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# Apophenia: The Postmodern Trap in Auster's Fictions

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## Introduction

In 1995, in his by now well-known anthology on Paul Auster entitled *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, Dennis Barone lamented the lack of critical materials available on the New York author. Barone in the same introductory chapter also predicted that “just as he burst on the world scene in the late 1980s Auster scholarship will witness an exponential growth in the late 1990s” (1). Looking backwards now, we cannot dismiss it as just a mere hypothesis, but rather as a statement that has proven its validity during time.

Since the publication of *City of Glass* (1985), the first installment that is comprised in *The New York Trilogy*, many critics, in fact, have left their contributions both on Auster’s fictional and autobiographical production. In dealing with all the themes touched by these following works, some of them went so far and deep in the discussion to highlight new and sometimes very innovative perspectives.

Among these perspectives we find investigations that concern primarily the affinity some of Auster’s novels share with the detective genre, and the considerations that encourage some critics to include them in the so called category of anti-detective fictions. We can find also important articles about those topics that recur more often than others such as: the solitude and isolation of the characters, that sometimes results in an extreme form of ascetism; the psychological analysis of the protagonist’s shifting personality which is directly linked with the theme of duplicity; the centrality of space and the always present dichotomy between urban scenery and wilderness; and the insistence on metafictional aspects and intertextuality. Important as well is the political dimension, which is often relegated in the background, even though it plays a central role in many novels. Nevertheless one of the themes that has been regarded with much more attention in respect with the others is the theme of chance, which many novels share as a common denominator. Auster himself has repeatedly maintained in past and recent interviews and autobiographical materials the great importance this phenomenon plays not only in his life, but also in his writing. In his novels he pays particular attention to the condition of the human being, whose frailty and weakness are always at the center of his stories. Auster’s characters are destabilized by the uncertain and the unpredictable, which are perfectly expressed by the power of contingency, the uncanny regularity of coincidences and the unfolding of random events. This viewpoint is made manifest by the protagonist of *In the Country of Last Things*, Anna Blume, who

says: "Our lives are no more than the sum of manifold contingencies, and no matter how diverse they might be in their details, they all share an essential randomness in their design: this then that, and because of that, this" (143 - 144). Marco Stanley Fogg reiterates this same idea in a passage of *Moon Palace*: "our lives are determined by manifold contingencies and everyday we struggle against these shocks and accidents in order to keep our balance"(78). The same assessment is heard again in *The Locked Room*, where it is a thought made by the anonymous narrator: "each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose"(219).

Chance therefore, as we can see by these excerpts, is one of the pivotal forces that determines, shapes, affects and conditions many of Auster's protagonists and their stories. But what is important to point out here is the fact that this notion does not remain a single and distinctive trait only in fictional worlds. Chance is first of all a predominant feature in Auster's everyday life as well as in every individual's daily experience. Hence my objective with this paper is to point out the importance that this concept, together with other ones to whom it is related (randomness, chaos, etc), have in influencing not only characters', but sometimes even ours fundamental choices and decisions.

The first introductory chapter aims essentially at tracing down a brief history of the notion of chance from the ancient times to postmodernity and secondly at attesting, with references to interviews and autobiographical works, the predominance of this theme in Paul Auster's life. This, I hope, will provide useful tools for the second and central part of my work, where I will analyze the relation that does exist between the four novels that constitute the corpus of the present study.

The main part of this paper, that comprises the two central chapter (II and III), revolves around the idea of the existential quest, and in particular around the idea that the life of the protagonists of these novels is assumed to be a draining journey in search for stability and purpose.

After a brief introductory paragraph, in which Auster's world is presented as essentially chaotic, the second chapter examines characters' attempt to relate with that chaos and their endeavors to retrace a glimmer of order in it.

In chapter III I will concentrate upon the protagonists' second quest, which proceeds in parallel with the first one, but whose objective is finding meanings and truths for their aimless life.

During my analysis I will also introduce the cognitive phenomenon of apophenia which, in my opinion, plays a key role in guiding the human mind into a precise direction.

The conclusion to this paper finally summarizes the main points of these investigations, illustrating, through a work of comparison, their substantial similarities. I will contest in fact that each of the novels follows a general scheme, a common pattern that is repeated with a certain regularity.

## **Chapter I: The mechanics of postmodern reality**

### **Chance and necessity**

What is chance and how does it relate with literary works? Chance is, in fact, an ambiguous and all-encompassing term, which is employed in different disciplines from philosophy to theology and in many scientific theories of the twentieth century. What is more, it is widely used in everyday life. We can find it in a lot of sentences conveying totally different and sometimes even contrasting meanings. Chance is the possibility that something will happen or is likely to happen in the future; it can also describe an event that is not planned and intended, an event that has no cause nor finality; it may even involve abstract concepts such as fate, destiny or luck, including a nuance of risk and opportunity; and finally it is used as a synonym for words like randomness, contingency and accident. In addition to all these possible definitions, it could be useful in order to explain this phenomenon to include its very opposite, that is the idea of necessity. If we look in fact, at what happens in the world we live in, we see that nature and human affairs in general seem to be regulated mainly by two forces. On the one hand there is necessity, which includes events that are logically and physically necessary and on the other hand there is chance, which includes events that are logically and physically possible. Both are key concepts of two very distinct systems and philosophical stances. First, we have deterministic systems, which are governed by necessity and causation (causal determinism). In such systems every single event has been already planned and determined. This means, in other words, that predictions about the future are practically possible. Secondly, we have indeterministic systems, which are related to chance. Here events do not obey to the law of causality, therefore according to the logic governing these systems, future is not a strict and single chain of causes and effects that follow in interrelated succession one after the other, but something that is unpredictable and uncertain.

It is not always so easy to trace a distinction between these two only apparently different ideas, because one may complicate things a little introducing either an outer force, namely an agent (it could be God(s), Fortuna or Karma) who is put in charge of all the decisions, or an inner force, counting in this case on the notion of human determinacy and libertarianism.

In the first case according to the arbitrary power in charge of all the decisions, we can have theological determinism (if the agent is an omniscient monotheistic God or a plurality of Gods), Fatalism (if the agent is Fate or destiny) or other forms of determinism that have in common a mystical background.

In the latter case, human beings, characterized by freedom of will, are the determining forces that shape the world with their actions and choices, bearing the moral responsibility of the consequences of their decisions. Commonly speaking, men are the creators of their future<sup>1</sup>.

In the past the contention between these two theories was easily solved. Indeterministic systems, in which events simply happen and are not naturally caused, had the collateral effect of causing many epistemological problems. The main issues revolved around the notion of chance, which was considered as an unintelligible and obscure concept that fully conveyed the limits of the human mind and threatened in this way the possibility of absolute knowledge. Many philosophers and men of science therefore radically condemned chance and all its theoretical implications, arguing that the only possible view of the world was that of a universe which responded only to the laws of nature and causality. In spite of all these critiques, chance has been restored and officially admitted as an essential component of the mechanisms of the world. An important role in this restoration was played by science and most of all by some scientific theories of the first half of the twentieth century. Recently other attempts have been made in order to find a compromise between indeterminism and determinism, that is between chance and necessity, but these two philosophical positions are still considered far from a general and valid agreement.

### **A brief history of chance**

Discourses on determinism date back to ancient Greece. One of its first advocates is Democritus who, under the influence of the school of the atomists, asserts that everything can be explained by natural laws, in the words of his master and predecessor

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<sup>1</sup> Though incompatible with strict determinism that implies a preordered future, the idea of free will is not excluded by indeterministic theories. Human freedom to act and the randomness of events might be related in a system where future always offers manifold solutions and possibilities.

Leucippus, that “Nothing occurs at random but everything for a reason and necessity” (*Guthrie* 415). According to the Greek mathematician there are two kinds of knowing, one through the senses (subjective and not precise) the other due to an inductive reasoning (much more objective and reliable). This approach, later known as the scientific method, will become one of the founding pillars of the modern sciences.

The atomists’ position is fiercely criticized by Aristotle, who refers to their theory as too simplistic. In the *Physics*, he states that the force that causes an event can be external (efficient cause) or internal (final cause). But these two principles are considered insufficient to explain the totalities of the events, and in particular those events who have not a proper cause or whose causes are obscure to the human understanding. Aristotle in referring to these uncaused accidents introduces the term *tyche*, the Greek word for chance and fortune. Epicurus as well supports this same thesis arguing that it is impossible to know the real cause of the atoms because they swerve unpredictably by spontaneous chances. This theory will be later on confirmed and developed by the Latin philosopher Lucretius who, in his *De Rerum Natura*, names this spontaneous deviation of the atoms *clinamen*.

The Aristotelian and Epicurean consideration of the incompatibility between chance and reason leads centuries of philosophers to deny the existence of the former concept. This fact paves the way for necessitarianism and mechanical deterministic ideas that thrive during the Middle Ages thanks to Descartes’ thought, and finally triumph in conjunction with the advent of the Age of Enlightenment. The progress and the innovations that are brought forward in many different fields engender a wave of supreme hope, confidence and positivism in the human being. Great thinkers, such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz and Isaac Newton, elevate the possibilities and capacities for the human intellect *ad infinitum*. With Newton’s mathematical theory of motion one in fact can predict the motion of things, such as objects or planets, given the knowledge of few data, that are the state of a physical system (which means its position and velocity at a certain time) and the forces acting on that very system. If we know these data we can determine the state of the system at any other future time. Leibnitz goes even further imagining a godlike scientist, who is empowered with a concrete knowledge of the events of all times as he states clearly in this passage:

Everything proceeds mathematically [...] if someone could have a sufficient insight into the inner parts of things and in addition had a remembrance and intelligence

enough to consider all the circumstances and take them into account he would be a prophet and see the future in the present as in a mirror. (qtd. in *Vaidam 2*)

Pierre Simon Laplace develops this vision in his *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (1814) where he offers a perfect image of this view of the world. What will be later named Laplace's Demon is a personification of determinism and is described as:

An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes. (qtd. in *Vaidam 1*)

The roots of the deterministic thinking start to be eroded when scientists focus their attention on the analysis of the games of chance, such as the tossing of a coin or the throwing of a dice. In both cases these events display a certain tendency that goes against the law of causality. The outcome in fact, that cannot be predicted a priori, can be considered the mere product of randomness and therefore its future state is never certain, but only probable. Thus, the only thing one is sure of is the probability of a given result to come out.

David Ruelle in his *Chance and Chaos* explains how this concept works:

There are nine chances out of ten that it will rain this afternoon, and therefore I will take my umbrella. This kind of argument involving probability is of constant use when we make decisions. The probability that it will rain is estimated to be 9/10, or 90 percent, or .9. Generally speaking, probabilities are counted from zero to one hundred percent or, in more mathematical terms, from 0 to 1. The probability 0 (zero percent) corresponds to impossibility and the probability 1 (one hundred percent) to certainty. If the probability of an event is neither 0 nor 1, then this event is uncertain, but our uncertainty about it is not complete. (14)

For those who find chance inconceivable this uncertainty is symptomatic of the ignorance of the human mind, literally the fact that we lack some important data or information. On the opposite those who do account chance as a fundamental subject in some scientific disciplines this uncertainty is a major breakthrough.

Chance finally enters physics when two scientists, the Austrian Ludwig Boltzmann and the American Willard Gibbs, begin their studies on the dynamics of the atomic particles

of gases. In particular, the former physicist assumes that the movement of these particles is not determined, but absolutely random. In this picture of disorder, or technically speaking of molecular chaos, the collisions are due to chance.

This idea, that reintroduces the validity of absolute chance and therefore of indeterminism in physics, is supported and developed by an American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. In his essay *the Doctrine of Necessity Examined* he argues that the universe is profoundly irregular and this irregularity can only be attributed to chance. Peirce made it clear in this passage: "I must acknowledge there is an approximate regularity, and that every event is influenced by it. But the diversification, specialness and irregularity of things I suppose is chance" (12). This theory that denies necessity and its implications is named by Peirce *tychism* and can be considered to all intents and purposes, the early philosophical anticipation for the major scientific revolutions that occur in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is in fact at this time that a valid alternative to absolute determinism, that has been considered a widely recognized truth for years, is finally introduced. In 1927 Werner Heisenberg, in his studies and experiments on quantum theory, proves that the position ( $x$ ) and the momentum ( $t$ ) of a particle cannot be measured with absolute precision. The more accurately the position is determined, the less accurately the momentum is known and vice versa. This principle, known as the indeterminacy principle, expresses, in other words, the impossibility to predict the future behavior of subatomic particles, like the electrons, and by large the future behavior of the sensitively dependent systems those particles belong to. Heisenberg's assertion is a major breakthrough, traditionally considered one of the greatest revolutions of the twentieth century, together with Einstein's relativity.

As we have pointed out in previous passages the main paradigm that is accepted by the scientific community before the publication of this principle, is classical determinism, based on Newton's mechanics. At the core of that theory when we know the present state of a physical system, we can calculate its physical state in the future. Well, according to Heisenberg, predictions about the future are not possible, because our knowledge of the present state of a physical system is never accurate, due to an always-present sensitive dependence on initial conditions. What are supposed to be predictions are in truth mere hypotheses that rely simply on possibilities and statistics.

Even though the indeterminacy principle concerns primarily certain aspects of reality, in particular the microscopic scale, its application is not limited to that level. Many thinkers

borrow this notion in order to explain macroscopic phenomena as well. As a result of this, the whole universe begins to assume a different configuration, rather more uncertain and unstable.

What is more, the implications of this principle have major consequences on many other disciplines affecting the way we, human beings, think, interpret and understand the physical world as I am going to make clear in the next section.

### **Chance in postmodernism**

In dealing with the literary production of a writer it is important to consider in which period his works are produced, because his stylistic choices, his themes and his view of the world are always influenced by the cultural background of the time. In the case of Paul Auster for instance, the most important part of his writing production is condensed mainly during the last decades of the twentieth century and adhered, at least according to many critics (Brown, Martin, Shiloh), to the conventions of the postmodernism.

This term, with the words of Jean-Francois Lyotard, “designates the state of our (western) culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts” (Introduction XXIII). In the same passage, taken from his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the French philosopher conceives postmodern “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (XXIV). Metanarratives, according to Lyotard, are those grand theories that have asserted over time transcendent and universal truth (Progress, Enlightenment, Marxism) and that now, in our contemporary post WWII society have failed significantly for their inability to conform to the reality. Lyotard goes even further in his analysis of this condition investigating the causes of this failure, and identifying the major one in the development of science.

