vivid stimuli, which are simultaneously a part of the disaster (the gunshot is one of the many details one would find in a police report of the murder, for example) and a substitute for it. They unequivocally refer to the murder. As such, this substitution could be seen as a synecdoche for the murder. This experience of the disaster through a substitution seems to relate to Derrida's conception of chance and of the event analyzed in the third chapter of this study. What the flash and gunshot have in common is their brevity and intensity. Both are events to which one cannot ascribe a duration – events which are already in the past by

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 40.

the time one becomes aware of them. They are purely instants. The experience of the murder of Auster's grandfather is thus condensed in a single point in time, rather than being stretched over a period of time – which further increases its intensity. The disaster becomes pure verticality – it ceases to occupy the horizon of time. However, no matter how punctual they are, the sound and the flash still carry an ambiguity as to their chronological position with respect to the murder itself. When the witness becomes aware of it, the shot could have either just been fired, or it could have already hit its target. It is not clear if what caused the boy to be “panic stricken” is the fear that a disaster *has occurred* or that a disaster *is going to* occur. The focus on brevity (in accordance with Derrida's verticality), and in spite of that, the temporal blurring between the event and its imminence, contribute to making the experience of the murder a truly disastrous one. In other words, this indirect experience of the murder, in its very synecdochical relationship with the actual event, is in itself a disaster.

However, the disaster may not be seen at all. In Samuel Auster's case, what becomes important for the narrator – Samuel Auster's son – is seeing his father in the state of being dead, an experience of which he is deprived and whose impossibility he comes to regret:

Worst regret: that I was not given a chance to see him after he died. Ignorantly, I had assumed the coffin would be open during the funeral service, and then, when it wasn't, it was too late to do anything about it.

Never to have seen him dead deprives me of an anguish I would have welcomed. It is not that his death has been made any less real, but now, each time I want to see it, each time I want to touch its reality, I must engage in an act of imagination. There is nothing to remember. Nothing but a kind of emptiness.¹

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 70-71.

Not seeing his father being transformed by disaster makes his death an event that troubles memory. Samuel Auster's death (his condition of being dead) can only be invented, not recalled or remembered. The true disaster for the grieving son seems to be the impossibility of recollection. As the narrator of the second section "The Book of Memory" puts it, "[for] the story of memory is the story of seeing."¹ As a corollary, when seeing becomes impossible, so does memory. Yet, the narrator seems to find a way to substitute seeing his father dead, and he does so by seeing a particular picture of his father:

From a bag of loose pictures: a trick photograph taken in an Atlantic City studio sometime during the Forties. There are several of him sitting around a table, each image shot from a different angle, so that at first you think it must be a group of several different men. Because of the gloom that surrounds them, because of the utter stillness of their poses, it looks as if they have gathered there to conduct a seance. And then, as you study the picture, you begin to realize that all these men are the same man. The seance becomes a real seance, and it is as if he has come there only to invoke himself, to bring himself back from the dead, as if, by multiplying himself, he had inadvertently made himself disappear. There are five of him there, and yet the nature of the trick photography denies the possibility of eye contact among the various selves. Each one is condemned to go on staring into space, as if under the gaze of the others, but seeing nothing, never able to see anything. It is a picture of death, a portrait of an invisible man.²

As the narrating son perceives it, to exist is to be seen. The multiplication of the selves that is supposed to resurrect Samuel Auster ("to bring himself back from the dead") only makes him disappear, because none of the selves in the photograph look at each other. As Sophie Vallas puts it in her essay entitled "'The Invention of Solitude' de Paul Auster, ou l'acquisition du nom propre:"

Ces yeux aveugles sont morts, souligne Auster ("It is a picture of death"), et vident le sujet, sur lequel ils ne parviennent d'ailleurs jamais vraiment à se poser, de sa substance. *The Invention of Solitude* serait donc une tentative désespérée, au lendemain de la mort de Samuel Auster, de revivre la douleur du passé, de tuer le père tout en entamant un chant mortuaire officiellement destiné à retenir son

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 165.

2 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 33

souvenir, de lui donner enfin le corps que, vivant, il n'a jamais vraiment habité [...].¹

Samuel Auster is blind to himself, and the gaze of the son, instead of restoring or reviving him – resurrecting him – only highlights his disappearance, his invisibility, his death. This picture is therefore the closest the narrator comes to seeing his father dead. More than that, however, as Sophie Vallas suggests, seeing his father – casting his gaze upon him – is an attempt to kill him. When the disaster of the other (in this case, the narrator's father) cannot be seen, seeing becomes a means to actualize it.

Seeing the disaster of the other, however, is not the only means of experiencing it. While certain characters become eyewitnesses to disasters, others experience it through hearing – through the act of story-listening.

13.2 The listener: experiencing the disaster through narration

In Auster's corpus, the narration (within the narration) of disasters appears most conspicuously in *Leviathan* and *Man in the Dark*. This *mise en abyme* of the narrative process raises two important questions.² First, how is the narration of these second-hand disasters framed within the main narration: do their narrators temporarily take the place of the main narrator, or is the main narrator still in control? Important clues will be gained by studying the use of narrative voices and modes. Secondly, what characterizes the experience of story-listening a disaster – and what makes this experience necessary?

1 Vallas, Sophie. "The Invention of Solitude' de Paul Auster, ou l'acquisition du nom propre." *Revue française d'études américaines*. No. 70. 1996, pp. 87-96. *JSTOR*. <www.jstor.org/stable/20874347> Web. 31 Aug. 2014.

2 Such second-hand testimonies also raise the question of their reliability and truthfulness. In the second chapter of *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. p. 53), Adam Kelly attempts to separate what belongs to Aaron and what belongs to Sachs in the narration of *Leviathan*.

The first disaster to be narrated in detail in *Leviathan* is Sachs's fall. Not having witnessed the fall, the narrator, Peter Aaron, experiences his friend's disaster through accounts of the incident provided by Maria and by Sachs himself. Maria's oral account is the first, given to Peter Aaron and Sachs's wife, Fanny, while Sachs is still recovering from his accident at the hospital. However, Maria's account of the incident concerns the events leading up to the fall, rather than the fall itself. For the most part of it, indirect speech is used: "She hadn't thought he'd been drinking excessively, but at a certain point, completely out of the blue, he jumped up, swung himself over the railing, and sat down on the edge of the bannister, legs dangling below him in the darkness. This frightened her, she said, and she rushed over and put her arms around him from behind, grabbing hold of his torso to prevent him from falling."¹ Some irregularities are nevertheless observed: although the interpolated reporting clause "she said" ("[this] frightened her, she said, and she rushed over [...]") might point towards the use of indirect speech, there is no marker of subordination characteristic of indirect (reported) speech in this particular utterance. It would thus be more accurate to describe Maria's account as an instance of free indirect speech. Free indirect speech fuses the speech of the narrator as well as the character, it is a speech that winds up belonging to no one: neither the narrator, nor the character. This suggests that Maria's account of the disaster is neither hers, nor the narrator's. The focus is therefore on the act of telling, rather than the character experiencing it or telling it.

Sachs's account of the experience of the fall is first reported by the narrator, through the use of free indirect speech. However, as in the case of Maria, the free indirect speech only reports Sachs's experience of the events leading up to the fall, and not the fall itself. The narrative switches to direct speech the very moment Sachs starts describing his immediate experience of the fall. Being the one to experience the disaster directly, Sachs is

¹ *Leviathan*, p. 123.

given full command of the narrative. Once Sachs's account of his fall ends, Peter Aaron, the original narrator, regains control of the narrative, in order to comment on and make sense of Sachs's narration. It would thus appear that the character undergoing the disaster is the only one allowed to directly narrate the event. It is worth observing that when Sachs narrates his accident using direct speech, the words we read are the same as those that Aaron, the narrator, has heard. As such, the switch to direct speech performs and re-actualizes the narration of the disaster. In other words, the reader is involved in the experience of being narrated a disaster.

The second disaster narrated in *Leviathan* is Sachs's murder of Reed Dimaggio. Since Dimaggio – the character undergoing the disaster – dies, an account of the disaster in direct speech becomes impossible. Sachs narrates the incident to his friend, Aaron, who then reports it to the reader using free indirect speech. Once again, the speech (the account of the disaster) belongs to both the narrator and Sachs, and at the same time, it belongs to neither. The use of the free indirect speech could be seen as the experience in speech of the Austerian “nowhere.” However, it should also be observed that when reporting Sachs's account of the murder in free indirect speech, the narrator refrains from interpreting or trying to make sense of it. It focuses on Sachs's experience alone. Although Sachs did not undergo the murder, he caused it, and this makes his experience of the disaster nearly as direct or immediate as Dimaggio's. Thus, the narrator's focusing on Sachs's experience of the disaster in his account, without interrupting it with his own thoughts or comments is a way of marking the degree of relationship with the disaster: he who experiences the disaster most closely or immediately is the one who is in control of the narrative, who narrates. The voice behind the free indirect speech in this particular case therefore belongs more to Sachs than to the narrator of *Leviathan*.