Together with Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in fact, other important developments in the scientific field occur during the first half of the twentieth century; among them, just to give a few examples, the theory of chaos by Lorentz, the concept of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics, the question of irreversible systems and the unpredictable distortions and fluctuations of space and time. The affirmation of all these new theories has an enormous impact not only on the scientific discourse but, as we have pointed out in the final part of the previous section, also on many different disciplines and notably in our everyday life.

Postmodernists question the Newtonian classical determinism and the Cartesian rationalism, which play a crucial role first in positivistic and later in modernist thinking, advocating the incompatibility of these methods with the new reality that gradually has been discovered. Scientists for the first time paid attention to problems that have always eluded a scientific interpretation, such as vagueness and ambiguities. Inexplicable phenomena are analyzed and new formulations emerge. Complexity and chaos become crucial categories in postmodern discourse, affecting life and society in general. The instability of social and economics interactions, the great range of brain functions and neural networks, the variability of weather in meteorological studies, and finally the intricacy of biological and genetic processes are just some examples of nonlinear dynamic systems that characterize our contemporary world. In such a context the grand theories that have contemplated the harmony and the stability of the world become “fabular” (Martin 38), eroded by relativism and pluralism.

The great complexity of the universe sets new limits to human investigation and therefore to the human mind, which definitively ceases to be the powerful instrument it has been during the nineteenth century. The possibility of a holistic comprehension of the mechanisms that regulate the world is eventually abandoned, together with the denial of an absolute truth.

This new condition may be summarized in a formula that is used by Ilya Prigogine as the title for his most famous essay: *The End of Certainties*. The Belgian physical chemist claimed that in conjunction with the advent of postmodernism “we have come to a new formulation of the laws of nature one that is no longer built on certitudes as is the case of deterministic laws but rather on possibilities” (29).

In other words, events do not follow a linearity and predictability dictated by a strict deterministic framework, from cause to consequence, but a succession that is totally unpredictable. From a single starting event we can have a plurality of events that can even contradict one another. The future is no longer determined by the present and the symmetry between past and future is eventually broken.

In the attempt to pinpoint the central and constitutive tendencies of postmodernism, Ihab Hassan coined the term “indetermanence” (3) which is the combination of two words: indeterminacy and immanence. According to the Arab American literary theorist indeterminacy is an immanent and unavoidable feature of our everyday life and perfectly represents the essence of a complex, chaotic and uncertain reality, because of

its close relations with other phenomena. Under this term in fact, Hassan includes many concepts such as “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation” (7).

With the failure of determinism and the acceptance of indeterminacy as the common denominator of our reality, chance and contingency are finally accepted as fundamental components of the human existence becoming, later on, essential categories of the postmodern discourse. Their centrality is asserted by many thinkers, but among them the strongest supporter of this thesis is probably the French biologist Jacques Monod. In 1971 he writes a book entitled *Chance and Necessity*, where he investigates the workings of chance within life-generating processes. The organism is, according to Monod, the ultimate expression of the genetic message that conveys its information through the repetition of a precise sequence of proteins. This sequence is not always replicated faithfully and it may present some errors. These errors are called, technically speaking, mutations. Monod identifies three types of mutations: substitution, deletion, and inversion. These errors, affecting irremediably the structure of the message, are the core elements for the evolution of the organisms. Nonetheless what is important to point out here is the real nature of these genetic mutations of the DNA, and this is precisely what Monod does in this passage:

We call these events accidental; we say that they are random occurrences. And since they are the only possible source of modifications in the genetic text, itself the sole repository of the organism's hereditary structures, it necessarily follows that chance alone is at the source of every innovation, and of all creation in the biosphere. Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution: this central concept of modern biology is no longer one among many other possible or even conceivable hypotheses. It is today the sole conceivable hypothesis, the only one that squares with observed and tested fact. And nothing warrants the supposition - or the hope - that on this score our position is ever likely to be revised. There is no scientific concept, in any of the sciences, more destructive of anthropocentrism than this one. (112 - 113)

The important contributions of Monod reasserted the centrality of chance and contingency in our life inserting the laws of casualty not only at the very basis of the idea of evolution, but also as ultimately associated with the origin of life.

The condition of the postmodern being gradually becomes influenced and shaped by chance that manifests itself with coincidental occurrences, unpredictable accidents, and

random happenings. According to Brendan Martin contingency not only changes the way of conceiving reality, it also “becomes one of the little narratives to which Lyotard refers. As the contemporary world is devoid of all certainties, the absolute coincidence that both Auster and Monod illustrate, can affect any individual, irrespective of time period, location and circumstance” (41).

### **Paul Auster and the centrality of chance**

In an interview released in 2003 for the *Paris Review*, Paul Auster makes perfectly clear his commitment as a writer and his role in relation with truth. He asserts that although novelists, in writing fictions, construct their stories around lies, their attempt remains always the same, that of telling the truth about the world. In order to pursue this aim all a writer should do, according to Auster is to “present things as they really happen not as they’re supposed to happen or as we’d like them to happen” (*Conversations* 138). He does not consider this simply a method, but it becomes to him a total “act of faith”, as if it were almost tinged with a religious nuance. In another interview, he presents the same idea when he states that gathering the bare events of everyday life and writing about them as they truly are, is a moral obligation for a novelist. The adherence to what he defines the mechanics of reality is therefore Auster’s main and only purpose once he launches himself into a new story.

Despite Auster’s widely acceptance of this principle, many literary critics have accused him of including a lot of artificial and almost unreal situations in his novels. One of these pieces of critique comes from an article published in *The New Yorker* in 2009. The author, James Wood, in discussing Paul Auster’s (then) latest novel *Invisible*, moves on providing a general overview of his previous works. In Wood’s opinion Auster’s “larger narrative games are antirealist or surrealist” (*Shallow Graves*) because his narration does not respect the conventions of literary realism. Characters are not credible, and that is because of their language, which is not natural but too constructed, embellished with cinematic speak, bogus dialogue and an intense use of cliché, and because of the absurd circumstances that make up their life and their stories. Everything in Auster’s novels, at least for what is expressed in this article, sounds artificial and leaves the reader with many doubts on the veracity of the plot. Wood ends the review stating that Auster’s novels do not convey that emotional credibility commonly achieved with a

faithful representation of reality; “what Auster often gets instead [...] is fake realism” (*Shallow Graves*).

The critique Wood makes of Auster’s fictions is partially true. The majority of his novels do display a certain kind of obsession for strange and eerie events. The ordinary and normal life of the protagonists is definitely destabilized and sometimes even compromised by the presence of the unexpected and the unpredictable. It is also true that the stories Auster conceives are often hard to believe and for this reason inevitably subjected to denigrations from those critics who fiercely defend the conventions of literary realism. Even ordinary readers struggle to make sense of these tales and most of the times they cannot help but feeling that everything, from the characters to the plot itself, has been forged by a misleading mind, completely detached from what we experience as true.

But if everything may appear implausible it does not mean that it has to be considered unreal. For the same reason, if the circumstances that make up one story seem surreal it does not mean that they have to be rejected as artificial. Those who draw such a conclusion are limiting their analysis only to a superficial reading, and that is precisely where Wood is wrong. The world we inhabit is ultimately filled with strange and absurd events, that most of the time elude a reasonable and sensible explanation. Rejecting this weirdness just because it goes against those old realistic conventions would mean to reject a fundamental part of our reality. On the contrary, what a writer should do is to accept a priori the absurd and the inexplicable nature of human life and then include that true absurdity and inexplicability in his fictions. In different terms, Auster states the same idea in one of his interviews: “truth is stranger than fiction. What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in” (*Hunger* 278).

The fact that the absurd in our life is a constant that we need to take into account becomes clear when we read a few pages of *True Tales of American Life*. This is a collection of stories that were sent to Auster, when he started to collaborate as a regular contributor to the National Public Radio in 1999. Listeners had the possibility to write about anything they wanted. The only two conditions that they had to follow were that the pieces had to be short and most of all they had to be true. In doing this project, what interested Auster most “were stories that defied our expectations about the world, anecdotes that revealed the mysterious and unknowable forces at work in our lives, in

our family histories, in our minds and bodies, in our souls. In other words, true stories that sounded like fiction" (*I Thought My Father Was God: And Other True Tales XV*). Among the many contributions that came in, the most outlandish anecdotes were chosen to form the book. Here it is the first entry entitled *The Chicken*:

As I was walking down Stanton Street early one Sunday morning, I saw a chicken a few yards ahead of me. I was walking faster than the chicken, so I gradually caught up. By the time we approached Eighteenth Avenue, I was close behind. The chicken turned south on Eighteenth. At the fourth house along, it turned in at the walk, hopped up the front steps, and rapped sharply on the metal storm door with its beak. After a moment, the door opened and the chicken went in. (3)

Of course it is possible to reject this story as artificial and label his author, Linda Elegant, as a liar, but there would be no reason to deceive everyone in Auster's opinion. The point he is trying to make is totally different. He wants to highlight the fact that his vision of the reality is shared by many people throughout their quasi-fabulous accounts. These stories are included here because they validate his initial hypothesis that the world we live in is ultimately strange.

Auster's interest for extraordinary but truthful stories is also evident in his novels. Some practical examples are gathered in one of his first books, entitled *The Locked Room*. The unnamed narrator, found in the act of writing a biography about his old friend Fanshawe, who has recently disappeared, goes through several samples of absolutely extraordinary lives, led by famous people from the past. One of these accounts, in my opinion, can be used as an exemplary model and it is that of Lorenzo Da Ponte (253). Born in Ceneda near Venice in 1749, he was the son of a Jewish leather merchant. After the death of his mother he was baptized and later on he took minor orders and became professor of literature. Although he was a priest he led a very dissolute life and in one of his many love affairs he fathered a child. The abduction of a respectable Venetian woman cost him the banishment from the city. He had to move therefore first to Gorizia and then to Dresden, where he lived as a librettist. He was introduced to Antonio Salieri and thanks to this acquaintance he began to collaborate with Mozart in Vienna. He spent almost ten years in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until his position became less stable after the death of the emperor. He moved to Trieste, where he fell in love with an English woman named Nancy Grahl. The two of them later on lived in Paris and London and finally emigrated to America. He settled in New York where he worked for a

period as a shopkeeper. He became the first Italian professor at Columbia and one of the first Italian to be buried in the New World.

This little but authentic anecdote – Lorenzo Da Ponte really existed - is the one that better points out the absurd circumstances, which usually compose one's life. Its singularity is the most important and defining trait. No matter how many facts or details we are provided, human existence ultimately retains its characteristics of inexplicability and absurdity. "Every life is inexplicable [...] the essential thing resists telling" (248). The man that was known to be Mozart's librettist happened to become the first Italian professor at Columbia. Two events that seem to be incompatible with each other are actually correlated. Every event hides a bifurcation: it involves countless possibilities, all of them equally feasible. Our lives burst apart so many times that it is hard to tell what will happen next.

Lives seem to veer abruptly from one thing to another, to jostle and bump, to squirm. A person heads in one direction, turns sharply in mid-course, stalls, drifts, starts up again. Nothing is ever known, and inevitably we come to a place quite different from the one we set out for. (253)

As far as these ultimate inexplicable and absurd events are concerned in the course of our life they may also return, bringing with themselves an aura of mystery and supernatural as if the linearity of our existence were disrupted in some way. The same occurrence may reappear over and over again and the same idea that recurs first in a dream or as a mental image may materialize itself under our eyes. This is what is called a coincidence. Auster has always displayed a certain fascination for the recurrence of this phenomenon, so much so that the majority of his works revolves around this very theme. In regards to its nature, Auster is a firm believer in coincidence as the purest expression of blind chance at work. In the interview released for Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory Auster says: "Chance is part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives" (*Hunger* 277). What Auster means by this phenomenon is explained later on in the same interview:

When I talk about coincidence [...] 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 power of contingency. (*Hunger* 278)

With this term we may refer to either small things or large things. We may include random encounters, unexpected occurrences and surprising repetitions of signs, numbers, names and in some cases even the repetition of the same characters. "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" (*Hunger* 279) or again thinking of a long-lost friend and subsequently run into him on the street, these are examples of coincidences and they seem to happen to Auster all the time.

Even if coincidences occur with almost impressive regularity in all Auster's fictions, it is in his autobiographical materials that we can find the author's most important contributions on this topic. Notoriously *The Red Notebook: True Stories* is considered the main reference for this theme. Divided in four books, it includes *The Red Notebook* (1995), *Why Write?* (1996), *Accident Report* (1999) and *It Don't Mean a Thing* (2000). In this collection Auster gathers tales that have as protagonist either Auster himself or one of his friends and acquaintances. They all focus their attention on barely credible events, that despite of coming through second and sometimes even third hand information, are all introduced by the author as authentic.

On this matter Auster expresses his belief:

Taken together, the little stories in *The Red Notebook* present a kind of position paper on how I see the world. The bare-bones truth about the unpredictability of experience. There's not a shred of the imaginary in them. There can't be. You make a pact with yourself to tell the truth and you'd rather cut off your right arm than break that promise. (*Conversations* 138)

Believed as ultimately true, these episodes therefore mimetically reflect Auster's vision of the world as affected by the forces of chance and coincidence. In analyzing these non-fiction works, Brendan Martin correctly points out that they cover a period of approximately forty years and are set in very different locations. This, according to him, highlights Auster's insistence on the fact that "chance events are not confined to any particular set of circumstances, but predominate on a global level" (44).

Another important work that deals with this theme is *The Book of Memory*, the second part of Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982). In this memoir the author tries for the

first time the device that he will implement in his subsequent publications. In his five commentaries on the nature of chance, as he calls them, he in fact, experiments with the anecdote as the perfect form of narration for this kind of topic. Hence the stories of *The Red Notebook* and those of *The Book of Memory* present the same stylistic features. They are bare bones narratives that lack unessential descriptions and information; character's names, for example, are often reduced to just their initials. The narration is basic, elements and details are provided only if strictly necessary and in those cases in which the account does not regard Auster's life, his voice sounds distant and almost impersonal.

Apart from sharing common formal devices, these accounts display certain recurring patterns. In many tales the main character, for example, is seen in the act of looking for a certain object or person only to find that very object or that very person immediately after. There is a correspondence, in other words, between the image constructed by the mind and the exterior event. In one case, R. is desperately craving for a book only to find it in the hands of a woman who is standing by the marble railing of the Central Station. Surprised by the coincidence, he approaches the woman in order to ask her more information on where to find a copy. When consulted she gives the book to R. saying that she came there only for that reason.