A third instance of narrated disaster in *Leviathan* is the event that both opens and closes the narrative: Sachs's accidental death in an explosion. The possibility that such an event – which had no witness and which killed its sole protagonist – could be narrated, first appears as an absurdity. Yet, there is indeed an instance of narration of this disaster in *Leviathan* to be found when tracing back the events that led to it. Peter Aaron learns about the actual disaster through a newspaper article:

It was one of those cryptic, two-paragraph stories they bury in the middle of the paper, but I happened to catch it in *The New York Times* while I was eating lunch that afternoon. Almost inevitably, I began to think about Benjamin Sachs. There was nothing in the article that pointed to him in any definite way, and yet, at the same time everything seemed to fit. We hadn't talked in close to a year, but he had said enough during our last conversation to convince me that he was in deep trouble, rushing headlong toward some dark, unnameable disaster.¹

While the newspaper announces the occurrence of the disaster – Sachs's death – its imminence is unambiguously hinted at by Sachs himself in his final conversation with Peter Aaron. In other words, Aaron's conversation with Sachs, in which he learns about Sachs's terrorist tendencies, could be seen as a narration of the disaster to come. This decisive conversation is placed at the end of the novel, making it the goal of the narrative: the rest of the narrative builds towards Sachs's revealing the story behind his emergence as a terrorist – “The Phantom of Liberty.” Indeed, the real disaster begins with Sachs's entering Dimaggio's room and stumbling across his dissertation on Alexander Berkman, and culminates in the accidental explosion that blows Sachs to smithereens.

Sachs's conversation with Peter could thus be seen as a prophetic narration of a disaster to come. Sachs monopolizes much of this conversation, and this is rendered through his taking complete control of the narrative mode, by using direct speech. The use of direct speech to report Sachs's narration of the framework of his final disaster is all the

¹ *Leviathan*, p. 3.

more justified since the one narrating is also the one undergoing the disaster. This corroborates the hypothesis we posited that in *Leviathan*, the proximity to the experience of disaster determines the voice and the modality of narration.

In *Man in the Dark*, the narrator, in addition to visually experiencing the disasters of the other, is also a “story-listener.” First of all, as discussed in previous chapters of this part of our study, he invents a character (Owen Brick) whom he subjects to the disaster of being killed in a uchronic war-stricken America. In this case, he tells himself the story of Brick’s experience of the disaster. In fact, the central theme of *Man in the Dark*, as the narrator explains, is stories of disaster: “My subject tonight is war, and now that war has entered this house, I feel it would be insulting Titus and Katya if I softened the blow. [...] War stories. Let your guard down for a moment, and they come rushing in on you, one by one by one...”¹ In other words, *Man in the Dark* becomes a novel about experiencing the disaster of the other through narration. When August Brill, the narrator, kills Owen Brick, the story of his disaster comes to be replaced by stories of other disasters the narrator has heard over the course of his life. The most striking instance of such a story narrated to him immediately follows the death of Owen Brick and his story: the narrator recalls a story he heard in Brussels from Jean-Luc (the second cousin of his wife Sonia – who at the time of Brill’s recollection of this story is dead) about his (Jean-Luc’s) much-admired high school literature teacher’s being “drawn and quartered”² in a concentration camp. What should be noted is that Jean-Luc does not witness his former teacher’s execution, but happens to overhear her story’s being discussed by two random strangers in a restaurant, who were her inmates in the camp and therefore witnesses to the disaster of her execution. Brill’s narration is therefore a narration of a narration that itself was a coincidental narration.

1 *Man in the Dark*, pp. 118-119.

2 *Man in the Dark*, p. 121.

All of the above instances show how disaster demands witnessing. The role of the witness (the spectator or the listener – whose positions are symmetrical) is essential to the experience of disaster. In other words, an experience of disaster is incomplete if there is no witness to it. In order for disaster to be narrated, written, there has to exist a listener, a reader.

In her essay entitled “The Reader at Play in ‘Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story’ by Paul Auster,” Linda Collinge-Germain writes:

When Michel Picard writes: “Literature is not an object, library, book, text, but an activity. This activity is not writing but primarily reading,” he is consciously and militantly subverting the social order that places the writer above the reader, taking his cue from Jauss and Iser’s “aesthetics of reception.” In a similar way, Auster’s story subverts the artist/spectator hierarchy.¹

Indeed, for Auster, it is the reader who makes writing possible. For him, the reader is not only the entity who defines himself in relation to an existing text, but is one whose existence precedes a text. This problem becomes most apparent for the author in the context of writing a journal. As he, hiding behind the second-person singular “you” in *Report from the Interior* writes:

The problem with the journal was that you didn’t know what person you were supposed to be addressing, whether you were talking to yourself or to someone else, and if it was yourself, how strange and perplexing that seemed, for why bother to tell yourself things you already knew, why take the trouble to revisit things you had just experienced, and if it was someone else, then who was that person and how could addressing someone else be construed as keeping a journal?²

For Auster, what determines the value of narration is the spectator. Moreover, experience gains significance only when it can be shared with and narrated to the other.

1 Collinge-Germain, Linda. “The Reader at Play in ‘Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story’ by Paul Auster,” *Transatlantica*. 02 Mar 2014, Web. 01 September 2014. <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/6567>>.

2 *Report from the Interior*, p. 179.

Thus, the experience of disaster can only exist meaningfully through its being witnessed. This leads us to think of disaster, not merely as an event, as that which unexpectedly arrives, but also as that which calls upon writing, and thus reading, witnessing.

Chapter 14

“Music of Chance” – The poetics of disaster

“Each book I’ve written has started off with what I’d call a buzz in the head. A certain kind of music or rhythm, a tone.”¹

A significant portion of this study has been centered around how the Austerian characters experience disaster. While some of them undergo disaster themselves, others are made witnesses to it. Still some others experience it through narration, through their being told stories about a disaster – indeed, in the preceding chapter, we looked at instances in which a character experiences disaster as a “story-listener.” Auster’s characters, however, are not the only ones who become the “story-listeners” of disaster. In fact, as readers of Paul Auster’s work, we are constantly in the position of being the ones to whom a disaster is narrated, and as “story-listeners” of Auster, we are made to give our undivided attention to his texts. Leaping from the narrative plane to the meta-narrative plane, we will now address the question of how Auster’s poetics is influenced by disaster. The project of our study, as a whole, being the reading of disaster in Auster’s narrative work, we will attempt, in this final chapter, to read his texts *aloud*, all the while paying close attention to the language and its sounds with which the author weaves his texts.

In placing music in the very title of one of his novels – *The Music of Chance* – Auster’s work begs the reader to think about what, as we are about to see, appears to be a

¹ *Conversations with Paul Auster*, pp. 144-145.

rich and crucial metaphor in his writing: music. But is music simply a metaphor for Auster, as the above title suggests? What are the connections, for the author, between language, writing and sound? At which level does music manifest itself in his writing?

Since our search concerns both the narrative and meta-narrative plane, and since music and literature are distinct modalities, this chapter will above all investigate works existing on the periphery of Auster's core fictional *œuvre*, such as interviews, autobiographies or films. Starting with Auster's first autobiographical work, *The Invention of Solitude* – in the second section of which a small but vital part of his discourse on memory, death and the body (among other topics) questions language and its sound – we will attempt to elucidate Auster's experience of sound within language. In particular we will see how, besides the very music of words, and perhaps more prominently than this superficial phonetic level, Auster's musical ear is also tuned in to structure and symmetry – those of language and those of storytelling (those of diction and those of fiction, as Genette would have it). Some of the challenges he faces as a writer are the same as those faced by a composer, and his poetics can thus be analyzed in terms of musical aspects or concepts such as pace, dynamics, expectation – this will be the concern of the second half of this chapter. If disaster is a central force in Auster's writing (not merely as a theme, but as a narrative strategy), and if music influences his poetics, then one should be able to hear, throughout his work, a “music of disaster.”