Almost the same thing happened to Auster when he was in London visiting some friends. Among them there was a girl, whom he had not seen for years. After having spent few days in Paris and Amsterdam he went back to London, where he realized that he could not stay any longer and he had to leave before seeing her again. One of the last days in the city he decided to visit a museum, but the great number of visitors he found there made him change his decision. He went out for lunch in a restaurant and still with the same regret for not being able to see the girl, he ran into her in the streets. "This encounter seemed perfectly natural to him, as though it were a commonplace event. He had been thinking about her only a moment before, [...] and now that she was there, suddenly standing before his eyes, he could not help feeling that he had willed her to appear" (*Invention* 154).

The conviction that someone's thoughts or desire may influence the exterior occurrences is part of what Auster means with coincidence. Chapter five of *The Red Notebook* focuses its attention on the life of a friend of the writer, a struggling painter named B. Apparently during his life he went through several unsuccessful love affairs.

After the umpteenth break, in a conversation with a friend of him, he expresses the desire to meet E. a woman that he had not seen for a long period, and also the only one whom he had ever loved.

He thought about her constantly, unable to shake the feeling that his one chance for happiness had been lost many years ago. Then, almost as if the intensity of these thoughts, had sent a signal out into the world, the phone rang one night, and there was E. on the other end of the line. (*Hunger* 336)

Another variation on the theme of coincidence is the correspondence between two seemingly unrelated events that happen simultaneously. *Why Write?* opens with the account of Auster's German friend named A., who describes the birth of her two daughters. In both cases, distanced in time three years, she was sitting on her sofa and watching by chance the same movie on the television before going to the hospital. While the first time she saw only the first half of the film, the second time she tuned in at the precise moment she had left three years before and she managed to finish watching it. Although the two events, the movie and the delivery, do not occur with a causal relationship they seem to be connected by a meaning. As far as the story is concerned, Auster chooses not to include any personal comments; his only interest is to present the fact as it is, with no further explanations. His opinion on the matter appears in chapter ten of the *Red Notebook* where he associates the drifting apart from his college friend J. with the mysterious occurrences that happened when the writer was in his company. Auster provides four instances in which he had a flat tire in his life and coincidentally on each of these occasions he was in the car with J. While he initially considered the incident just a piece of bad luck, he eventually came to the conclusion that this repetition was not totally chancy and void of significance. The four flat tires that happened in J's presence were, according to Auster "an emblem of how things had always stood between us, the sign of some impalpable curse. I don't want to exaggerate, but even now I can't quite bring myself to reject those flat tires as meaningless" (*Hunger* 350).

Another thing that strikes the reader in these stories is the fact that in the world that Auster portrays everything seems to be connected, as if a sort of harmony and equilibrium are involved. Objects do reappear many times and these repetitions strike not only the reader, but also the author himself who cannot hide his fascination. In an episode recalled by Auster in *The Red Notebook* a dime that was thrown by his ex wife

from the window of her apartment one spring morning in 1980, seemed to be vanished in the air. Another dime actually reappeared later that day nearby the stadium, where Auster and a friend were due to watch a baseball game. Auster comments what happened simply saying: “ridiculous as it might sound, I felt certain that it was the same dime I had lost in Brooklyn that morning” (*Hunger* 333)<sup>2</sup>.

These strange returns of the same thing in a different time and space do not regard only small objects, but it may include even larger ones. In a passage taken from *The Book of Memory* the same piano that was present in Auster’s wife’s house was also present in Maine, in a deserted and dusty hall the two of them were visiting. It was when she played it in fact, that she recognized that the piano had the same broken key (F above Middle C).

In the same book there is another anecdote that revolves around the same theme, and it goes under the name of first commentary on the nature of chance:

During the war M’s father had hidden out from the Nazis for several months in a Paris *chamber de bonne*. Eventually, he managed to escape, made his way to America, and began a new life. Years passed, more than twenty years. M. had been born, had grown up, and was now going off to study in Paris. Once there, he spent several difficult weeks looking for a place to live. Just when he was about to give up in despair, he found a small *chamber de bonne*. Immediately upon moving in, he wrote a letter to his father to tell him the good news. A week or so later he received a reply: your address, wrote M’s father, that is the same building I hid out during the war. He then went on to describe the details of the room. It turned out to be the same room his son had rented. (84)

As it has happened in other stories, there is no attempt on the part of the author to investigate or explain the dynamics of the event, which remains open to many interpretations. Incidents like this are almost inevitable in one’s life: when M. decides to go to Paris the probability to live in the same place his father has inhabited during the war, though a tiny one, is still a possibility that he has to consider. Nevertheless, plausible as it may seem, the concrete realization of that event sounds totally outlandish. Even if in several occasions Auster as well has expressed some doubts on the forces that are at stake in these particular circumstances, the choice of entitling this paragraph “commentary on the nature of chance” seems to draw the attention onto the topic of casualty. Auster’s mindset is indeed very different from that of those people who ground

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<sup>2</sup> Here it emerges another aspect of coincidences: the eagerness of the subject to view a peculiar event in a certain way, forcing things into an irrational scheme.

their thoughts in a predictable world of cause and effect. The world described in these lines is conceived as fundamentally arbitrary and random. This story, together with the other ones, reinforces Auster's belief in indeterminacy as the foundational principle that regulates human existence. As a consequence of the acceptance to this principle, everything may happen and nothing can be predicted with absolute certainty. To this end, coincidences, showing a natural tendency to entail mysteries and absurdity and clashing with the forces of rationality and causality, essentially represent chance in all its facets as the postmodernist element par excellence.

Auster's personal philosophy imbued in all his writings, relies on the principle that chance is the one true certainty in life. This mindset is not only attested by the autobiographical materials that we have examined so far, but it is also reiterated by his fictional works, including many novels that primarily revolve around this very topic. Broadly speaking, fictional worlds are a suitable terrain for a writer since he can shape his considerations on a subject using the alternative perspectives of the characters involved. In these stories in particular chance plays a pivotal role in the plot, being the governing principle that regulates the sequence of all the events shaping in this way the life of the characters and affecting irremediably their existences. Chance as coincidence is moreover the force that helps the plot to move forward. Those momentous events in the novel in which a character is taking a decision or choosing an alternative are in fact characterized by the presence of this disturbing element that hovers around. Encounters, incidents and episodes that change the story appear to be inspired by the forces of contingency.

Though suitable this terrain might be, it is far from being steady and safe, most of all when it welcomes chance as the central subject. Auster himself declares that: "from an aesthetic point of view, the introduction of chance elements in fiction probably creates as many problems as it solves" (*Hunger* 277). Brian Richardson seems to agree with the writer even though his position sounds more radical. He asserts that the deployment of chance in fictional works brings with itself a fundamental paradox and he declares that this paradox totally excludes the possibility of talking about chance in literature. "Its [chance] absence indicates a specious causalism that fabricates an unusual chain of appropriate causes and predictable effects; its presence, however, always reveals authorial intervention, since chance in fiction is never a chance occurrence" (Richardson 18). Steven Alford as well, in the last part of his essay *Chance in Contemporary Narrative:*

*The Example of Paul Auster*, returns on this issue though his stance is quite different. He agrees with Richardson on the initial hypothesis of the paradox: since “narratives don’t transpire in a single temporal sequence, but occur simultaneously in two temporal ways, the readerly present, and the narrative past unfolding in the present as the narrator putatively tells the story” (qtd. in Bloom 128) chance events undergo two different and seemingly contrasting interpretations. From the point of view of the reader and the characters they are events that “just happen”, something that is experienced in the precise moment of reading it, totally undetermined and uncaused. On the contrary, from the standpoint of the narrator and the author they are not chancy at all. Conceived by an intentional and authorial mind, they result predetermined and for this reason inserted with other events in a deterministic framework. Nonetheless Alford in the conclusion of his essay claims that these two seemingly contrasting interpretation of chance elements are just two different ways of looking at the fictional work in its entirety. “These views are not opposed, but rather result from privileging one of two differing temporal stances” (qtd. In Bloom 131).

Acknowledging this paradox, I choose to develop my analysis privileging one of these two temporal structures of narrative, and precisely that of the readerly present. I will focus my attention on the point of view of the character, that just like the reader, living the story forward, experiences the events as uncaused and undetermined moments ruled by the forces of contingency and chance. My objective will be that of comparing their different reactions, opinions and behaviors when facing this totally encompassing phenomenon. Having dealt with the non-fiction materials in this section, I now turn my attention to Auster’s novels. The ones that I decided to include in this discourse are the ones that I deem most appropriate to my subject matter: *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990), and *Leviathan* (1992). But before entering into the analysis of every single character, I wish to devote the first section of the following chapter to examine how their mind operates when confronting extraordinary and inexplicable chance events such as coincidences. This will help me to introduce the concept of apophenia, which is fundamental for my further considerations.

## Chapter II: order in chaos

### Seriality and synchronicity

I concluded the introductory chapter making a clear and important assessment on the nature of chance in fiction. I claimed, quoting Steven Alford, that it is only by sharing the same perspective of the characters that we perceive a certain randomness in the unfolding of the story. Characters are the ones that, living the story following a linear chronology, experience the events in their life as isolated and independent entities, totally uncaused and undetermined. On the other hand we cannot say that an event is chancy if we look at it with the eyes of the author and the narrator<sup>3</sup>. In telling the story in fact, they confront events that are not happening in the present time, but that have already occurred. From their vantage position their knowledge of the facts is different. They know which role plays every single event, what are its causes and what kind of consequences it brings forth. Hence what it has been perceived as an intentional choice made by a character, it is from a different perspective, an action that has already taken place and that has already had its own results. Looking retrospectively, events follow a strict sequence, a precise scheme that is formerly established by the author. They become one of those significant elements that necessarily contribute to the unfolding of the story. "We exist in the seemingly random present, yet our lived present only become significant as it is linked to past events through the agency of memory. Lived experience is indeed meaningless; it gains its meaning only through retrospection" (qtd. in Bloom 129). As Alford correctly points out in this passage, an event becomes significant when it is inscribed in a deterministic chain of cause and effect. Lived experience, as it is perceived by the characters, is made up by accidents that either have no meaning, or the access to this meaning has been denied. Nonetheless once they stumble across an event they struggle to make sense of it. In facing their sensory world they activate a filter and scan the events looking for possible connections or recurrences. They sieve through reality paying particular attention to coincidences. Characters, attracted by these wrinkles in the space-time continuum, try to interpret them searching for possible meanings.

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<sup>3</sup> I am here referring to the narrator that relates the events that have already happened. Looking in this perspective narrators, omniscient or not, shares the same ideological position of the author.

This approach towards reality is not totally outlandish since many theories throughout the twentieth century have based their fundamental principles on it. The first of these pioneer assessments was proposed by Paul Kammerer, one of the most controversial personalities of all time. He was an Austrian biologist who became famous not only for his work on Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics in animals, but also for his weird habits that included sitting for hours on benches in various public parks and taking notes on the aspects, the age, the sex of the passers-by<sup>4</sup>. These ‘experiments’, together with many other strange anecdotes that occurred to him or to his acquaintances, were collected in a book that was published in 1919 and that was entitled *Das Gesetz der Serie*<sup>5</sup>. Here it is one of these samples:

On July 28, 1915, I experienced the following progressive series: (a) my wife was reading about "Mrs Rohan", a character in the novel Michael by Hermann Bang; in the tramway she saw a man who looked like her friend, Prince Josef Rohan; in the evening Prince Rohan dropped in on us. (b) In the tram she overheard somebody asking the pseudo-Rohan whether he knew the village of Weissenbach at Lake Attersee, and whether it would be a pleasant place for a holiday. When she got out of the tram, she went to the delicatessen shop on the Naschmarkt, where the attendant asked her whether she happened to know Weissenbach on Lake Attersee - he had to make a delivery by mail and did not know the correct postal address. (Koestler 85)

As Kammerer makes clear in this passage, coincidences in his opinion tend to unfold in progressive series. All these recurrences do not follow a principle of causality, but they appear to be regulated by a mysterious force that ultimately aspires to a certain order and unity. Coincidences therefore are conceived as “manifestations of a universal principle in nature” (Koestler 85). The more a number, or a name, or a situation reappears in our space-time continuum, the more significance and importance it acquires. The human mind plays a key role in this process, because it is the instrument that notices the similar and sometimes even identical configurations and organizes data in different groups. With the correct interpretation of these clusters, according to

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<sup>4</sup> Curiously Marco Stanley Fogg, the protagonist of *Moon Palace*, during his down and out experience in Central Park, shows Kammerer’s same interests for people. He spends a great deal of his time watching them and writing down in his notebook all his observations, concerning their behaviors and their appearances (61).

<sup>5</sup> The title of this book would be “The Law of Seriality” in English. Since no translation has ever been done, all the quotations that regard this work are taken from the book written by Arthur Koestler entitled “The Roots of Coincidences”.

Kammerer, the human being can reach an ultimate understanding of the world. Seriality, in fact, is “the umbilical cord that connects thought, feeling, science and art with the womb of the universe which gave birth to them” (Koestler 87).

During the 1950s another innovative theory brought new considerations on the already discussed aspect of coincidences. The new idea came from a Swiss psychologist named Carl Gustav Jung, who published an essay entitled *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Always fascinated with parapsychology and spiritualism since his early years as a student of medicine, Jung shared Kammerer’s same premises and believed in the existence of an acausal principle that regulated our universe. His attention however, was not focused on those spontaneous clusters of serial happenings that defined the former’s theory, but rather on the simultaneous occurrence of two events. According to the well-known psychologist, those events were not related by a causal principle but they were connected through a meaning. Here it is an anecdote taken from his essay:

A young woman I was treating had, at a certain moment, a dream in which she was given a golden scarab. While she was telling me this dream I sat with my back to the closed window. Suddenly I heard a noise behind me, like a gentle tapping. I turned around and I saw a flying insect knocking against the windowpane from the outside. I opened the window and caught the creature in the air as it flew in. It was the nearest analogy to a golden scarab that one finds in our latitudes, a scarabaeid beetle, the common rose-chafer (*cetonia aurata*), which contrary to its usual habits had evidently felt an urge to get into a dark room at this particular moment. (22)

This is an example of a “simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events” (25) that Jung defined, coining a new term, synchronicity. The correspondence, as it is told, exists and it is between a mental image or an idea that comes from the unconscious and an objective external event<sup>6</sup>. Hence the mental image of the scarab that the woman had in mind coincides almost perfectly with its simultaneous apparition in the room. These happenings are meaningful coincidences for Jung, and “they are so improbable that we must assume them to be based on some kind of principle, or on some property of the empirical world” (115). The meaning therefore

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<sup>6</sup> As Jung asserted in this passage: “Synchronicity consists of two factors: a) An unconscious image comes into consciousness either directly (i.e. literally) or indirectly (symbolized or suggested) in the form of a dream, idea, or premonition. b) An objective situation coincides with this content” (31).

exists and the individual, who is attentive enough to see the correspondences between two events, can achieve a full comprehension of the secret mechanisms of our universe.

## **Apophenia**

Both seriality and synchronicity present some common features. There is always an observer who first of all perceives a recurring pattern in the world, and only then he claims that this pattern is real and moreover that it hides a meaning. If this pattern exists and it is true, the subject experiences something like a mystical revelation, as if he were able to foresee future events or to influence them in accordance with his preferences. On the contrary if the pattern exists but it is a misleading pattern the observer does not accept the absence of meaning as the first principle and therefore he moves on constructing a new meaning and assuming this new and artificial connection as the real and valid one. Believing that a pattern is real when it is not, is one of the most frequent mistakes that are ascribed to the human mind. It is something that happens all the times when we see what we expect to see. In statistics this mistake is identified for the first time by Neyman and Pearson in 1933 and it is named type I error. This error, also known as false positive, consists in finding a non existent pattern and it usually differs from the type II error or false negative, that consists on the other hand in missing a real pattern. The fact that we tend to make the former error more frequently than the latter is explained by theories on the evolution (Shermer). It is symptomatic of our instinct of self-preservation that was shaped back in time by our ancestors. When the first hominids heard a rustle in the grass, they could either interpret it as caused by a dangerous animal or by the wind. If they believed it was a predator where it was not (type I error) they ended up committing a small miscalculation. On the other hand if they believed it had been the wind when it was a dangerous animal (type II error), their mistake would have had rather more serious consequences. In the second case in fact, they were going to risk their own life. These survival choices influenced our behavior and gradually characterized our mental approach to our surroundings. Facing the environment we now start from the default assumption that all patterns (true and false) are real.

From these first life-or-death decisions, in which the organism learnt to adapt to the changes of its environment, the human brain has evolved sharpening its cognitive

capacities and becoming a pattern-recognition machine designed to reconstruct the inputs that come from the outside. In this way through a process of association learning, common to every species, the human mind shapes its beliefs. According to Michael Shermer when these patterns become beliefs they affect ultimately our understanding of reality. Around our beliefs in fact, we create a plausible explanatory model of interpretation for the world we live in. "When such a model is successful at explaining events, we tend to attribute to it, and to the elements and concepts that constitute it, the quality of reality or absolute truth" (7). Pattern detection assumes therefore an important role in our life even though sometimes we are not even aware of using it. Doctors for instance make diagnoses of an illness and proceed with a correct treatment relying on the symptoms that the patient shows and that, put together, form a peculiar pattern. In a different field, sales agents calculate the pros and cons of setting a new business in a specific area from the feedback they have received and then elaborated. Ultimately, we all use pattern recognition no matter what is our profession or role within the society: this is how we work. Unfortunately, as it has been highlighted previously with the example of the hominid, we have not developed a system that would permit us to distinguish between true and false patterns. We start from what it has been called a default assumption and consider all patterns as real. This of course intimately affects our interpretation of the world that would become naturally distorted and biased. If those models that we use to understand reality relied on beliefs that are based in turn on false patterns, our perception of reality ends up being naturally compromised. In other words, if pattern-detection abilities are useful to draw immediate conclusions, as in the example of the doctor or the sales agent, they can also mislead us. According to the skeptics, this is what normally happens to believers in religious superstitions, paranormal claims and secret conspiracies. Those who believe in these phenomena are considered paranoid individuals who not only see patterns everywhere, but who fail also to interpret those patterns in the correct way. Many people feel the presence of God or other divine agents behind everything striking that happens to them, and sometimes they claim that this same presence is revealed with signs that cannot be discarded.

Near-death experiences (NDEs), profound subjective events at the threshold of death, often encompass spiritual and paranormal elements, such as a sense of leaving the physical body, perceiving events at a distance, and encountering mystical entities and environments (Greyson 2).

The same happens with those who believe that a conspiracy is taking place when they are confronted with two or more different elements that, put together, form a certain coherence<sup>7</sup>. Allured by the strange recurrences and connections that return in their life and that follow according to their opinion a precise logic<sup>8</sup>, they end up living an alter reality they themselves have furnished with their own imagination. Deceived by their cognitive capacities they first assume that all patterns are real and then they endow every single pattern with a meaning. Michael Shermer describes these two tendencies, proper of the human mind, in his book *The Believing Brain* (2011). Here he argues that:

The brain is a belief engine. From sensory data flowing in through the senses the brain naturally begins to look for and find patterns, and then infuses those patterns with meaning. The first process I call patternicity: the tendency to find meaningful patterns in both meaningful and meaningless data. The second process I call agenticity: the tendency to infuse patterns with meaning, intention, and agency. (6)

Patternicity and agenticity together point out that the human brain is anything but that infallible and perfect machine that operates through ratio and logic, an idea born within positivistic theories and recovered during the first decades of the twentieth century with Modernism. Our propensity to find out a meaning everywhere, that is our nature of meaning seekers, has to deal inevitably with our cognitive flaws in understanding reality. What is more, patternicity and agenticity are not the only two phenomena that deceive the human brain. Michael Shermer in the last few chapters of his book in fact, enumerates many other cognitive biases. Among them the most familiar ones are confirmation bias, gambler's fallacy and pareidolia. Confirmation bias is the tendency to select from the environment only those data that support your hypothesis. If you believe that a conspiracy is taking place your mind will register only those evidences that sustain your theory and ignore those that are contrary. Gambler's fallacy instead is part

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<sup>7</sup> Perfect examples are the September 11 terrorist attacks that according to many were an inside job held by the Bush administration, or the theories on the assassination of the president of the United States John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963.

<sup>8</sup> In truth this logic most of the times can be explained using statistics. For the law of the truly large number (Diaconis and Mosteller) for example when numbers or samples involved are large enough, the probabilities that strange occurrences and relationships might come out are higher. The probabilities that a friend would call you on the phone in the exact moment you were thinking of him are very low, but if you consider the total amount of population making phone calls in the world and those who are thinking about a friend, what is commonly regarded as a weird event becomes something almost inevitable.

of the cognitive biases but it works differently. It is the mistaken belief that past events may influence future occurrences and it is most strongly associated with gambling. It is the reason why on the roulette wheel we expect that a red is out if the black has won for ten times in a row. Another subcategory of patternicity is facial recognition or pareidolia that is considered a side effect of the brain, which perceives familiar patterns within random stimuli. The most common example of pareidolia is making out the contours of human faces on the shape of rocks, clouds or any other objects<sup>9</sup>.

All these errors in cognition have acquired a more general connotation in respect with their initial use. While recently they have been employed to debunk some false beliefs and have been referred as a common aspect shared by every individual, in the past they were only limited to the explanation of some pathological conditions. Cognitive biases in fact were normally attributed to people who suffer from particular mental diseases. The first who identified this common problem was a German neurologist and psychiatrist, named Klaus Conrad that in 1958 in his essay *Die beginnende Schizophrenie. Versuch einer Gestaltanalyse des Wahns*<sup>10</sup> described the progress of schizophrenia and its treatment in some patients. Outlining the different stages of this illness Conrad coined the word apophenia, which he defined as “the unmotivated seeing of connections accompanied by a specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness” (Brugger). According to the German psychiatrist, apophenia is a delusive and false revelation attributed to some forms of psychosis. Affected subjects experience a hyper-association of meaning that, overwhelming the brain, induces paranoia and makes natural comprehension of the world nearly impossible. Even though Michael Shermer did not hint explicitly at this term in his 2011 essay, the similarities with patternicity are certainly evident. In many scientific articles these two words are even interchanged or used together to describe the same situations. Personally, I decided to restrict my references only to the concept of apophenia, that is why the reader will find from now on allusions limited to this idea. In this way I hope first to avoid any form of confusion that may originate from the usage of

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<sup>9</sup> A famous example of pareidolia is the so called “Face on Mars” which is cited by believers as an evidence of the extraterrestrial presence on the planet; other cases have to do with religion and concern the appearance of the face of Virgin Mary and Jesus on pieces of food such as a grilled cheese sandwich, a tortilla and a burnt toast.

<sup>10</sup> In English it would be: “the onset of schizophrenia: an attempt to form an analysis of delusion”. The book, released in German, has no translation available in other languages. Quotes of this text are taken from scientific essays or articles.

different terms and secondly I wish to pay homage to the originality of its creator that has been often underestimated and relegated to a backstage level.

Even though it was introduced as one of the main characteristics typical of psychotic people, apophenia has been lately employed to describe the behavior of sane individuals as well. As we have already pointed out previously, these errors in cognition play a fundamental role for the human being in general. Seeing patterns in random configurations and endowing those patterns with a meaning is in fact indispensable for the organism to adapt itself to all the possible changes occurring in the environment. Hence living our life without making any assumptions about what happens around us is not only unnatural, but very dangerous too.

This human weakness is even more evident in Auster's novels where the author pays particular attention to the subjects and the workings of their mind. The protagonists of these stories strive to achieve some sort of relief against the grief and sorrows, which rage in their life. To reach this glimmer of tranquility, Auster's characters launch themselves on a quest to instill stability and purpose in their life. The sense of stability brings order and safety within the chaotic fragmentation of the surroundings and it is usually provided by a fixed position in the world, by a place such as a house or a refuge where characters may feel secure and protected. Finding a purpose on the other hand, helps the individuals to endow their life with a meaning, amounts to finding a way to enrich their experiences with significance. That is why Auster's characters are constantly looking for some clarity, which they think is attainable when they transcend reality and reach some sort of ultimate truth about the world. A correct understanding of the events that unfold in their life is useful for the subject that in this way knows how to move and to react to the adversities. Typical of Auster's characters in fact, is the desire to understand what kind of forces are at stake in their life, whether they are responsible for their own actions or whether there is a superior design that has already planned everything.

This quest to find ways to instill stability and purpose, which is actually a two-fold quest for order and for meaning, is normally triggered by some unconventional and

anomalous occurrences such as sudden deaths of beloved family members<sup>11</sup> or acquaintances, unexpected windfalls or accidental encounters. These extraordinary circumstances bring the individuals to reconsider their present situations and push them on this research. What they do not know is the fact that this quest is doomed to fail from the very beginning. The fictional environment, in which they are thrown and in which their investigations are conducted, presents in fact none of the features that would make it a discernible and straightforward place for the individuals who inhabit it. Ruled by a pervading sense of disorder and an impending force of chance, it seems to unveil no absolute certainties upon which they can rely. The fluidity and the instability of this context, where the laws of rationality and causation have no ultimate value, hinders the capacities of the protagonist to grasp the objects of their desire. Their investigation therefore, turns out to be an absurd task<sup>12</sup> that entraps the individual in an endless and limitless loop.

Probably the most detrimental aspect of this vicious cycle is not the fact that Auster's subjects are not aware of the futility of their pursuit, but the fact that they even see some logic and coherence in what they are doing and perceiving. Deceived by the phenomenon of apophenia, their mind is encouraged to find a pattern everywhere even though this pattern does not exist. Order is created out of chaos and meaning is created where none is present, but this is only an illusion. Subjects connect the dots and realize a new image, where there was just a senseless cluster of lines and shapes. While they are constantly seeking for order and for meaning and cannot help but wondering if the world may have some hidden secrets or other truths to unveil, reality remains independent of their interpretation and indifferent from their cravings. In such a world, apophenia turns out to be a perverse mechanism, a trap for the individual. Differently from epiphany, which is an experience of sudden revelation and a taste of the interconnectedness of the world, apophenia deludes the mind encouraging the subject

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<sup>11</sup> Something that recurs very often in Auster's narrative is the death or the absence of the father. This is another autobiographical information taken from his real life and repeatedly fictionalized, In *The Invention of Solitude* the author talks about "the curse of the absent father" (125). But maybe the perfect image that describes this absence is coined by Ilana Shiloh in her *Postmodern Quest: on the Road to Nowhere*. In depicting Auster's protagonists she says that they are "Fatherless son and sonless fathers" (122).

<sup>12</sup> Their condition in this sense can be compared to the condition of the absurd man described in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this essay, published in 1942, the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus argued that the anguish and the confusion present in the human life are generated by a disharmony between "the mind that desires and the world that disappoints" (51).

to pursue a meaning that does not exist, and to impose new artificial values that only bend the truth.

The conclusive part of this chapter and the next one will focus on this very problem: apophenia as the primary cause of failure of the character's quests. Each part revolves around one of these ruinous investigations, starting from that of order in the chaos and ending with that of meaning in meaninglessness. Through some useful examples and precise references from the texts I will underline the fact that failure is an inevitable conclusion for every single character.

### **Order in chaos**

In his interview with Sinda Gregory and Larry McCaffery Auster says that all his books "are connected by their common source, by the preoccupations they share" (*Hunger* 289), and taken together they could stand as a single book, a composition of different perspectives on how he sees the world. His novels in fact are known for the same interest they express in common themes, which make his poetics very peculiar. Another important and distinctive aspect of his works is his tendency to a certain form of intertextuality. Even though this is a recurrent trait in literature, Auster seems to push all these analogies and connections a little bit too far. The author in many cases arrives at the point of linking even two seemingly distinct literary worlds. This practice regards primarily the reappearance of some characters in different texts. This literary device has been defined as *retour de personnages*<sup>13</sup>; but, as correctly pointed out by Michelle Banks, Auster's instances are not respectful of this convention, since the characters that return are not totally identical (Banks 156). In the *New York Trilogy* for example we witness two of these returns. The first occurs when we learn that Quinn, the protagonist of the first installment *City of Glass*, reappears also in *The Locked Room*, the third installment of the trilogy. He apparently has been hired by Sophie Fanshawe to gather clues about the disappearance of her husband. Since we know that he is not a detective but a writer who has only impersonated that role once, this information destabilizes our perception. The second reappearance instead occurs when the narrator of the third volume in a down and out experience finds himself in a Parisian café. There he addresses a man that looks like Fanshawe, the person he has unsuccessfully tried to track down. Annoyed by his

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<sup>13</sup> In *Postmodern Fiction*, Brian McHale stated that it was Robert Alter the one who named this device in describing Balzac's stylistic choices (57).

insistence this man responds that his name is Peter Stillman. Now the reader already knows Peter Stillman from *City of Glass*, or better he already knows the two Stillman that are present there, father and son. But we are told that the former commits suicide and as far as his son is concerned, he has some difficulties both in moving and speaking. Apart from these two examples, Banks offers in her essay other cases of recurrences of characters, among which the most striking ones are that of David Zimmer and that of Anna Blume<sup>14</sup>. Since these characters reappear in different fictional worlds assuming each time characteristics and functions that are totally different, our ontological certainties of readers about Auster's cosmos are ultimately questioned.