14.1 Rhyme of events, grammar of existence

As suggested above, Auster's fascination with language takes the shape of quasi-philosophical inquiries in his autobiographies. What exactly it is about language that interests and fascinates him is laid bare through such investigations. They reveal, for

instance, what for Auster are the most important mechanisms of language – those he might like to toy or experiment with in his writing, those on which he might want his poetics to be focused. A striking instance of his fascination with and investigation of language is to be found in the second section of *The Invention of Solitude* (“The Book of Memory”):

The words rhyme, and even if there is no real connection between them, he cannot help thinking of them together. Room and tomb, tomb and womb, womb and room. Breath and death. Or the fact that the letters of the word ‘live’ can be rearranged to spell out the word ‘evil.’ [...]

At the heart of each language there is a network of rhymes, assonances, and overlapping meanings, and each of these occurrences functions as a kind of bridge that joins opposite and contrasting aspects of the world with one another.¹

This passage reveals that Auster is concerned with the sound of language. It would be interesting to reiterate here an observation we made in the twelfth chapter of our study: Auster’s relationship with language seems to be a primitive one – one based on euphony. The sense or meaning of words for Auster is subordinate to their sound. Therefore, he sees rhymes and assonances as being at the heart of the experience of language. However, Auster’s conception of rhyme is complex. For him, a rhyme is not simply a correspondence or similarity in the ending of sounds. He is also sensitive to graphical or visual similarities, permutations, anagrams. The reader may notice a certain shift or mechanism at work in the examples of rhymes Auster gives in the above passage: he begins with purely acoustic, perfect (or “full,” or “true”) rhymes (“room and tomb”), then shifts to a rhyme that is at once a perfect rhyme and a visual rhyme (“tomb and womb”), then returns to a perfect rhyme (“womb and room”), and finally ends with another instance of a perfect and visual rhyme (“Breath and death”). Auster thus makes the very structure of his examples rhyme: indeed, the rhyme scheme of the above structure would be a, b, a, b (perfect, perfect and visual, perfect, perfect and visual). In other words, his discourse on rhymes is

¹ *The Invention of Solitude*, pp. 171-172.

performative. Besides, in making the words “room,” “womb” and “tomb” rhyme with each other, Auster seems to suggest an equivalence between these three spatial categories, which in turn implies the crossing over of the categories of life and death into each other. It is then only logical that the perfect and visual rhyme “Breath and death” should follow – the rhyme “breath and death” hinting at a chiasmus, if not an interchangeability between the two categories of experience: life and death.

The rhyme that follows “breath and death,” however, is one that is neither a perfect rhyme, nor entirely a visual rhyme. Indeed, “live” and “evil” which are essentially anagrams of each other, are treated as rhymes by Auster – he places anagrams within the realm of rhymes. It should be observed that anagrams, homophones and other mechanisms centered around acoustic and graphic similarities are an important part of Auster’s poetics, in the act of naming his characters. Instances of anagrammatic naming include: Delia and Iris in *Leviathan*, that are anagrams of the names of Paul Auster’s first wife, Lydia, and his second wife, Siri, respectively – the pair Delia/Lydia being a phonetic or acoustic anagram, as opposed to the graphic or visual anagram Iris/Siri. Other visual or graphic similarities are echoed in the initials of characters (his own characters or characters borrowed from other literary works): D.Q. (Daniel Quinn, and Don Quixote) in *City of Glass*, P.A. (Peter Aaron, and Paul Auster) in *Leviathan*. The near-homophones Brill and Brick – two of the characters who appear in *Man in the Dark* – also seem to testify to Auster’s sensibility to rhyme. This interplay between the visual and the phonic textures of language would suggest a certain synesthesia in Auster’s poetics – a desire to shift a fundamentally acoustic perception (the similarity of sounds, unfolding in time) to other modalities or realms – such as the similarity of words, unfolding in the space of the page. As if the sight of two similar-looking words would create the impression, in the reader’s mind, of two similar sounds.

This transition from the sound of words to their shape on the page is only the first step through which Auster extends the notion of rhyme – with the sense of musicality it carries – to other realms. Developing his idea of the rhyme in the second section of *The Invention of Solitude*, he writes:

As in the meanings of words, things take on meaning only in relationship to each other. ‘Two faces are alike,’ writes Pascal. ‘Neither is funny by itself, but side by side their likeness makes us laugh.’ The faces rhyme for the eye, just as two words can rhyme for the ear. To carry the proposition one step further, A. would contend that it is possible for events in one’s life to rhyme as well. A young man rents a room in Paris and then discovers that his father had hid out in this same room during the war. If these two events were to be considered separately, there would be little to say about either one of them. The rhyme they create when looked at together alters the reality of each. Just as two physical objects, when brought into proximity of each other, give off electromagnetic forces that not only affect the molecular structure of each but the space between them as well, altering, as it were, the very environment, so it is that two (or more) rhyming events set up a connection in the world, adding one more synapse to be routed through the vast plenum of experience.¹

Auster proposes in this passage a generalization of the notion of rhyme. Rhyme is not only the repetition of sounds in time, it becomes any kind of identity and repetition – the perception of a sameness in persons, objects or situations shifted in space, or in time. Through this generalization, Auster reinforces the idea that poetics is not limited to sound and language, but may also apply to other categories; that any experience of sameness can be perceived as sound. It is possible to have, he seems to say, a poetic or stylistic approach towards writing outside of language, above the surface of words, with non-linguistic elements. What is the reader to make of such a definition of the rhyme? In order to explain it, we may posit two hypotheses – which do not exclude each other.

Firstly, it could be said that for Auster, the vocabulary of grammar or poetics is not a purely linguistic phenomenon – poetics is not only relevant to language, but to other

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 173.

phenomena as well. Poetic and rhetorical devices, figures of speech, may all be likened to a mathematical language, a set of relationships between entities that can be employed to describe everything – a generic meta-language to talk about symmetry and order.

Secondly, we may say that Auster perceives the world as language. He superimposes the materiality of language (and therefore the possibility of rhyme) over his perception of the world. This is especially apparent in the way in which his characters experience the world. In the fourth chapter of this study, we saw how Austerian characters (especially Peter Sachs in *Leviathan* and Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night*) are afflicted with the chronic malady of seeing signs in every incident, everywhere – the universal illness that Deleuze and Guattari have named “interpretosis” (“*interprétose*”). Indeed, the “interpretosis” of Auster’s characters manifests itself in their experience of events as an act of navigating through a chain of signifiers. For them, events are signifiers, and as signifiers, events become word-like entities. Thus, events can be subjected to the possibility of creative play offered by language, and conjunctions of events must be read or interpreted as figures of speech. As a result, it would appear that for Auster, the experience of the world is not simply mediated by language, but the experience of the world becomes a language in itself.

From this generalization of the notion of rhyme follows that the coincidences or figures of the *Doppelgänger* dear to Auster are instances of events, or persons that rhyme. Auster points out that these rhymes predominantly occur in the realm of literature, but at times, they can also be experienced in the world:

These connections are commonplace in literary works (to return to that argument), but one tends not to see them in the world – for the world is too big and one's life is too small. It is only at those rare moments when one happens to glimpse a rhyme in the world that the mind can leap out of itself and serve as a bridge for things

across time and space, across seeing and memory. But there is more to it than just rhyme. The grammar of existence includes all the figures of language itself: simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche – so that each thing encountered in the world is actually many things, which in turn give way to many other things, depending on what these things are next to, contained by, or removed from.¹

While Auster's first allusion to rhyming events could still carry an ambiguity as to whether they relate to fictitious events, or events in the world, this passage clearly states that for Auster, poetics and language encompass everything – the experience *of* the world, *in* the world, becomes a language. This would therefore serve as evidence for our second hypothesis posited above. For Auster, combinations and arrangements of events can be in the same relationship with each other as are words: events, like words, are relational; the one can be understood through its relationship to the other(s). Beyond the “rhyme” and the numerous figures of speech enumerated by Auster, the presence of language in the world is hinted at by another word: “grammar.” For Auster, the poetics of events is not just a question of sound, or stylistics, but also one of grammar.

The notion of grammar, which would be taken here in its normative sense – i.e. saying that some arrangements are more correct or preferable to others (and the implicit assumption that such categorization can be reduced to a set of rules) – applies to events as well. Auster can thus deploy his poetics, his poetic strategies (and tune his ears to, focus his sense of sound) on events, rather than merely the materiality of language. Auster seems to sense a strong presence of language in the arrangement of relationships between events. This might perhaps provide a first explanation as to why his style is straightforward and rather plain. Indeed, if his syntax is often simple, conventional, and his style is devoid of figures of speech, it is because the grammar with which Auster experiments the most is the grammar of events at which he hints in *The Invention of Solitude*.

1 *The Invention of Solitude*, p. 173.