Of course one could argue that if we limit our analysis only to a precise work these intertextual connections would not stand out. When we consider a character simply within the fictional boundaries of the novel he inhabits in fact, these ontological contradictions should not emerge since he appears with one and only one individuality. Well this is not always true, especially when we are taking into consideration Auster's fictional world. Even though we are limiting our analysis to a specific book, excluding all the connections that are possible in an all-encompassing analysis, references and links arise in any case. This is due to the destabilizing and confusing depiction of every single fictional world, which presents contrasting elements within the same story. Readers and also characters openly face the presence of recurring events and individuals. Auster acknowledges this as a constant principle in his stories: "everything seem(s) to be repeating itself. Reality (is) a Chinese box, an infinite series of containers within containers" (*Invention* 125). That is why in his fictions characters live, vanish and reappear again sometimes with a different identity or name; they are also inhabited by contrasting personalities that physically manifest themselves in the form of doppelgangers or mirroring reflections. Characters are ghosts, shadows that move along in a suffocating world of despair and anguish. They are prisoners in a cruel universe, which offers few moments of solace and scarce oases of tranquility, whose endurance is not guaranteed. Auster's fictional worlds can be depicted as a Borgesian space of alternative possibilities, in which life can take different directions and can change

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<sup>14</sup> David Zimmer is a minor character in the novel *Moon Palace* but he plays a central role in *The Book of Illusions*. As far as Anna Blume is concerned, she appears both in *The Country of the Last Things* and *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

abruptly; or as a Mobius strip<sup>15</sup>, an ambiguous and enigmatic surface. In his world “nothing is real except chance” (*Trilogy*, 3). Improbable and bizarre circumstances happen all the times in Auster’s storyworlds. The encounter with the unknown and bewildering forces of chance and contingency is always out there, an intrusive aspect that characters have to face, but at the same time something that they are ultimately unable to comprehend. Irrational events with their essentially inexplicability challenge characters’ certainties so much that their logic fails to ultimately understand the mechanism of the world.

To sum up, Auster’s universe appears to the eyes of the reader and to the eyes of the characters that are thrown in it, fundamentally chaotic: in this entropic world no space is left for coherence, linearity and certainty. This chaos, as we are going to see in the next sections, is not only external (it affects and pervades every single space), but also internal (it is an innate characteristic of every single individual).

### **External chaos: the city**

Auster’s novels are renowned for the tendency of their author to include many autobiographical elements; characters often share the writer’s initials or his name, his date of birth or more generally his lived experiences and profession<sup>16</sup>. Places are no exception. The settings of the novels are often characterized by a profound relation with the life of the author. As it happens most of the times in fact, the places Auster describes in his books are places he is familiar with. Characters for instance move along the whole territory of the United States passing from large and crowded urban centers to wild and inhabited places, such as deserts and woods. Moreover, they make brief appearances in foreign countries, among which France stands out as the most recurrent location, since Auster has spent there many years of his life. Nonetheless the place that he chooses as a

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<sup>15</sup> This is a metaphor already used by Adrian Gargett in his review of Auster’s books entitled *Cruel Universe*.

<sup>16</sup> In *Leviathan* the writer Peter Aaron shares Auster’s same initials, he has written a book entitled *Luna (Moon Palace)* and he has studied at Columbia and then had an experience in France; he also met his wife Iris, in the art gallery where Auster met his wife Siri. Fanshawe one of the main characters in *The Locked Room* wrote a series of poems collected under the title *Ground Work* and has a sister who has been diagnosed as schizophrenic; what is more he worked in an oil tanker and spent a long period of his life in France. Marco Stanley Fogg instead, the protagonist of *Moon Palace*, is exactly Auster’s age and he as well studied in Columbia as his author did.

set for the majority of his novels is New York and its surroundings. Even Mark Brown, probably the critic who more than anyone else has offered causes for reflection on spaces in Auster's fictions, underlined the centrality of the American city.<sup>17</sup> This is the place where the author has lived (he was born in Brooklyn in 1947) and where he currently works. This profound attachment to this city is expressed by the continuous insistence on exact spatial coordinates that run through his entire production. Characters live or work in apartments that have a precise address and even when the name of the street is invented it is in any case located in one of the many New York boroughs. Manhattan and Brooklyn are the most common background for his characters' peregrinations. In addition, symbols of this city are disseminated everywhere in the text where they play also a key role in the construction of the plot. The most evident ones are the Brooklyn Bridge, Central Park, the Brooklyn Museum, Columbia University and the Statue of Liberty. But this repeated use of New York as the setting for his stories is not only due to the special bond, which links this place with the private life of the writer. The choice of New York in fact, derives also from the function this city performs, being at the same time the perfect example of urban space and the postmodern environment par excellence. Better expressed by the words of Roberto Righi it is "a city of the world, the microcosmic emblem of the world at large, it is the perfect symbol of the postmodern metropolitan space" (110).

Since we are taking into account postmodern metropolises, we should acknowledge from the very beginning that those conventional categories of order and unity, that were once used to describe such contexts, have become obsolete. They were used in the past because urban plans followed a strict scheme of necessity and functionalism that were proper of modernist standards. What is more, the structure and the topography of the city appeared as something legible to the eyes of the observer, who could easily organize what he saw around a certain coherent pattern.

The correct interpretation of the place provided the individual with useful information on the nature of the place itself and on those who inhabited it. What is more an organized and harmonious city gave also a sense of security and protection. An individual, who is familiar with a place, knows well what to expect and is able to prevent any sort of danger or harm that may arrive from it.

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<sup>17</sup> In his *Paul Auster* he claims that the New York author "has consistently taken the city of New York as a central feature in his work" (1).

Breaking with the logic of modernism, postmodern theories invite us to rethink the concept of the cities and their spaces in a totally different way. Recent urban studies in fact, have pointed out that a city cannot be defined anymore as a whole, an organized space in which individual could retrace coherence and linearity in its scheme. Postmodern cities are characterized on the other hand by the presence of disorder and the lack of a center, in a word an overwhelming sense of fragmentation. The French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term heterotopia (in his essay *Of Other Spaces*) to define what he considered a peculiarity of postmodern urban places, namely the tendency to comprise contrasting and sometimes even incompatible spaces within themselves. This view is also confirmed by the British anthropologist David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernism* (1989). In this essay, which deals mainly with the problem of the transformation of the urban setting in architecture, he conceives these contexts as ultimately fragmentary. In particular, he affirms that:

Postmodernism cultivates [...] a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a palimpsest of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a collage of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. [...] The metropolis is impossible to command except in bits and pieces. (66)

Harvey returns to the concept of fragmentation few pages later in the same essay, where he collects a series of definitions taken from the *Postmodern visions catalogue* that presents the contemporary metropolis as “a collage of fragments of reality and splinters of experience enriched by historical references” (84) or as “a system of anarchic [...] signs and symbols that is constantly and independently self-renewing” (83). In this anarchic assemblage of different parts that convey only a sense of disorder and confusion, people, according to Fredric Jameson, “are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves” (51). The vast extension of the urban space, together with its further development and constant renewing, render the cognitive process of mapping out a correct image of the city practically impossible. The postmodern city becomes therefore a “labyrinth without a center or periphery” (Hutcheon 59), a place in which the individual loses his topographical perception together with his mental stability. In Auster’s novels, cities are characterized by this very spatial atmosphere; these are places that are imbued with chaos and disarray, chaotic arenas in which characters struggle to find some sort of cogency.

The motif of the city as a maze appears for the first time in *City of Glass*, where Daniel Quinn, the main protagonist of this story defines New York, as “an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps” (3). This place, “no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhoods and streets, [...] always left him with the feeling of being lost” (3). The reader is told that Quinn has relegated himself in a small New York apartment since the death of his wife and his three-years-old son. In a complete isolation, he now occupies his time with reading books, writing mystery novels, walking and with other forms of leisure activities. We know as well that he has no longer any friends or acquaintances and that he takes no active participation within the city, in conclusion “he no longer existed for anyone but himself” (4). This form of self-imposed anonymity is exacerbated by the impending presence of the city, which appears unperturbed and indifferent to the despair and sufferance of the single individual. Quinn seems to be thrown in an enclosed space whose labyrinthine quality and inanimate structure only convey a sense of dislocation and alienation. Quinn is left with no other choice but to surrender himself to the overwhelming force of this world.

The other character that has a direct experience of the city in this novel is old Peter Stillman. In one of the three encounters he has with Quinn, he launches himself on a digression about the chaotic nature of the new reality mankind is living in. In his opinion, the epitome of this fractured universe is precisely New York, which is portrayed as “the most forlorn of places the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray universal. [...] The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap” (78). Here Stillman acknowledges the dislocation and displacement that fragmentation has brought about. Individuals, according to his analysis have come to a moment in which having lost any sense of connection seem unable to reproduce a certain order and stability. Everything in this place has been reduced to something useless and worthless, a bunch of scraps scattered in the streets. Once, these objects, “from the chipped to the smashed, from the dented to the squashed, from the pulverized to the putrid” (78) had been a whole, but the possibility of putting them back together and seeing them in their original form seems now humanly unachievable and therefore irremediably remote. Even the capacity of defining them, providing them with a name, which was Stillman’s initial project, seems lost forever.

This difficulty of the individual to relate with the all-encompassing force of chaos that originates from the city is also evident in the final part of *The Locked Room*. The unnamed narrator of this story attracted by the mystery that concerned the disappearance of his long lost friend, named Fanshawe, ends up being dragged away from the promising and peaceful world of his wife and son, into an abyss of desperation and annihilation. In an attempt to find some clues about Fanshawe, he carries out an extensive research in France, the place where his friend had lived for many years. Here the narrator intoxicated his self with drunkenness and promiscuity sinking into a descending spiral of debauchery. Even though the scenario is different, the main problem remains: the individual has to confront the failure of his ability to understand and analyze reality. Talking about his permanence in the city of Paris, the narrator makes clear from the outset that his account relies simply on uncertain and incoherent memories.

I have lost a month of my life, and even now it is a difficult thing for me to confess, a thing that fills me with shame. A month is a long time, more than enough time for a man to come apart. Those days come back to me in fragments when they come at all, bits and pieces that refuse to add up. (293)

The urban world becomes something impenetrable, an unknowable and illegible place. The sentiment of dislocation and displacement that characterizes the individuals derives not only from the realization of their inability to rationally understand this world, but also from the physical structure of the city itself. The arrangement and disposition of the streets and the buildings conveys a sense of bewilderment.

Apart from being lost, the protagonists of the story experience also a sense of oppression. Paris in particular, is depicted “with its slow skies and chaotic streets, its bland clouds and aggressive buildings” (287), an alienating place in which the narrator “felt as though he had been turned upside-down” (287). That is not the only city that seems to have a detrimental and noxious effect on the mind of the protagonists of Auster’s novels. If Paris is aggressive, New York is a menace and a threat for those who live there. Maria Turner, one of the characters of *Leviathan*, had in fact the same experience when she settled down in this place:

She returned to New York, sold her van, and moved into the loft on Duane street, a large empty room located on the floor above a wholesale egg and butter business. The first months were lonely and disorienting for her. She had no friends, no life to speak of, and the city seemed menacing and unfamiliar as if she had never been there before. (62)

Disorientation is a feature that all Auster's characters share at different levels. Whether they wander about the schematic precision of the Manhattan grid or in the intricacy of the European streets, the sense of being lost is something that pervades their selves. As we have pointed out at the beginning of this section, this lack of orientation sharpens the characters' sense of insecurity and diffidence towards a place that they do not know. They are immersed in a restricted and inimical background that does not offer any protection for its inhabitants. People are constantly spied, observed and every single action and movement is controlled and registered. The streets become the scenes of tailing jobs, intrigues and pursuits that inevitably arrive at a dead end. Here the most representative part of the derelict population, a jumble of drunk, crazy and addicted people, finds a dwelling. No privacy is fully guaranteed; even in their own apartment, citizens are not able to experience a glimmer of safety. The walls of their houses do not protect them from the intrusive glances that come from the outside and what is more they fail in recreating a domestic intimacy, which can be found only in few places<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore Auster's city encourages indifference and impersonality not only through its physical structure, but also through the depiction of its inhabitants. A communal and social background is completely absent, which provides an image of the environment as something totally unfriendly. New Yorkers for example, as they are seen with the eyes of Marco Stanley Fogg, the main protagonist of *Moon Palace*, are essentially apathetic. They do not show any feelings of sympathy or friendliness.

In the streets, everything is bodies and commotion, and like it or not, you cannot enter them without adhering to a rigid protocol of behavior. To walk among the crowd means never going faster than anyone else, never lagging behind your neighbor, never doing anything to disrupt the flow of human traffic. If you play by the rules of this game, people will tend to ignore you. There is a particular gaze that comes over the eyes of New Yorkers when they walk through the streets, a natural and perhaps necessary form of indifference to others. (55)

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<sup>18</sup> These places are Auster's apartment in *City of Glass*, Sophie's flat where she recreates her family with the anonymous narrator after Fanshawe's departure, and Peter Aaron and Iris's domestic tranquility.

In conclusion, the contemporary urban space that emerges from Auster's novels presents certain common characteristics that return very often. As I tried to point out with direct references from the texts, the metropolitan space, postmodern environment par excellence, is a fragmented world that eludes the ontological certainties and cognitive capacities of the individuals. What is more it forces those characters, who inhabit this reality, to retreat or escape. Any form of exile in fact, seems preferable to these oppressive and threatening places.

### **External chaos: the wilderness**

In Auster's fictional works, characters often "shuttle between [...] two extremes: confinement and vagabondage – open space and hermetic space" (*Conversations* 40)<sup>19</sup> as the author himself commented in an interview with Mark Irwin. They often show a common penchant for moving away from an enclosed environment willing to relocate somewhere else. This constant displacement, that has many advocates throughout all the novels, is symptomatic of their lack of an intimate and private place, a fixed position in the world. That is why the figure that recurs very often in the texts is that of the vagrant, a homeless person who wanders and roams around with no purpose and no precise destination<sup>20</sup>. Ilana Shiloh in his *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: on the Road to Nowhere*, traces some analogies between Auster's novels and the genre of the picaresque which in her opinion relies "on a triad of interconnected elements: the ambiguous figure of the picaro, the temporal and spatial framework of the road and the capricious unpredictability of chance" (2). As far as the figure of the picaro is concerned, Shiloh underlines the fact that no matter how difficult it may be to properly define it, he or she always presents the characteristics of the outsider: "of dubious and uncertain origin, alienated in a morally disintegrating society to which he nevertheless aspires to

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<sup>19</sup> The titles of the three parts that comprise The New York Trilogy are a perfect example: from the open space of the 'city' the reader is thrown into the suffocating world of the 'locked room'.

<sup>20</sup> This characteristic is one of the fundamental traits of Sam Auster, Paul's father. In *The Invention of Solitude* the author admits in fact that: "his life was not centered around the place where he lived. His house was just one of many stopping places in a restless, unmoored existence, and this lack of a center had the effect of turning him into a perpetual outsider, a tourist of his own life. You never had the feeling he could be located" (9).

belong he hits the open road to solicit the favor of Lady Luck" (2). Entrapped in the labyrinthine mechanism of the postmodern metropolis, all Auster's heroes daily experience a profound inadequacy, a delusion that comes from their incapacity to piece together the countless fragments of the world, and therefore the impossibility to obtain in this way a coherent image of it. What is more, as I have pointed out in the last part of the previous section, they do not feel safe within the boundaries of the city, which seems to be the place in which anguish and sufferance steadily thrive. Individuals' stability is constantly tested and mental breakdowns are around the corner. Death or other crucial events burst into those few moments of serenity that characterize their urban life. Auster's characters are confronted with two alternatives: either they remain in these daunting places or they strive to find a way out. The exile from the social background is often seen as a radical decision that involves leaving everything behind, from the house to the family and friends, severing in this way any sort of relation. Nevertheless this departure is welcomed as the last attempt made by the character to find his lost position in the world, a place in which they could experience a spiritual rebirth. Hence uninhabited areas and empty spaces far from large urban centers are often chosen as the most suitable destinations. Wilderness, in all its forms – be it the immense western desert or the intricate northern forest – appears, at least from their standpoint, as a harmless place, a refuge that offers a shelter to all those that look for relief and solace<sup>21</sup>.

M.S. Fogg is one of those characters who desperately look for a way out. With little money to sustain himself and to pay the rent he is forced to leave his flat and to start a new life among the derelict population of New York. Central Park becomes his new home for nearly a month. Even though he remains within the boundaries of the urban space he manages to find a "sanctuary [...] a refuge of inwardness against the grinding demands of the streets" (55), a place distant from the noises and preoccupations of the rest of the world that offers him "the possibility of solitude" (55). According to his account, many good things happen from the moment in which he chooses this place; he thus comments this experience in few words: "there is no question that the park did me a world of good" (56). No one is there to criticize him for how he looks like or for what he does and he encounters many strangers ready to help him with money and food or to

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<sup>21</sup> This idea of the wilderness as the place in which the individual will recreate a sense of peace belongs to that tradition which, since Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, has influenced American writers and artists in general.

invite him to join them in some game. He feels for the first time to be in the right place, to have found his position in the world. He becomes a part of it “he was blending into the environment” (56). But all these promising expectations that fill this place, at the end seem to be totally deluded. Central Park reveals to be a place as dangerous as the city itself; the negative moments exceed in the final amount the rather more pleasant happenings. Fogg in fact, comes close to dying in different occasions. He happens to be threatened once by a gang of kids and on another occasion by a drunk man with a broken beer bottle. But probably “the most terrifying moment”, as he himself admits, “comes on a cloudy night toward the end” (63) when he stumbles into three people that are hidden in the bushes. One of them menaces him with a gun, but he manages somehow to run away unhurt. The threat comes also from the weather condition: one day a violent downpour takes him off-guard. Completely soaked, and with his body consumed by the strict and self-imposed regime of starvation and deprivation he finally surrenders. After an imprecise period of hallucinations and delirium due to the high fever, Fogg ends up being rescued by his friends David Zimmer and Kitty Wu who manage to find him in a cave in the park. The place where he thinks to have found his position in the world turns out to be not very different from the city he has refused. Giving his personal opinion on this experience he later on will admit that it has been a ruinous project. “I’m not saying that I managed to do this very well. I failed miserably, in fact” (78).

In *Moon Palace*, Fogg is not the only character that has lived for a period like a hermit. Thomas Effing, the eccentric and bad-tempered blind old man forced into a wheelchair, has a similar experience. He narrates to Fogg, who has become by now his current live-in companion, the series of events that bring him to spend more than a year in the Utah desert. Sick of his previous life characterized by a loveless marriage and moved only by his desire to become a famous painter, Effing wishes to relocate himself in the untamed Western wilderness, where he thinks he can find inspiration and refuge. He has left the city with a young topographer, called Edward Byrne, and he is “in one of those excited moods when everything suddenly seems to fit together in a new way” (149). But this feeling only lasts for few days. As soon as he enters in this unexplored land in fact, he is forced to admit that he is not prepared for the unearthly silence and the vast emptiness of the territory. “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 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" (152). Within this environment even his capacities as a painter, the one who is supposed to copy and reproduce landscapes and scenarios on a canvas, are useless. The place, as it presents itself in front of his eyes is totally unintelligible: "it's all too massive to be painted or drawn; even photographs can't get the feel of it. Everything is so distorted, it's like trying to reproduce the distances in outer space: the more you see, the less your pencil can do. To see is to make it vanish" (153). Confronted by the chaotic immensity of this space the mind drifts away from the tangible reality it cannot comprehend. The individual, deceived by the phenomenon of pareidolia, in a constant search for order and protection, retraces logic patterns and familiar images everywhere. That is why the structures that rise from the ground are viewed as "obelisks, minarets, palaces" (152) and the conformation of rocks and peaks reminds closer shapes such as "thumbs, eye sockets, penises, mushrooms, human beings, hats" (152). Everything is distorted and ambiguous, the randomness of the environment, the result of the action of the atmospheric agents, seems to acquire a new coherence, but this is only apparent. The world that Effing has constructed around himself is an artifice of his mind with no points of contact with the real one.

The situation gets even worse when he finds himself alone to cope with this immensity. His loyal partner in this adventure in fact dies for the bad injuries received from a tumble into a precipice and Effing overwhelmed by a mixed sense of guilt and loneliness has a mental breakdown: "I started to scream and after that I just let myself be crazy" (158). Blundering desperately among the rocks for days he finally spots a cave. Here little by little he manages to return to himself and regained "something that resembled peace of mind" (164), but even in this case the harmony that he has created around himself is something temporary. An unexpected visitor comes and destroys this semblance of tranquility. "He had worked steadily for the past seven months at being alone, an absolute stronghold to delimit the boundaries of his life, but now that someone had been with him in the cave he understood how artificial his situation was" (172).

Like Fogg and Effing, Jim Nashe, the protagonist of *The Music of Chance*, drifts away from his hometown, which in this case is Boston and embarks on a new adventure that will bring him to travel around the country for more than a year. This radical decision comes after having realized that the urban space does not hold any prospects for him. What is more, typical of many other Auster's characters, he has no social ties that detain him. His

mother passed away four years before and as for his father, who abandoned the family when Nashe was two, he has died only recently. A month after this death, his wife Thérèse walks out on him and since his job at the fire department occupies his whole day and he cannot afford any help he decides to give his little daughter Juliette to the custody of his sister who lives in Minnesota. Shortly after her departure he finds out that he has inherited from his father a colossal sum. On the spur of the moment he pays off all his debts, buy himself a brand new car, take two weeks vacation and set off for Minnesota eager to claim his daughter back. Here he understands that what is supposed to be a temporary arrangement has become something totally out of his control: he has not seen Juliette for six months and during this absence his role of father “had been usurped by his brother-in-law”; “he had turned himself into a ghost” (4). On his way back to Boston he misses the correct ramp that would bring him home and find himself in the vastness of the landscape. He welcomes this unpremeditated resolution as a momentous event, the beginning for him of a new life spent in the solitude and emptiness of his car. Back in Boston after two weeks of aimless travel in fact, he finds that “he was growing restless” and that “his mind kept wondering back to the road, to the exhilaration he had left” (7). Unable to settle back again, he decides to give up the only two things that still connect himself to the city, namely his job at the fire department and all his belongings.

For the next five days, he took care of business, calling up his landlord and telling him to look for a new tenant, donating furniture to the Salvation Army, cutting off his gas and electric service, disconnecting his phone. There was a recklessness and violence to these gestures that deeply satisfied him, but nothing could match the pleasure of simply throwing things away. (9)

Succumbing to the lure of his “new life of freedom and irresponsibility” (10) he experiences a sort of exile very different from that of Fogg and Effing. Having acknowledged the fact that the city is not his place in the world he wishes not to relocate and settle down somewhere else, but to drift for a while around the country. However the tendency to avoid large urban centers remains. In the year that he spends in his car he restricts himself “to open and unsettled areas: northern New York and New England, the flat farm country of the heartland, the Western deserts” (11).

Nonetheless the space that Nashe chooses is not free of any danger and risks. Just like Central Park for Fogg and the Utah desert for Effing, it is equally treacherous. The idea of death and impending calamities are always present as it is expressed in this passage:

There were constant perils to watch out for, and anything could happen at any moment. Swerves and potholes, sudden blowouts, drunken drivers, the briefest lapse of attention – any one of those things could kill you in an instant. Nashe saw a number of fatal accidents during the months on the road, and once or twice he came within a hair's breadth of crackups himself. (11)

Even in this case the experience of the exile as an attempt to escape from the alienating and oppressive force of the city turns out to be a failure. The freedom that he has been looking for during his journey and that he thinks he has created for himself, turns out to be built around the colossal amount of money he receives at the beginning. Without that stunning inheritance in fact, he would not have had the possibility to buy himself a new car, to live without a work and to travel along the country for so long. As he correctly points out: “the money was responsible for his freedom, [...] the money kept him going, but it was also an engine of loss, inexorably leading him back to the place he had begun” (6). Nashe understands that the world that he has constructed, an artificial world in which he thinks to be free and autonomous, is not only flawed but also destined to fail.

Even the writer Benjamin Sachs, protagonist of the novel *Leviathan* looks for his place in the world in the wilderness. In particular, he wants to get back his old inspiration and regain his mental stability after a traumatic experience. In his case, the choice falls on a remote and scarcely inhabited area of Vermont, which is inhospitable in winter, but at its most splendid during the warmest seasons. Here he resides in a house cut off from the rest of the world sitting “on top of a small mountain, four miles from the nearest village by way of a narrow dirt road” (8). This decision to leave the city and his wife and to reduce his life to “its bare-bones essentials” (140) eventually bears its fruits. “Daily life was easier for him than it had been in New York, and little by little he managed to regain control of himself” (140). The silence and the solitude of the northern woods in fact are a major benefit for his concentration, and the absence of interruptions or daily preoccupations permits him to pour all its energies into the act of writing. The reader is told that Sachs has even begun a new remarkable novel. This fact is confirmed by his friend Peter Aaron who reads the first chapters of the manuscript and “concluded that

Sachs was on firm ground again” (140). The days he spends in his company dispel all the doubts he initially had about a possible recovery: Sachs looks regenerated and serene again. But even in this case what seems to be a situation well in control turns out to be beyond any repair. The environment that has appeared as a friendly space in which the individual can find a shelter, reveals its true nature. “Less than a month after [Aaron] saw him in Vermont, Sachs stopped working on his book. He went out for a walk one afternoon in the middle of September, and the earth suddenly swallowed him up” (142). Later in the novel the reader will be told what happened to this character. Entering the woods, he finds himself in a place that he has never seen before; with no familiar landmarks to count on he loses his bearings and with no light to help him getting back home he passes the night there. The day after the situation does not look any different:

He took what he thought was the same path he had taken the previous evening, but after he had walked for close to an hour, he began to suspect that he was on the wrong path. He considered turning around and heading back to the place where he had started, but he wasn't sure he would be able to find it again – even if he did, it was doubtful he would recognize it. (148)

The woods, as they are described in this passage, has become a place so intricate that once the character crosses its confines he has to deal with the impossibility to locate the right path that would take him home. The same situation that happens to Sachs in Vermont is experienced also by Effing in Utah, in the same scene that I hinted at previously. Although the scenario looks very different from a northern forest, the situation appears identical. Wandering through that desolated area the character seems totally disoriented. “He made a half-hearted attempt to extricate himself from the canyon, but he soon got lost in a maze of obstacles: cliffs, gorges, unclimbable buttes” (160). Wilderness, as we have seen before, is not only subjected to the same rules of the city – it is in fact an alien environment, which resists any process of representation, and a perilous area that presents a certain grade of danger – but is also informed by the same labyrinthine quality. Therefore the sense of being lost in a maze is a constant feeling that we can find in several characters in many Auster's novels since it is not restricted only to the boundaries of the city, as it was in the *New York Trilogy* for example, but it is something that becomes manifest everywhere.

This metaphor of the labyrinth used by Auster to convey the idea of fragmentation, displacement and alienation returns again in *The Music of Chance*. Directed to the

mansion of Flower and Stone, where they will challenge the two eccentric millionaires in a poker game, Nashe and Pozzi notice that the route has become more and more uncertain.

Ockham was no more than fifteen miles from the river, but they had to make a number of complicated turns to get there, and they wound up crawling along the narrow, twisting roads for close forty minutes. [...] After a while, it began to feel as if they were traveling through a maze and when they finally approached the last turn, they both admitted that they would have been hard-pressed to find their way back to the river. (58)

The same feeling is shared by Fogg when, not receiving any response from his uncle who is going through a bad moment in Boise, he comments: “the possibilities of disaster seemed infinite to me. I imagined all the things that can happen to a man between Boise and New York, and suddenly the American continent was transformed into a vast danger zone, a perilous nightmare of traps and mazes” (18).

The chaos that characters face within the metropolis is a force that crosses the boundaries of the urban space pervading the American landscape as a whole. Auster’s world, made up by open and closed spaces, is an inescapable labyrinth<sup>22</sup>, an oppressive and authorial construction in which all characters indistinctly witness the erosion of their ontological certainties. In this particular context characters, who are willing to relocate themselves, cannot but acknowledge the impossibility of doing so. In order to find their position in the world in fact they should know the logical scheme that governs it, they should have the Ariadne’s thread that will help them to find their sense of direction and to comprehend in advance where each path may lead. All labyrinths, apparently chaotic, hide in fact a coherent and rational scheme. Unfortunately for the person who is looking for a way out, this scheme pertains only to the mind of the creator, or, as in our specific case, to the mind of the author.