Auster does not directly confirm in his interviews that in his writings, the grammar with which he is most fascinated is the grammar of events, more than any other stylistical device. However, more evidence can be found in another medium with which he has been involved: that of film, as a screenwriter and a director. One should first observe that all of the questions we have discussed above – stylistic devices and grammar – are relevant to the medium of film. *Film grammar* refers to the set of rules governing relationships between a hierarchy of nested entities (frames, shots, scenes, sequences) – just like words, constituents, clauses and sentences. If Auster shuns exploring all possibilities offered by the grammar of English in his writing, what can be said of his use of the grammar of film in the cinematographic works in which he has been involved?

In her (published) dissertation entitled *Paul Auster's Writing Machine: A Thing to Write With* – concerned with Auster's marginal and collaborative projects – Evija Trofimova calls our attention to the simplicity of the film grammar at work in *Smoke*:

González, in his article “Words versus Images: Paul Auster's Films from ‘Smoke’ to ‘The Book of Illusions’,” has observed that *Smoke* is basically Auster's attempt to re-create and add that missing third dimension to film. In *Smoke*, it is mainly achieved through its peaceful, slow and “natural” pace, the emphasis on conversations and long takes rather than action and editing, as well as the filmmakers' refusal to use conspicuous and manipulative cinematographic techniques. González has noted that *Smoke* follows the “realistic” approach in cinema as manifested in works by such directors as Jean Renoir, Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson, who “emphasize telling stories over technique” by letting their characters speak for themselves and giving them time to show their emotions so that they can “unfold before our eyes” on screen and “exist as full-fledged human beings.”¹

Trofimova then points that this simplicity is directly acknowledged by Auster in an interview: “We wanted to make an Ozu film, but with Americans... Hence the little

1 Trofimova, Evija. *Paul Auster's Writing Machine: A Thing to Write With*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. p. 62.

bracketing shots of the Brooklyn subway train, which echo Ozu. We were shooting mostly indoors with just faces and bodies, and their story to tell.”¹ It would thus appear that Auster has the same project in his writing as he does in his films: that of underplaying the grammar of the medium to focus on the story. In his writing, the rhymes or alliterations are not to be found in the sounds of the words, but rather in the repetitions (characters and their doubles) and coincidences. This is the level at which Auster perceives sound and musicality in his writing – where he deploys his poetics.

14.2 The buzz and the rhythm: Storytelling and writing as music

Musicality pervades through Auster’s works not only because of his sensitivity to the “rhyme of events”, but also because he sees the act of writing itself as a musical process. In other words, writing and music intersect not only in the product of writing, but also in its very process – a situation which would suggest that the music of the act and art of writing would infuse the music of the prose.

Before we proceed, it is important to establish what we mean by music and musicality in writing (and in the act of writing). Music, when defined as an arrangement of sounds, contains in this very definition two focal points. One should bear in mind the existence of these two poles: the structure, and its acoustic manifestation. The experience of music, and the pleasure derived from it, commonly combine the perception of both, but it is also possible to experience music solely in one of these extremes, in the complete absence of the other. For example, one may find a piece of music beautiful simply by reading its score and becoming aware of its structure, without even listening to it being played – the aesthetics of music can be experienced even outside of the realm of sound.

1 Peachment, Chris. “Give the man a cigar.” *The Independent* 07 March 1996. Web. Sep. 23 2014. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/give-the-man-a-cigar-1340694.html>>

Conversely, music can be appreciated as a pure acoustic manifestation, even in the absence of structure, or even of boundaries between sounds delimiting musical events (as exemplified by La Monte Young's experiments in *drone music*, focusing on the pleasure of the sound itself). For Auster, what makes the process of writing, or storytelling musical, resides at either of these poles.

This is to be observed towards the beginning of *Moon Palace*. M.S. Fogg tells the reader how he would attempt to justify to his friends his using the boxes packed with books (given to him by his uncle, Victor) as pieces of furniture in his apartment:

Think of the satisfaction, I would explain to them, of crawling into bed and knowing that your dreams are about to take place on top of nineteenth-century American literature. Imagine the pleasure of sitting down to a meal with the entire Renaissance lurking below your food. In point of fact, I had no idea which books were in which boxes, but I was a great one for making up stories back then, and I liked the sound of those sentences, even if they were false.¹

Fogg's use of the books as pieces of furniture represents, if not performs, the materiality of language. Books, stories, language have a physical presence – they are tangible. At the same time, language gains its materiality in sound. In fact, it is sound that fascinates Fogg. His fabricating stories about his use of the books – rather, his mythologizing the function of the boxed books – is not so much an attempt to justify his actions as it is a simple, primitive experience of the pleasure of sound: “I liked the sound of those sentences, even if they were false.” The pleasure of sound is not only superior to meaning, but is also more important than truth. Literature, stories, meaning and truth are only the subordinate aspects of language. Language and literature for M.S. Fogg is, above all else, pure sound.

¹ *Moon Palace*, p. 2.

This idea is further developed in *Winter Journal*, in a passage we have briefly commented on in a previous part of this study, in the context of the parallel between the gesture of walking and writing. It would be interesting in this part of our study to look at what the passage reveals about sound and musicality:

In order to do what you do, you need to walk. Walking is what brings the words to you, what allows to you hear the rhythms of the words as you write them in your head. One foot forward, and then the other foot forward, the double drumbeat of your heart. Two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs, two feet. This, and then that. That, and then this. Writing begins in the body, it is the music of the body, and even if the words have meaning, can sometimes have meaning, the music of the words is where the meanings begin. You sit at your desk in order to write down the words, but in your head you are still walking, always walking, and what you hear is the rhythm of your heart, the beating of your heart.¹

As discussed in the eighth chapter of this study, writing is an act, a physical gesture responding to another act, that of the body's walking in space. Walking is a rhythmical activity – a regular repetition of steps. Indeed, the connection between walking and music is ever present in the vocabulary of music – words like “*andante*” (at a walking pace) or “march” designating tempi. As rightfully observed by Auster, walking is characterized by a binary rhythm. Auster’s description in the above passage of the rhythmical act of walking itself becomes a rhythmical sentence. The binary rhythm of walking translates in the vocabulary and grammar. The binary rhythmic figure (“double drumbeat of your heart”), the anaphoric (the repetition of “two”) and chiasmic (This, and then that. That, and then this.) constructions all add to the musicality of the passage. Talking about “the rhythms of the words” produces them: rhythm in the above passage could be seen as a speech act. Walking creates this rhythm, and simultaneously initiates the act of writing; and Auster desires to capture and preserve the rhythm of his walk in his writing. The heartbeat is what sets the pace – the pace of walking, as well as of writing.

1 *Winter Journal*, pp. 224-225.

The music of writing, and the music *in* writing, however, do not emanate only from the body in motion. An otherwise stationary, but writing body, is also capable of producing music. This phenomenon is to be observed in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, in Graf's typescript that Mr. Blank is in the process of reading:

I am sitting at the table, listening to the pen as it scratches along the surface of the paper. I stop. I dip the pen into the inkwell, then watch the black shapes form as I move my hand slowly from left to right. I come to the edge and then return to the other side, and as the shapes thin out, I stop once more and dip the pen into the inkwell. So it goes as I work my way down the page, and each cluster of marks is a word, and each word is a sound in my head, and each time I write another word, I hear the sound of my own voice, even though my lips are silent.¹

Even writing in an apparent state of immobility engenders sound. Here, it would be important to distinguish between two forms of sound: the sound of the words in his head, and the sound produced by the very act of writing – the pen scratching on the paper. Let us see how the two sounds are experienced by the character.

Firstly, it is through writing that Graf, in this passage experiences his voice. For him, the experience of writing precedes the experience of the voice. Writing for Graf does not seem to be the exteriorization of the voice, but in fact, *produces* the voice, produces speech. Graf's experience of hearing his own voice, that is to say, hearing himself speak, depends on (the experience of) writing. This inclusion of writing by the Austerian character in the experience of the voice appears in stark contrast with the Derridian notion of hearing-oneself-speak ("*s'entendre parler*") which, for the philosopher is the perfect metaphysical model of absolute or full-presence:

[Le] logos ne peut être infini et présent à soi, il ne peut *se produire comme auto-affection*, qu'à travers la *voix* : ordre de signifiant par lequel le sujet sort de soi en

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 33. By its opening words "I am sitting", by the way it details the exact process by which it has been created, and through the progressive focus on a latent inner voice or tone, this passage is reminiscent of Alvin Lucier's work of tape music, "I Am Sitting in a Room".

soi, n'emprunte pas hors de lui le signifiant qu'il émet et qui l'affecte en même temps. Telle est du moins l'expérience – ou conscience – de la voix : du s'entendre parler. Elle se vit et se dit comme exclusion de l'écriture, à savoir de l'appel à un signifiant "extérieur", "sensible", "spatial" interrompant la présence à soi.¹

For Derrida, full-speech, or hearing-oneself-speak is experienced *within* the self, in the proximity of the voice to the self – it is the voice of the self that is heard without speaking. Writing, for him, is the (inferior) other of speech, because it calls upon "exteriority" and "spatiality," thus interrupting self-presence. Graf, however, seems to experience self-presence through writing, as it is only through writing that he can hear himself speak: "each time I write another word, I hear the sound of my own voice." In other words, although Auster is in no way engaging in a philosophical dialogue with Derrida, through his character, Graf, Auster nonetheless may be seen as conveying the idea that for him, writing does not interrupt self-presence, but rather produces it, by producing full-speech – and this does not prove Derrida wrong. Musicality is then, the experience of full-speech, of full-presence.