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<sup>22</sup> In the word of Jorge Luis Borges, the writer that more than anyone else has analyzed this elaborate structure in his works, the labyrinth is “a house built purposely to confuse men; its architecture, prodigal in symmetries is made to serve that purpose” (113).

## **Internal chaos: the self**

In the previous section I traced the descending parabola of those characters that, confined in a perilous and chaotic metropolis, welcome their exile into the wilderness as a form of salutary displacement, only to recognize that the destination they deem to be the most appropriate for their salvation turns out to be no promise land. Choosing some exemplary models among the protagonists, I argued that those fictional characters (Fogg, Effing, Nashe and Sachs) that set off for the desolated areas of the wilderness, eventually face the same dislocation and alienation their urban peers (Quinn, Stillman senior, the anonymous narrator of *The Locked Room*, Maria and Fogg again) experience within the boundaries of the city. Crowded metropolises and desolated areas of the wilderness in fact, show no intrinsic differences, since they share the same labyrinthine quality that characterizes Auster's fictional world in general. I concluded claiming that both typologies of characters, either the ones who remain within the city or the ones who settle somewhere else, eventually have to confront the failure of their quest for relocation.

What I did not underline in the previous section is the fact that it is the phenomenon of apophenia that plays a key role in deceiving the mind of the subject with the illusion of a beneficial escape. Looking for a fixed position in the world, characters, as already suggested, usually avoid chaotic environments searching specifically for order and thus stability. Having acknowledged that fragmentation is the main characteristic of the metropolises in which they live, they open themselves up to the vastness of the wilderness. Here, misreading those seemingly promising signs of solitude and peacefulness, they endow certain places with the ideal quality of being a refuge for the self. Deserts, woods and parks therefore become salutary areas in which the individual may find some solace and relief from the anguish of his everyday urban life. Regrettably, characters will recognize that here as well relocation is impossible. Recreating around themselves a new reality based on artificial values, the subject fails to notice that these places hide the same element of danger and chaos that was present in the city. Wilderness in fact unveils those intricate paths that have misled the characters bringing them far away from the city into a nowhere zone, where they acknowledge their being lost. Once they recognize their mistake it is already too late: in the labyrinth of confusion which is Paul Auster's world they are simultaneously denied their position in these new places and the possibility to get back from where they started. They are nowhere, a non-

place in which all characters indistinctly seem to converge and where all of them eventually understand that the nature of the world they inhabit is ultimately chaotic and that their quest for order is therefore totally absurd.

At this point I think it is important to dwell on and clarify this notion of nowhere, which has been introduced as the destination of all those characters that have embarked upon their journey through the chaotic immensity of Auster's spaces.

In this way, I hope first to introduce the topic of this section, which is internal chaos, and secondly to shed some light on what I deem to be a problematic aspect. What seems to complicate my analysis is the fact that although the majority of Auster's heroes confront the environment with the precise objective of finding a fixed position in the world and then unexpectedly lose themselves, there are few of them that begin their journey through corrupted urban settings or deserted landscapes with the aspiration to reach exactly that very form of displacement I mentioned above. They believe this non-place might reserve them that stability they aspire to achieve from the very beginning. In some cases in fact, they envision something positive in this sense of losing oneself, since in this way they think they will manage to forget the despair and the anguish that is present in their life and that precludes them from grasping some sort of tranquility.

Nashe for example is one of those characters who wishes to reach this pleasant condition. His journey by car in fact gives him the possibility to free himself from the hardships he has undergone during the last few years.

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. [...] 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. (*Music* 11)

The vastness of the open road which provides the self with a new sense of freedom and irresponsibility and the solitude of his car in which Nashe restricts himself, helps the individual to purge his mind of the negative memories of the past. The same sense of liberation that is linked to the awareness of not having to take any decision is felt also by Daniel Quinn. The reader is told in fact that:

Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movements 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. (*Trilogy 4*)

Again the act of thinking produces only a constant return of the old anguish, something that the individual is willing to forget. His constant longing for something he cannot have back again, namely his wife and his little child, seems to diminish only during the endless walks that Quinn takes through the streets of New York. Losing himself appears to be his last attempt to achieve a glimmer of happiness and therefore stability.

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. (4)

Auster himself in his autobiographical work *The Invention of Solitude* positively regards this sense of disorientation that comes from being nowhere. In the second part of this book, entitled *The Book of Memory*, his alter ego A. not only accepts the disorienting experience that the circularity of the Amsterdam streets offers, but he enjoys it as a supreme form of peace:

He realized that perhaps there was some purpose to his being lost. 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. (91)

All these examples seem to convey the idea that this sense of being lost has some beneficial effect on the individual and that this nowhere is a salutary zone, in which characters seek to mend their wounded self, while on the other hand it turns out to be a place where they discover not only that their wound is incurable, but also that it is worse than expected. This is a situation common to everyone: the characters who craved for the mindless oblivion of this nowhere and those who, on the other hand, simply find themselves there.

Once the subject confronts for the first time this non-place and realizes the impossibility to come to terms with it, he is left with no alternatives but to retreat into himself. In this way, the subject acts in order to preserve his self from the threats of instability that may come from such a chaotic environment and for this reason he diverts his inquisitive look from his surroundings to his interior landscape. It is here, in the solitude of his inner terrain, that the subject becomes aware of his real nature confronting as well the impossibility to find a glimmer of order in his world. The individual finally recognizes that the fragmentation that ultimately characterizes his reality concerns also his being.

Auster's novels revolve around a type of character that is generally depicted as a fluid and inconsistent being, who never presents one and only one individuality. His identity is never permanent; opaque and ambiguous, it is always subjected to constant shifts and jolts. Multiple voices, contrasting personalities and sharp discontinuities keep alternating within the same story rendering an all encompassing interpretation and representation of the protagonist almost impossible. Sometimes this aspect affects the capacity of formulating coherent discourses as in the case of Stillman Junior - one of the characters of the first installment of *The New York Trilogy* - who can barely assemble together fragments of different phrases.

Essentially chaotic, Auster's hero is inhabited as well by a variety of personae whose boundaries are hardly discernible by the other. Marco Stanley Fogg seen under the gaze of Chandler, the owner of a bookstore near Columbia University, becomes a disjointed self, "a collection of disparate strangers, a random horde" (*Moon* 23); The same is true for Pozzi, who on his first impression, appears to Nashe's eyes as an impenetrable and conflicting figure where "The evidence was contradictory, full of elements that did not add up" (*Music* 20).

Auster sums up in few words all these peculiar traits claiming that his fictional creation can be essentially characterized by what he calls the "multiplicity of the singular" (*Hunger* 312). Within this single expression the writer manages to include the two main features that recur very often among his protagonists and that are elusiveness and inconsistency. Both traits can be found in the person of Sam Auster, Paul's father, who has been widely referred to by many critics (mainly Shiloh and Martin) as a model for the author's fictional characters. In line with these previous readings, I will hint at this figure as a point of reference for the next sections in the attempt to demonstrate this intrinsic fragmentation that defines the self.

## Fragmented characters: elusiveness

As it has been pointed out, elusiveness is one of the peculiar features that are condensed in the person of Sam Auster, who is the protagonist of the first part of the autobiographical work *The Invention of Solitude*, entitled "Portrait of an Invisible Man." The book, presented as a collection of memoirs taken from the author's past life, is an attempt to provide an image of the recently dead parent. In a passage Auster claims that his father's "capacity for evasion was almost limitless" he appeared to the eyes of the others with "another self (that) he had trained as an actor to represent him in the empty comedy of the world-at large. This surrogate self was essentially a tease, a hyperactive child, a fabricator of tall tales" (16). With this elaborated ploy he used to hide himself from the world lying not only about his profession and age, but also about his true identity. Among the different anecdotes that are used as examples, Auster remembers the time in which his father pretended to be a culinary critic in order to eat for free in a restaurant and when he managed to enter in a tennis club giving a false name. Another weird habit stands out in those rare moments in which he had a conversation with another person. While speaking he always hid his true self behind lies and made up stories. In Auster's opinion everything was done for the sake of protection: "if people never learned the truth about him, then they couldn't turn around and use it against him later" (16). Preserving his self from the intrusive glances of the other was Sam Auster's main purpose. That is why "what people saw when he appeared before them, [...], was not really him, but a person he had invented, an artificial creature [...]. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain" (16)<sup>23</sup>.

All these weird habits return very often in Auster's fictional panorama, where characters, generally depicted as experts in the art of disguise, are often seen in the act of either sharing and sometimes imitating other's behaviors and attitudes or even

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<sup>23</sup> The figure of the puppeteer hiding behind a surrogate self returns in Auster's first novels. In particular in *City of Glass* it is used to describe the triad of selves that forms the character of Quinn where "Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise" (6). The same image is used to introduce Stillman Junior who is depicted as "a marionette trying to walk without strings" (15).

forging brand new names and identities for themselves. Most of the times this process is pushed to such an extent that the protagonist's of Auster's books inevitably arrive at a point in which they cannot distinguish their real self from their surrogate creations. In this sense what for Sam Auster was an innocent stratagem deployed for eluding the others and buying protection from an inimical world, in the novel turns out to be a trait that increases characters' complexity as well as their inner fragmentation and chaos.

In the second installment of *The New York Trilogy* entitled *Ghosts* for example, the reader learns from the beginning that the main protagonist Blue, an investigator that works in New York, is no amateur in this art of disguise since he has been trained by Brown who "in his day was the best in the business" (137). Hired as a private detective to keep an eye on Black, Blue accepts the task a man named White proposes to him, considering it similar to all the other tail jobs he has been through in the past. But this time the assignment seems different: not involving any action, Blue ends up in the stagnancy of his apartment, watching a man that apparently occupies his days with writing and reading. Oppressed by the static and motionless life he has committed himself into, he finally decides to approach Black and he does that retrieving from his past a variety of disguises. These new identities not only make it possible for him to preserve his self from the intrusive eyes of the other as for Sam Auster, but they are also used as a means in order to escape from the solitude of his apartment. That is why in the three encounters he has with Black, Blue plays three different roles (the homeless Jimmy Rose, the life insurance salesman Snow and the Fueller's brushman). All of these costumes seem to uncover a fragment of Blue's previous life, being them either the vestiges of past cases or real people he once met or knew. Independently from the one he chooses, he revives not only his appearance but also his personality. After these three encounters both the case and the person of Blue gets further complicated. Aware of being unable to recover his initial stability Blue begins to question his own freedom and therefore his agency. Although his existence gains a meaning only through the other this gradual identification with his counterpart endangers his mental stability. Alienation, expressed by the emerging of different selves into one single person, brings him into a state of confusion and disorientation which accompanies the character until the end of the story.

Other characters decide to forge new identities for themselves under certain difficult circumstances. In *Moon Palace* for instance, there is a long passage concerning the life of Thomas Effing. In the account of his journey in the desert we have learned, as pointed out in the previous section, that he loses himself. Overwhelmed by a strong sense of guilt for being unable to save his young companion's life, he decides to cancel his old self Julian Barber and conjures up a new one in its place. The idea of divesting himself of his old identity comes precisely the day in which he finds refuge in a cave and discovers in it the corpse of a man.

They were more or less the same age, they were more or less the same size, they both had the same light brown hair. It would not be difficult to grow a beard and start wearing the dead man's clothes. He would take on the hermit's life and continue it for him, acting as though the soul of this man had now passed into his possession. [...] He would simply pretend to be someone he was not. (162)

With this new identity Barber - now Effing - ends his period of relegation into the cave and returns to his urban life, renting a room in a hotel of San Francisco. Though the self easily assumes another identity, its maintenance costs him a lot in terms of mental stability. Dissociation and imperfection renders the whole situation rather precarious. Effing's transformation for example does not resolve the question of his sense of guilt and only endangers his situation making it impossible for him to find some consolation in other people's company. The subject reaches a point in which the only thing he craves is oblivion: "for several months, he shut himself off the world, sleeping in his darkened room by day and venturing out to Chinatown at night [...] he was trying to drown in a degradation that would equal the loathing he felt for himself" (182).

Like Effing, Fanshawe, the vanishing character of *The Locked Room*, seems to have undergone the same transformation during his life. He not only has adopted a different name in order to preserve his identity<sup>24</sup>, but he has experienced as well the same momentous event after which everything has changed for him. How can we explain otherwise the sudden and unexpected passage that leads him to abandon the tranquility of his life as a married man who is having a child for his concrete alienation from the rest of the world? The narrator as well acknowledges the fact that he must have

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<sup>24</sup> The name Fanshawe has been using so far is Henry Dark (310), which following the twists of Auster's intertext is also the name Stillman Senior (*City of Glass*) chooses for the fictitious character of his book.

undergone some hardships in his past: “the Fanshawe I had known was not the same Fanshawe I was looking for. There had been a break somewhere, a sudden, incomprehensible break” (283).

### **Fragmented characters: inconsistency**

But as we have pointed out at the beginning of this section the inner fragmentation of Auster’s characters is not only conveyed by their elusive nature since many of them display also a temperamental inconsistency, which is expressed by a fractured body-image. Auster’s subjectivities are characterized by manifold contradictions that pervade the self, questioning its uniqueness and stability.

Hinting again at Sam Auster, this passage explains what Paul Auster intends for inconsistency:

The rampant, totally mystifying force of contradiction. I understand now that each fact is nullified by the next fact, that each thought engenders an equal and opposite thought. Impossible to say anything without reservation: he was good, or he was bad; he was this or he was that. All of them are true. At times I have the feeling that I am writing about three or four different men, each one distinct, each one a contradiction of all others. Fragments. (*Invention* 65)

As far as Auster’s fictional creations are concerned probably the most notable example of inconsistency can be found in *Leviathan* where the main character Sachs comprises within himself many different personalities, which is clear from the very beginning; in their first encounter in Nashe’s tavern the narrator Peter Aaron comes up with two totally different images of him: one comic, the other forlorn. When later on he comments on this encounter he says: “He resembled Ichabod Crane, perhaps, but he was also John Brown, and once you got past his costume and his gangly basketball forward’s body, you began to see an entirely different sort of person” (12). During their conversation all the different sides of his self merge one after the other and Aaron is forced to admit that it is impossible to restrict this character into the confines of a unified figure. Sachs “managed to combine a multitude of contradictions into a single, unbroken presence” (16)<sup>25</sup>. He is

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<sup>25</sup> In this sense Sachs is a jigsaw made up of different pieces that do not fit together as it was for Fanshawe whose figure is provided via the material the anonymous narrator has accumulated over the years. What emerges from letters, conversations and interviews is a conflicting personality, a Fanshawe that once appears as a thing and then as its opposite (282 – 283).

both a clumsy person and an excellent athlete; though his writings appear concise revealing a frugal use of words, his speeches are long and sometimes even superficial; he is a man that loves to be surrounded by people but who also manages to feel at home in the solitude of his room. All through his life he has always manifested an open adherence to the precepts of pacifism and he is so committed to this ideology that he has even spent a whole year in prison to defend it. Nevertheless the reader is told that Sachs used to despise his father for not having taken part in World War II. These contradictions mixed up in a single body convey an image of the individual who is apparently torn into many different pieces. Hence in hindsight it is logical to think of his death as the consequence of an explosion that disperses that body itself into dozen of little shreds. This is "the concretization of his metaphorically fragmented self" (112) as Ilana Shiloh perfectly sums up.