Secondly, musicality is not only to be found in the words themselves (hearing the sound of the words in the head), but in the sound made by the very act of writing. Graf also experiences the musicality of writing through the sound of the pen "[scratching] along the surface of the paper." The importance of this sound in the experience of writing is highlighted in Auster's essay "The Story of My Typewriter:"

In the beginning, I didn't think about it much. A year went by, ten years went by, and not once did I consider it odd or even vaguely unusual to be working with a manual typewriter. The only alternative was an electric typewriter, but I didn't like the noise those contraptions made: the constant hum of the motor, the buzzing and rattling of loose parts, the jitterbug pulse of alternating current vibrating my fingers. I preferred the stillness of my Olympia. I was comfortable to the touch, it

1 Derrida, Jacques. *De la grammatologie*. Paris : Minuit, 1967. p. 146.

worked smoothly, it was dependable. And when I wasn't pounding on the keyboard, it was silent.¹

While the sound of writing with a pen may be conducive to the experience of full-speech and self-presence, writing with an electric typewriter is no more than the unpleasant experience of its sounds, or rather, its “noise:” “the constant hum of the motor, the buzzing and rattling of loose parts, the jitterbug pulse of alternating current vibrating my fingers.” Yet, this unpleasant sound has a musical dimension – be it the drone of the buzzing, or the rhythm of the “jitterbug pulse”. It would seem that this uncontrollable musicality interferes with the musicality that the writer is trying to convey in his writing – the pace set in walking or the musicality of language, and performed through the clicking of the keys. An illustration of this conflict can be seen in *Smoke*, in the scene in which Paul Benjamin’s writing is interrupted by Thomas “Rashid” Cole’s dropping plates in the kitchen. The growing tension between the characters is expressed entirely through sound – the clash of the plates overpowering the clickety-clack of the typewriter.

This equivalence between the act of writing and the performance of music is further supported by the role played, in Auster’s works, by musicians and writers. While the protagonists of Auster’s novels are predominantly writers (as novelists, critics, academics, or – independently of their occupation – involved in the act of writing a story or journal), the figure of the musician is also present in his cinematic works. For instance, *Blue in the Face* stars the singer-songwriter Lou Reed himself, but more importantly, the screenplay of *Lulu on the Bridge* revolves around a jazz musician – a saxophonist whose inability to perform music following a lung injury constitutes the initial disaster triggering the narration. Through the figure of a mysterious, and ultimately fictitious woman, the plot of

1 *Collected Prose*, p. 291.

Lulu on the Bridge echoes that of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, whose protagonist is a writer. The writer and the musician thus appear to be interchangeable figures.

This equivalence between the act of writing and the performance of music is not only staged in Auster's works, but also acknowledged as an important part of his writing process, as revealed in an interview published in *Conversations with Paul Auster*:

MC: You take the metaphor of painting rather than that of melody?

PA: I think in terms of music much more than in terms of painting. But I do sometimes think in terms of maps.¹

One might wonder what precisely are these musical terms in which Auster thinks. An answer is provided in an interview given to the *Paris Review*:

INTERVIEWER: Do you work from a plan when you start writing a novel? Have you figured out the plot in advance?

AUSTER: Each book I've written has started off with what I'd call a buzz in the head. A certain kind of music or rhythm, a tone. Most of the effort involved in writing a novel for me is trying to remain faithful to that buzz, that rhythm. It's a highly intuitive business. You can't justify it or defend it rationally, but you know when you've struck a wrong note, and you're usually pretty certain when you've hit the right one.²

It is sound – a “buzz in the head” – that sparks the writing of a novel for Auster. Curiously, he seems to use “buzz” and “rhythm” interchangeably. The two categories of sound, however, can be defined in total opposition to each other: while a buzz is a drone – a continuous sound characterized by the lack of any event whatsoever – a rhythm is a structure of repeated musical events. Their interchangeability, therefore, is paradoxical and might hint at the presence of a very peculiar form of music in Auster's writing. We may therefore try to detect the presence of music in his *œuvre*. And if his work in its entirety is

1 *Conversations with Paul Auster*, p. 78.

2 *Conversations with Paul Auster*, pp. 144-145.

marked by disaster, we may then expect to find, in this intersection between musicality and the performance of the disaster, a “music of disaster.”

14.3 Music of disaster

It should first be observed that silence – which can equally be seen as the negation of music, or as an essential part of it¹ – is an instance of disaster in two of Auster’s narratives. The following passage from *Moon Palace* reinforces the idea that Auster views silence as the absolute disaster:

Scoresby rode off. Within an hour, I began to feel that he had never existed. I can’t tell you how odd that sensation was. It wasn’t as though I had decided not to think about him, I could barely remember him when I did. The way he looked, the sound of his voice, none of it came back to me anymore. That’s what silence does to you, Fogg, it obliterates everything. Scoresby was erased from my mind, and whenever I tried to think of him after that, it was like trying to remember someone from a dream, like looking for someone who had never been there.²

The self, for Auster, exists through the experience of the sound of the voice. Silence is therefore, not only the destruction of the voice, but also the destruction of the self. Similarly, we have seen in the sixth chapter of this study how for Anna Blume, the protagonist of *In the Country of Last Things*, Isabel’s existence – her presence – depends on her voice, and how Anna perceives Isabel’s death as occurring at the exact moment at which she loses her voice.

This is not the only intersection between music, or sound, and disaster in Auster’s narratives. What makes the two coincide is the notion of time. By its very definition, music unfolds its time – be it the rapid vibrations of a sound, or the successive events a rhythm is

1 Rhythms are built through the performance but also the omission of sound, these omissions being noted as rests.

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 156.

made of. Because it is so deeply tied to the notion of time, music can serve as a powerful metaphor for the experience of time. In Auster's novels, the experience of time is strongly marked by disaster. It would thus be possible to translate what disaster and trauma do to time into musical concepts. In particular, the processes or experiences discussed in the first chapters of the third part of our study – dissociation and reappropriation, decomposition and recomposition – have a musical equivalent.

For instance, Nashe in *The Music of Chance* is shown as experiencing the world through music, when he plays the piano: “Nashe had no illusions about his playing, but he generally managed to put in a few hours at the instrument every week, sitting down to muddle through some of the old pieces he had learned as a boy. It always had a calming effect on him, as if the music helped him to see the world more clearly, to understand his place in the invisible order of things.”¹ For Nashe, music is a means to create order. This relationship between music and order could be construed in two ways. First, it would be implied that the regularity of music – its predictability – contrasts with that of the world². By superimposing, or even replacing the temporality of the world with that of a piece of music, by immersing itself in the musical time, Nashe creates an illusion of having a deep understanding of time, of performing himself its flow – this resonates with his will, described later in the novel, to master fate. Yet, practicing music not only allows him to organize time and create order from it, but also improves his ability to make sense of the world. Taking our clue from Auster's notion of the rhyme discussed in the first section of this chapter, it could be said that the practice of music enhances Nashe's ability to perceive the “rhyme” of events – providing him with the right language to understand existence.

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 10.

2 One of the composers whose works are played by Nashe in *The Music of Chance* is Bach. Nashe's search for order echoes Otto Bettmann's observation that “Bach's music sets in order what life cannot” (reported for instance in Stauffer, George B. “Why Bach Moves us”, *The New York Review of Books* Feb 20, 2014. Web. Sep. 30 2014. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/feb/20/why-bach-moves-us/>)

Nashe's experience of music and time further coincide later in the novel:

As long as he was driving, he carried no burdens, was unencumbered by even the slightest particle of his former life. That is not to say that memories did not rise up in him, but they no longer seemed to bring any of the old anguish. Perhaps the music had something to do with that, the endless tapes of Bach and Mozart and Verdi that he listened to while sitting behind the wheel, as if the sounds were somehow emanating from him and drenching the landscape, turning the visible world into a reflection of his own thoughts. After three or four months, he had only to enter the car to feel 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.¹

Nashe's experience of music echoes his experience of time – which we have first examined in the second chapter of our study. Specifically, we have shown how it is a paradoxical experience in that it combined both, immobility and motion. The simultaneous experience of immobility and motion seems to also be present in music, in the above passage. Music, in this case, is perceived as “endless,” as a drone, a buzz, without boundaries. Yet, it contains rhythm, a motion. Music seems to shield Nashe from the world outside of his car, and remove him from the temporality of the outside world. Music, for Nashe, brings its own temporality, which he then enters, and of which he becomes an inseparable part. Like his car, music is the device with which – and *inside of* which – Nashe chooses to lose himself. The car extracts him from the experience of space, whereas music shields him from the experience of time. Together, the car and the music create, from the point of view of Nashe and within the novel, their own spatio-temporality.

Beyond its being staged in the narrative, the interplay between music, time and disaster – music unfolding in a time affected by disaster – is further present at the meta-narrative level in Auster's work, through his poetics. This is the true “music of disaster,” through which Auster demonstrates the musical sensibility we have highlighted in the first

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 11.

section of this chapter. Auster's "music of disaster" can be approached from multiple points of view – corresponding to various aspect of music, or phenomena related to its perception.

A first aspect of music to consider is rhythm. In its very definition¹, rhythm evokes repetition – the presence of a scale at which events, or groups of events, repeat themselves. In the fourth chapter of this study, we have highlighted how chains of chance events and coincidences are carefully laid out in time. While the former could be seen as a masterfully crafted rhythm, the later could evoke the notion of polyrhythms – the musical process of letting two unrelated rhythms play simultaneously, with phenomena of unexpected reinforcements or dialogues randomly appearing between them. In spite of being built from regular and predictable elements, polyrhythms provide an illusion of chaos, unexpectedly resolved in rare, disastrous, moments of synchronicity – the same temporal structure as the Austerian's play with coincidences. This polyrhythmic play is best illustrated in *Leviathan*, through the phasing² between Fanny and Sachs's chronologies discussed in the fourth chapter of this study.

From rhythm can be derived the notion of tempo or pace – the rate at which events occur. What institutes a sense of rhythm within the structure of Auster's novels is the cyclical acceleration and deceleration of the pace of the narrative, due to the occurrence of disaster. When disaster strikes, narration moves forward in time at a much faster rate. Then, through his narrators, Auster focuses on the consequences of the disastrous event, slowing down time, and the pace settles to a lower tempo. The perfect instance of this phenomenon in Auster's corpus of novels is again *Leviathan*. *Leviathan* reads as a series of

1 For example: "The systematic grouping of musical sounds, principally according to duration and periodical stress; beat; an instance of this, a particular grouping or arrangement of musical sounds." ("rhythm, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2014. Web. Oct 10th 2014.)

2 Adopting the vocabulary of Steve Reich's polyrhythmic works, such as *Piano Phase*.

disasters, occurring one after the other – Peter Aaron’s divorce, his affair with Benjamin Sachs’s wife Fanny, Sachs’s fall, Dimaggio’s murder by Sachs, and Sachs’s own death in the accidental explosion of a bomb – but the novel takes place in the time and space between disasters. Correlated with the occurrence of disaster, we notice changes in what is at stake for the characters – the question of whether or not the characters are challenging their entire existence at the time of the narration. These variations create gradations in intensity. The “music of disaster” is thus characterized by stark contrasts in pace and dynamics.

An important phenomenon in the cognition of music, highly relevant to Auster’s writing, is that of expectation, theorized by Meyer in *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Meyer posits that whenever a musical event (such as a note within a melody) is perceived, it is implicitly judged in the light of the events that preceded it: how well it completes the sequence of previous events; whether it could have been anticipated from the context in which it emerges. Whether what is heard and what is expected coincide or diverge is the source of dramatic tension and emotions in music: “Similarly a dissonance or an ambiguous progression which might be unpleasant when heard in isolation may be beautiful within a piece of music where its relationship to past events and impending resolutions is understandable”¹. The art of the composer is thus to understand the listener’s process of expectation (governed by universal rules of cognition, but also learnt through exposure to other pieces of music), and play it. This concept of musical expectation resonates with several aspects of Auster’s writing discussed in our study. First of all, it gives a musical illustration of how Auster plays with imminence in his novels. Be it Nashe’s money running out, Fogg’s books being sold one by one, or Nathan Glass’s days being “numbered” because of cancer, the imminent disaster creates a slow and steady

1 Meyer, Leonard B. *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1956. p. 92.

descending pattern in the narration, a pattern whose continuation can be effortlessly imagined, which gives even more intensity to the point at which the disaster – the death, the depletion – occurs, in the resolution of what is expected. Secondly, musical expectation provides a new way of reading Auster and Derrida’s congruent view of the concept of chance and event. The musical equivalent of a chance event, of the “vertical” (to quote Derrida), is the musical event whose emotion derives from its unexpectedness. When Sachs, in *Leviathan* settles in a routine life with Lillian, it establishes a context in which his sudden departure¹ is almost unexpected. In one same stroke, Sachs’s departure violates the expectation born from his apparently stable relationship with Lillian, but simultaneously contributes to resolving the tension created at the beginning of the novel – by providing an additional link to the chain of events that lead to his accidental death. Several times in this study we have highlighted the presence of a figure of Scheherazade in Auster’s novel, and the ability of the author to make us want to know “what happens next.” But this dimension of storytelling, and how it showcases Auster’s talent as a writer, would be incomplete without considering the interplay between “what happens next,” and what the reader can anticipate of it. As a narrative device, the disaster makes the text pleasurable in that it allows us to experience both the pleasure of seeing our predictions confirmed, and that of seeing all of our expectations discarded. The “music of disaster” plays with expectations, and the mastery of this aspect of music is probably the most salient expression of musicality in Auster’s writing. Through the tension between its imminence and its unexpectedness, the disaster is either an ominous, continuous drone, or a stark percussive event.

1 “In point of fact, that was the first sign of doom, and from the moment Lillian slapped Maria across the face, until the moment Sachs left Berkeley five weeks later, nothing was ever the same for them again.” (*Leviathan*, p. 240)

However, although Auster deploys his musicality at the structural level of his narratives, by mastering the aspects of rhythm, pace, dynamics and expectation, he does not seem to play with sound or ornamentation and timbre – whose literary equivalents would be syntax or what reminisces the reader of the materiality of language, like punctuation or typography. Indeed, he does not seem to be invested in the meta-narrative experiments in which his postmodernist contemporaries like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William Gass (to name but a few of the most prominent) engage. For instance, John Barth provides in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* a striking example¹ of writing challenging the rules of syntax and typography, a piece whose writing has been triggered by the September eleventh attacks, and whose musicality is obvious:

Although Auster seems to have in common with these authors certain narrative concerns like language or metafiction, his prose, unlike that of these authors, surprisingly reveals an unwavering consistency and coherence. His sentences, for the most part, are relatively short and adhere to the syntactical convention of English: Subject-Verb-Object.

He often writes in the active voice. His frequent use of logical connectives ensures the cohesion of sentences within a paragraph as well as between two paragraphs. Figures of speech are rare. There is little change – if any – of style, from one novel to another.

One may then wonder why Auster breaks away from the tendency to experiment with language – at the level of the sentences that make up the fabric of his narratives. Why does Auster’s prose remain impervious to disaster? Why does disaster strike his characters, the space and time of the narration, and the musical aspects of rhythm, dynamics, expectation of his prose, but not his syntax? How or why does his grammar remain intact in the face of disaster?

In the first section of this chapter, we have studied how Auster generalizes the notion of rhyme and grammar to encompass the realm of the story and of the world (the world as a language), and how, as a corollary, the grammar on which he focuses his poetic efforts is the “grammar of events.” This study might provide a first answer. Another possible answer to the question of his consistent grammatical and typographical unity may be found in *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

Mr. Blank, the protagonist of *Travels in the Scriptorium*, wakes up one morning to find himself locked in a room and completely disoriented from (seemingly) having lost his memory – his mind (and name) embodying a *tabula rasa*. In order to help him orient himself, the different parts of the locked room and the various objects it contains are marked with labels of the names of the parts and objects (for instance, “WALL,” “DESK”). However, at some point in the story, these labels are interchanged among themselves so that the name on a label does not correspond to the object onto which it is tacked. This sudden and inexplicable event infuriates Mr. Blank:

But Mr. Blank is a man of order, and he is offended by the childish mischief-making of his captors. From long experience, he has come to appreciate the importance of precision and clarity in all things, and during the years when he was sending out his charges on their various missions around the world, he always took great pains to write up his reports on their activities in a language that would not betray the truth of what they saw and thought and felt at each step along the way. It will not do, then, to call a chair a desk or a desk a lamp. To indulge in such infantile whimsy is to throw the world into chaos, to make life intolerable for all but the mad. Mr. Blank has not reached the point where he cannot identify objects that do not have their names affixed to them, but there is no question that he is in decline, and he understands that a day might come, perhaps soon, perhaps even tomorrow, when his brain will erode still further and it will become necessary for him to have the name of the thing on the thing in order for him to recognize it. He therefore decides to reverse the damage created by his unseen enemy and return each one of the scrambled labels to its proper spot.¹

What Mr. Blank seems to resent most in the scrambled labels is the lack of order and coherence. Like Mr. Blank, Auster himself seems to seek “precision and clarity” in language, and two hypotheses may account for that. One should observe that the act of scrambling the labels is not just described as an innocuous “infantile whimsy,” but also as something that “throw[s] the world into chaos” and “make[s] life intolerable.” If the world is experienced through language, or if the world itself is language, the jumbling of the wor(l)ds is experienced as a disastrous event of cosmic, existential significance. Just like the dissolution of the voice (of Isabel, witnessed by Anna Blume in *In the Country of Last Things*), the disintegration of language gestures towards the end. Striving for and maintaining the cohesion, precision and clarity in language could be seen as reflecting a desire to reconstruct, or reverse the damage caused by disaster – or at the very least, to prevent it.

This incompleteness in Auster’s use of musicality – his choice to focus on some aspects of music and leave others unexplored is not foreign to music itself. Through the

1 *Travels in the Scriptorium*, p. 104.

constraints of instrumentation, or deliberate choices made by the composer, a piece of music can intentionally eschew one aspect of music, reinforcing the presence of the other. For instance, insofar as the harpsichord was unable to produce variations in loudness and timbre, composers of the Baroque era relied on rhythm – by varying for example the density of notes – or played with expectation to convey a sense of intensity, and this constraint privileged formal explorations. This ability to let one aspect of music speak through another is also at play in the works of American minimalist composers of the second half of the twentieth century (such as John Adams, Philip Glass or Steve Reich), in which complex rhythms, textures, or variations in dynamics and timbre are born out of the combination of small patterns of manifest simplicity. It would appear that a similar shift is at work in Auster's writing – a shift corroborated by Auster's definition of the rhyme. Auster's clarity of language, to the point of blandness, could reveal Auster's willingness not to obscure the other manifestations of music in his writing, in order to keep the attention of the reader focused on the large-scale structure of the story rather than on the language of which it is made.

Auster's consistency of style and writing patterns throughout his work, and the idea of a “buzz” or “rhythm” running throughout his writing, leads us to posit a new hypothesis: that his novels should all be seen as various instances of the same latent novel. Each Austerian text could be seen as a new performance of his internal music, externalized through writing, in harmony with the scratching of the pen or the clacking of the typewriter. It would not be far-fetched to think of Auster's career as a novelist as being marked by a monomania, in the way that Gérard de Nerval's might have been. Nerval's writings abound with recurrences (of themes, places, plot segments, vocabulary and turns

of phrases), characters engaged in metaphorical relationships,¹ suggesting that each text should be seen as an imperfect, projected image of a single and larger text.² That Auster shares these traits would suggest that the same mechanism is at work in his writing – the attempt to exteriorize, through writing an ever-playing inner melody.

A final aspect of music that needs to be addressed is that of texture – the existence of superposed layers of sound – opening up the question of the uniqueness or multiplicity of voice or voices, or of viewpoint and viewpoints. There is indeed rarely a multiplicity of narrative voices in Auster's work. The exceptions to this phenomenon are *The Invention of Solitude* and *Sunset Park*. The multiplicity of the narrative voice in *The Invention of Solitude*, as Sophie Vallas discusses in her essay “‘All the others inside me’ : les enjeux ambigus de la citation dans ‘The Book of Memory’ (*The Invention of Solitude*) de Paul Auster,” originates from the voices borrowed by Auster from other texts and incorporated into his own. Yet, they speak (or inhabit Auster) in turn, and never does the multiplicity of their existence lead to a contradiction – thus, a truly polyphonic effect is never achieved, the reinforcement and mutual support of the voices with each other being more akin to heterophony. While *Sunset Park* presents the perspectives of its various characters (mainly – but not only – Miles Heller, Bing Nathan and Morris Heller, each of whom is the respective subject of the first three sections of the novel) the characters are not given their own narrative voice – with the exception of Morris Heller who resorts to narrating his story in the second person singular “you,” like the narrator(s) of Auster's autobiographies (*Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior*). However, it would be incorrect to say that

1 As demonstrated in Sarah Kofman's study, *Nerval: le charme de la répétition*.

2 Barthes has made the same observation about the works of Bataille: “La réponse est si malaisée que l'on préfère généralement oublier Bataille dans les manuels de littérature ; en fait, Bataille a écrit des textes, ou même, peut-être, toujours un seul et même texte.” (Barthes, Roland. “De l'oeuvre au texte”. *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984)

Auster's writing is purely monophonic. The presence of staggered or conflicting chronologies – a sign of contrapuntal or polyrhythmic writing – can be felt in *Leviathan*, or *Moon Palace*. In fact, beyond the narrator, all of the other characters provide a set of conflicting rhythms rather than true voices.

It follows from all these observations that, for Auster, the “music of disaster” is a music of repetitive rhythms and stark contrasts in pace, masterfully playing with the listener's expectation – sometimes rewarding them and sometimes being utterly confounding – constant in its timbre, gravitating towards monophony (monophonic, or at least devoid of contrapuntal voices stealing the attention from the main sequence). One would wonder if there are existing pieces of music matching these criteria, which could give us an opportunity to hear Auster's inner “buzz” or “rhythm”. Auster himself provides the answer to our interrogation in the *Music of Chance*, in which Nashe plays on an electronic keyboard:

[...] works by pre-nineteenth-century composers: *The Notebooks of Anna Magdalena Bach*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, ‘The Mysterious Barricades.’ It was impossible for him to play this last piece without thinking about the wall, and he found himself returning to it more often than any of the others. It took just over two minutes to perform, and at no point in its slow, stately progress, with all its pauses, suspensions, and repetitions, did it require him to touch more than one note at a time. The music started and stopped, then started again, then stopped again, and yet through it all the piece continued to advance, pushing on toward a resolution that never came.¹

The final sentence in the above passage describes not only Couperin's piece, but also the musicality in *The Music of Chance*, and more generally of Auster's writing – a musicality imparted to his novels by disaster.

1 *The Music of Chance*, p. 165.

In conclusion, in this attempt to read Auster aloud, our ears open up to the music that permeates through his writing. Auster perceives sound and musicality, not only in language, but even, and mostly, beyond it. His poetic (narratological) and stylistic concerns are not limited to the realm of language – they extend to events, allowing him to shift his poetic effort towards fiction, rather than diction, to borrow again Genette's terminology. Auster can hear a music of events, of coincidences, and for him, writing is a musical act. This musicality affects – and is affected by – disaster: at the narrative level, the disaster is seen as the disappearance of sound and music, or of the order established by them. At the meta-narrative level, the disaster dictates the musicality of the text: a monophonic, highly rhythmic stream of events, a plainness of sound which never distracts from the unfolding of the music, at times accompanied by the hum of the maestro himself who plays with our expectations at the perfect time, grabbing and holding our undivided attention.

Conclusion

Disaster is a complex spatio-temporal notion, the experience of which results in a variety of processes of fragmentation and dissociation. To attempt to study or even define disaster is to be confronted with a multitude of contradictions, paradoxes or impossibilities. One can only begin to understand disaster (if at all possible) through – if not *as* – these conflicts and inconsistencies. Blanchot's text *L'Écriture du désastre* (*The Writing of the Disaster*), the seminal work centered around disaster, from its very opening sentence, gestures towards the paradoxes immanent in the notion of disaster. Disaster is an elusive notion, and its elusiveness is reinforced by the fact that Blanchot's text is impossible to paraphrase, impossible to summarize without reaching a logical dead-end. Our study of Auster's texts also brought us face-to-face with the many conflicts with which the notion of disaster is riddled.

When disaster strikes, as a truly unexpected chance event, it embodies pure randomness. Yet, characters like Nashe from *The Music of Chance* or Fogg from *Moon Palace* have attempted to deliberately embrace chance, to the point that anything that happens to them, no matter how random, exactly conforms to their expectations.

When disaster strikes, in the shape of a coincidence, it meshes together the opposite notions of determinism and randomness, defying interpretation and confounding characters in a semiotic maze.

When disaster strikes, a book is born. A book which can itself engender disaster.

When disaster strikes, no word can be spoken, language is impossible, or futile. In this void is born the need for writing, for narrating.

When disaster strikes in the shape of an illness, it reverses the idea of death as a disaster. In the course of a healthy life, untimely death is the disaster due to its being unexpected. However, when illness – especially a fatal one – befalls an individual, it is survival that becomes that which is unexpected, and is therefore the disaster. Illness, as we saw in the case of Nathan Glass from *Brooklyn Follies* or Sidney Orr from *Oracle Night*, reverses the experience of life and death as disaster.

When disaster strikes the other, it also strikes the self. More precisely, as we saw in the thirteenth chapter of our study, experiencing the disaster of the other coincides with the self's undergoing disaster. Most readers of Auster's work have noted that the self and the other are in constant conflict in his texts, and then shown how the self only exists through the other, if not *as* the other. We have highlighted a new modality of this conflict, made apparent in these accounts of second-hand experiences of disaster. Disaster is therefore inherent to the experience of the self and identity. Subjectivity itself is disastrous in Auster's work.

From these few, but significant instances, Auster emerges as a "Writer of the Disaster". However, this formulation must be employed with great caution. Auster's project as a writer of the disaster does not seem to be aligned with that of his fellow Jewish-American contemporaries, in that he does not strive to represent historical disaster. Indeed, Auster does not so much seem to be interested in the mimetic potential of disaster, as he appears to concern himself with its diegetic potential. Put differently, Auster does not

seem to explore the possibilities of *showing* disaster in his texts, but rather explore those of *telling* it. Disaster is a narrative tool rather than the very purpose of the narration, and Auster makes astute use of its possibilities. This leads to the greatest of all the paradoxes of the Austerian disaster: disaster does not destruct or destroy, but is rather a means of imparting structure and continuity to his texts. Disaster creates a need for a story, sustains the need for the story to go on, and is that by which stories become worthy of being told. Auster writes *in spite of* the disaster and *through* the disaster.

Disaster is thus fertile in the possibilities it opens up for storytelling. A central question seems to drive Auster's storytelling: what deserves to be said, to be narrated? Auster, as we have seen in this study, challenges the idea of disaster as an event experienced collectively. What Auster tends to name "disaster" in his texts are often events that would commonly be perceived as trivial. For instance, the episode of the accidental breaking of the eggs in *Moon Palace* shows us how a mundane event for Auster's characters can attain the magnitude of a disaster, to the point of becoming more significant than a historical event. More than that, it goes to show how it is necessary to magnify such a mundane event to the proportions of a disaster in order to tell a story. Disaster, for Auster, is to be measured by its potential to become a good story, rather than its having an impact on history.

In Auster's work, disaster is not to be seen merely as destruction, but rather as a force of creation – destruction as a necessary condition for creation. In being a destructive force, it becomes a creative force. When disaster strikes, it repairs, creates, recreates. As a gap, as a crack, as a rift, disaster creates a space for something new to emerge – replaying endlessly, in Auster's fiction, the "epiphanic moment of clarity that pushed [him] through a

crack in the universe and allowed [him] to begin again.”¹ Auster’s fiction endlessly perpetuates and reiterates this moment. Isabel’s loss of her voice in *In the Country of Last Things* is a disaster, akin to (leading to, even coinciding with) her death, but this loss is what allows Anna to start writing.

The means of reconstruction are infallibly narration and language. For Auster, language brings about adhesion. Indeed, in Auster’s works, it is nearly impossible to find fragmentation at the level of language. Unlike his postmodernist contemporaries (John Barth or William Gass, for instance) who tend to challenge syntactical rules, subvert the rules of printing, and indulge in the materiality of language by subjecting it to fragmentation, Auster uses language to reconstruct, to repair, to re-stitch together fragments resulting from disaster. The focus of his poetics, and his sensibility to what *sounds* right, has shifted away from the materiality of the language, and moved into the realm of the narration. Indeed, language tells a story, a story that is the glue binding together what disaster breaks apart and leaves behind. While Blanchot subjects his text to fragmentation – *L’Écriture du désastre* being conceived as fragments, rather than as a cohesive text – in order to talk about disaster (if only to convey the idea that it is impossible to talk about disaster), Auster’s narratives present if not a unity, a certain mended structural continuity. Because his writing mends what is fragmented, through storytelling and language, Auster would appear closer to the modernist project (the essence of which, taken from Susan Stanford Friedman’s concise formulation in her work on H.D., has been given in the introduction of this study.²) Yet, what sets Auster’s writing apart is

1 *Winter Journal*, p. 220.

2 “The search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language, the Word or Logos of the twentieth century.” (Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. p. 97.)

that, first, the disasters through which and in spite of which he writes, strike the personal sphere, rather than the historical, and secondly, that the finality of his work is not the production of an absolute meaning or coherent picture of the world. Indeed, there is no finality in the work of Auster other than the pleasure of the story, of its sound, the experience of its continuity.

This continuity is particularly felt through Auster's musical writing. Auster considers the act of writing as a musical endeavor – the act of tuning oneself to an internal “buzz” or “rhythm”, and letting it flow out through the sound of the pen scratching on the page, or the clickety-clack of the typewriter. But what serves as the initial impulse, and then the ongoing rhythmic pulse of his writing is the disaster. The disaster defines the very musicality of Auster's novels, a musical presence that is not to be heard in sound clusters or repetitions of words and sentences, but instead through the larger structure of the narration and perhaps even through his entire body of work. Auster's “music of the disaster” is characterized by modulations of pace, by brutal shifts in themes and direction, by the tightly timed orchestration of chance and coincidence. The recurrence of Couperin's piece “The Mysterious Barricades” in *The Music of Chance*, in *Moon Palace*, as well as in the title of the fictitious book that Rashid reads in *Smoke* – a piece with a mesmerizing, almost monophonic line, “pushing on toward a resolution that never came” could help us imagine what this internal music is that Auster strives to convey in his writing.

The presence of both musicality and narrative fluidity in his texts make them pleasurable to read, a pleasure heightened by the elaborate play with readers' expectations. One might be tempted to categorize Auster's novels as what Barthes calls “*textes de plaisir*”¹, but as we have seen in this study, they also tend to present ambiguities,

1 “Texte de plaisir: celui qui contente, emplit, donne de l'euphorie ; celui qui vient de la culture, ne rompt

paradoxes, contradictions, making the task of reading a challenging – if not a troubling – one. These inconsistencies then seem to hint at “*textes de jouissance*.¹” Auster’s writings, we might say, fall somewhere between “*textes de plaisir*” and “*textes de jouissance*.” The conflict between Auster’s texts as both “*textes de plaisir*” and “*textes de jouissance*” also seems to be reflected in the reception of Auster’s works among his readership: while some readers find critical and academic value in his work, others reject it for being too easy, for falling under the category of “mainstream” or “best-selling” work.

If Auster engages and captivates his readers through his fluid storytelling, he does so also in a more direct way. In the manner of a magician who comments on his act as he performs it, Auster through his homodiegetic narrators comments on his own craft. For instance, in *Moon Palace*, the narrator M.S. Fogg tells the reader from the very first page how his story is structured: “That was the first part. From then on, strange things happened to me. [...] I moved into an apartment on West 112th Street. That was where I lived for the next three years, right up to the moment when I finally hit bottom.”² Similarly, the narrator of *Leviathan*, Peter Sachs, comments on the unfolding of the story he is in the process of telling: “That was the event that started the whole miserable story. Maria opened the book, and out flew the devil, out flew a scourge of violence, mayhem, and death.”³ In such instances, Auster’s own voice becomes apparent behind the voice of his narrator. The artifice of the novel is revealed for a short while. When highlighting the presence of metafiction in Auster’s work, most critics tend to focus on his staging the scene or process of writing; but here is an author, who, in describing his storytelling *modus operandi* is

pas avec elle, est lié à une pratique confortable de la lecture.” (Barthes, Roland. *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris: Seuil, 1973. pp. 22-23).

1 “Texte de jouissance : celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu’à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage.” (*Le plaisir du texte*, p. 23)

2 *Moon Palace*, p. 1.

3 *Leviathan*, p. 73.

acknowledging the reader, like a magician does his audience. Auster's metafictional concerns equally address the question of storytelling and writing, as they document the process of story-listening and reading. What disaster engenders must be woven into a story: a story that exists for the pleasure of reading.

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