Characters in Auster's fictions also present within themselves different identities, as Dennis Barone correctly pointed out in the introduction of his *Beyond the Red Notebook*. The critic admits that in the majority of the novels "instead of a unified self we have [...] a self that can radiate toward infinite possible relations. As it radiates, it questions those relations" (15). In a passage of *City of Glass* old Peter Stillman claims that this infinite possibility of the self is perfectly expressed by the character of Quinn, or better by his name. During one of the encounters they have, Stillman comments: "I see many possibilities for this word, this Quinn. [...] It flies off in so many little directions" (74). Among Auster's different characters he is certainly the one in which this inner fragmentation is more evident. The reader is told in fact that for six months in a year, Quinn impersonates his alter ego William Wilson, the real author of his mystery novels. This literary pseudonym, taken from Edgar Allan Poe's short story, is the mask behind which Quinn preserves the tranquility of his secluded life not only from the social obligations of a writer, but also for the responsibilities this role would imply. That gradual withdrawal into the solitude of his apartment is symptomatic of Quinn's vanishing from the real world and it also coincides with the appearance of another part of his split self. This third fragment revolves around the figure of Max Work, the sharp and almost arrogant detective protagonist of Wilson's novels. In the triad of selves that is comprised in the character of Quinn, Work is probably the one with the most persistent presence: "Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him (Quinn), Work had increasingly come to life. [...] Little by little, Work had become a

presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude" (6). Quinn on the contrary, the one who is supposed to be the true self, the center of this triad, is gradually marginalized and loses his grip with reality bringing the subject to question his own stability. In Rubenstein's opinion internal fragmentation, as the title suggests, is a condition that would not regard only Quinn but every single individual who plays a part in this novel:

As each character in *City of Glass* splits and disintegrates into fragmentary doubles of himself and/or disappears as impersonators become the figures they impersonate, the narrative virtually doubles back on itself, threatening to cancel itself out. The title image thus suggests not so much a transparent surface as an opaque glass or the glass of a distorting mirror; alternatively glass connotes a fragile material, susceptible to shattering into multiple pieces, all of which reflect the same (multiplied) image. (251)

Paul Auster has always defined himself as an intuitive writer and he has repeatedly intimated that when he is working on a new novel he writes without being totally aware of what is going to occur to his fictional creations. This happens because he admits to follow "a certain kind of music or rhythm" that comes as "a buzz in the head" (*Conversations* 144). As a consequence of that, he never imposes his decisions or his choices onto the characters but hears their voices and simply accepts their gradual development throughout the novel. That is why each character in Auster's books "thinks differently, speaks differently, writes differently from the others" (*Hunger* 289).

Nonetheless we cannot but notice common elements in these stories as it has been pointed out in this chapter. Each account in fact presents a subject that, looking for order in a chaotic reality, faces the absurdity of his quest and his inner fragmentation. Auster with his fictional writings manages to capture that postmodern category of disorder first with the image of the labyrinth that characterizes urban places as well as the wilderness and then with the introduction of subjectivities that unveil the same essential problematic. Having outlined the failure of these investigations for order, from the next chapter I will turn my attention on the quest for meaning and absolute truth.

### Chapter III: meaning in meaninglessness

#### Auster's absurdism

With *The New York Trilogy* Paul Auster manages to present through three different variations of the same story, that existential paradox that better characterizes our nature of human beings: our desire to penetrate the world and the world intrinsic impenetrability. The protagonist of each novella, at a certain point of the narration acknowledges this ontological limit, which is perfectly conveyed by Auster through the image of the locked room that concludes the trilogy. Metaphorically speaking, the individual confronts the impossibility to grasp the truth that is assumed to be present beyond the closed door. The realization that the ultimate knowledge is unattainable always comes as a result of an arduous journey that terminates in the deepest frustration and disillusion.

For the recurrence and the insistence on this philosophical theme Auster's novels have been compared by many critics (Shiloh among the others) to the works of Albert Camus who develops his thoughts precisely on this disharmony, as he himself calls this paradox. Though presenting a universe that is silent and indifferent to human needs, as it is Auster's, Camus's arguments always leave the space for a solution.

In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* for instance, the French philosopher argues that the key to overcome the problems generated by the contrast between the world's essential meaninglessness and the human longing for meaning is to embody and accept this condition. The French philosopher comments in this way:

I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. (51)

Inhabiting this paradoxical condition which revolves around two certainties, the individual's "appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle" (51), the human being, in Camus's opinion, will experience the most profound form of freedom which is the freedom of

knowing in advance what is going to happen, of being released from the burden of having to take any decision. Camus also provides the example of Sisyphus, who courageously accepts his being constrained to repeat the same absurd action in an endless cycle. Sisyphus is aware of his condition and does not look for comfort in the mind's capacity to evade reality. He heroically faces the facts of his existence never questioning his situation.

This is what Auster's characters refuse to do. In each of the novels that I took into consideration, the main protagonist seems to know the fact that he should "embrace meaninglessness as the first principle" and that "his (only) obligation is to see what is in front of him and to say what he sees" (158), as A. clearly suggests in *The Invention of Solitude*, and yet this initial condition seems totally unacceptable. The character craves for an answer to his questions and he thinks to find it beyond those apparently meaningful correspondences and associations that are generated by the unpredictability of life and that connect the most disparate elements together.

As we have already pointed out at the beginning of this dissertation in the very first chapter, chance is the governing principle of Auster's universe. In such a world where irrationality and contingency dominate over rationality and causality, there is no space for the ultimate meaning as Camus supposed. Nevertheless in Auster's novels characters do not have the consolation of a solution. It is as though the absurdism of the French philosopher has been turned into a personal form of nihilism by the American writer and this nihilism characterizes every single subject.

From this general premise it is my intention to move on examining *The New York Trilogy* the first and most acclaimed of Auster's works, that in my opinion better represents the author's philosophical beliefs quoted above.

### **Detectives in *The New York Trilogy***

Nearly at the end of *The Locked Room*, the reader is told that the nameless narrator that has spoken so far, is also the author of the other two installments that, put together, form the trilogy. He unexpectedly reveals in fact, that "the three stories are finally the same story" (294). In hindsight, an attentive reader will notice that the three parts indeed share certain elements. For instance, they all start out in the same way: an external force sets the whole story in motion. The uniformity of a lethargic present ends and characters are confronted with a period of new activity. In each novel the initial

harmony is disrupted by a single event: in *City of Glass* it is said that “a wrong number started it” (1); in *Ghosts*, the second installment of the trilogy, it is a person named White that steps into the office of Blue and “this is how it begins” (137); finally in *The Locked Room* an unexpected letter reaches the protagonist.

All these three events have the same intent, which is that of requesting a person’s professional service. As a result of that, the main character’s daily routine is interrupted and suddenly his life takes a new direction providing them with a precise purpose.

The work they are asked to do, normally consists in trying to solve a mystery: Quinn has to keep an eye on a man who has been recently released from confinement; Blue has to spy on a stranger named Black; and finally the anonymous narrator of the *Locked Room*, has to find a writer who has disappeared. Though involving different situations their tasks slightly present the same structure: a subject following the steps of his counterpart and trying at the same time to gather clues that may be helpful to unveil the whole mystery. Due to the involvement of both closed inspection and legwork, every single assignment reproduces a typical detective work although among the three characters, only Blue is a real private eye working for an agency; the other two, Quinn and the nameless narrator, are writers who simply find themselves impersonating this seemingly rewarding role. Nevertheless they all expect the story to unfold in the same way and that is why they do not have the slightest hesitation when they accept the job.

In a typical detective work<sup>26</sup> in fact, there is the tacit assumption that through an attentive examination of the clues that ‘the criminal’ has left behind and a precise interpretation of signs and of evidence that emerge during the research, the private eye always succeeds in unveiling that hidden pattern that turns the initial jigsaw into a coherent and significant image. As Quinn argues:

The key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. (*Trilogy* 67)

The world of the detective in fact usually obeys a strict determinism, where each fact has precise consequences. With the correct reasoning the acute detective is able to

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<sup>26</sup> I am here referring to the tradition of detective fictions the three characters have in mind when they approach their case. Sherlock Holmes in *The Hound of Baskerville* and Auguste Dupin in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* are perfect examples.

rearrange the events in the proper order, grasping their logic and therefore understanding the meaning beyond the whole sequence.

In *The New York Trilogy* however this is not possible. Each detective tries to operate on their reality, using the traditional tools of the trade, but when they apply them, they become aware of the fact that the reality they confront turns out to be ungraspable. In Auster's stories, mind and world do not share the same principle: while the mind strives to follow a rational chain of cause and effects, the surrounding events are contingent and unpredictable. Nothing is certain anymore and chance is the only certitude. What is more, the reader witnesses a deliberate and gradual deconstruction of the plot, that cannot be interpreted as a linear and teleological progression of beginning, middle and end. Lastly, a conclusion/solution is always denied and the hard work all characters have been through does not have that promising reward they initially thought. The questions, which trouble the mind of Quinn, Blue and the nameless narrator at the beginning of the novel, are eventually left unanswered and their epistemological quest for truth ultimately fails or it is left unfulfilled. A role they thought would provide them a new purpose and therefore the stability they are looking for, leaves them with nothing at all as correctly pointed out by Little in this passage: "the detective [...] casts nets, transcribes events, and traces marks, but his calculations and representations lead to no final illumination, no climatic discovery" (133).

Quinn arrives at a point in which "he had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing" (104); the same disillusionment is felt by Blue, who admits that "he has learned a thousand facts, but the only thing they have taught him is that he knows nothing" (171); and finally the unnamed narrator who, looking back to what he has done, admits that it "amounted to a mere fraction of nothing at all" (209).

Starting from these general assumptions I will now focus my attention on each part of the trilogy trying to point out these elements that return with a certain regularity and that I have so far simply enumerated.

### **Quinn in *City Of Glass***

In describing the personality of Daniel Quinn in the previous chapter concerning internal chaos, I argued that he displays better than any one of his fictional counterparts that typical feature of Auster's characters, which is inner fragmentation. Inhabited by diverse and contrasting subjectivities, he strives to reach some form of stability, after

the death of his wife and little child. This stability, as already suggested, is not only provided by a quest for relocation but also by a quest for a purpose that would guarantee a glimmer of significance to his life.

As far as his role is concerned, at the beginning of the story the reader is told that Quinn is a writer of detective fictions whose monotonous and solitary existence is disrupted by a chance event, which offers him the possibility to reinvent himself. Later one night in fact, he receives a phone call from a person asking for “someone he was not” (1). In spite of hanging up, Quinn accepts to be the person, the stranger on the other end is looking for: Paul Auster. The new role he embodies is coincidentally that of a detective, not a fictional one as Max Work, the hero of his novels, but a real one, a private eye, who works for an agency. Fascinated with the possibility of abandoning the solitude of his apartment and finally entering a world that he has lived only through his fictions, he commits himself to the assignment that will set the whole story in motion. The task consists in protecting Peter Stillman (the stranger on the phone) and his wife from the harm, which may arrive on the part of Peter’s father. Member of a rich family and former Harvard professor, the elder Stillman has already endangered the life of his son, when he was only two, locking him up in a dark room of his apartment for nine years. That abduction was part of an insane project aimed at recreating that natural language that was spoken by men in their prelapsarian innocence antecedent the fall of the Tower of Babel. This abuse took place in 1960, the same year in which, according to Stillman’s visionary dissertation, a new pre-edenic world had to emerge. Persuaded by this compelling evidence, Quinn regards the recently paroled Stillman as a real menace to Peter’s safety.

With a typical detective attitude, Quinn launches himself on a tailing job following the traces left by the criminal through the streets of New York. Little by little he feels at ease in this new disguise, which permits him to forget his old self’s anguish. “The effect of being Paul Auster, he had begun to learn was not altogether unpleasant. [...] he felt as though he had somehow been taken out of himself, as if he no longer had to walk around with the burden of his own consciousness” (50). Furthermore the chase provides him with an objective and therefore a new meaning for his life.

There was now a purpose to his being Paul Auster – a purpose that was becoming more and more important to him – served as a kind of moral justification for the charade and absolved him of having to defend his lie. For imagining himself as

Auster had become synonymous in his mind with doing good in the world. (50 – 51)

And yet, after thirteen days of following Stillman in New York, Quinn begins to question the essential aim of his project confessing that “there seems to be no substance in the case” (64). First of all, rather than a dangerous criminal who is patiently waiting for the right time to enact his vicious plan, the elder Stillman looks like a harmless and disinterested archeologist who roams the city without a precise direction and sifts through that heap of discarded and apparently valueless objects he finds in his path. What is more, on a close inspection, his counterpart’s moves seem to be entirely arbitrary, no logic is to be found beyond them and this leaves Quinn deeply “disillusioned” (67).

Despite the evident confusion and lack of coherence between past artifacts and present clues, Quinn “continued to disbelieve the arbitrariness of Stillman’s actions. He wanted there to be a sense to them, no matter how obscure” (69). He knows too well that approaching reality as if it were one of his fictions, is a misleading and deceitful process, but this is something he cannot avoid. Refusing to accept meaninglessness as the first principle, Quinn rejects randomness and firmly expresses the idea that everything must be plotted in advance: this at least is how a detective story works.

“For no particular reason that he was aware of” (67) using the notes he has been taken while following the man around the city, he manages to recreate, on a clean page of his notebook, Stillman’s exact itineraries. He realizes that “he was looking for a sign. He was ransacking the chaos of Stillman’s movements for some glimmer of cogency” (69).

Continuing in this way he finds out that Stillman’s daily roaming hints at different letters of the alphabet that put together form part of a phrase: OWER OF BAB. “The solution seemed so grotesque that his nerve almost failed him. Making all due allowances for the fact that he had missed the first four days and that Stillman had not yet finished, the answer seemed inescapable: THE TOWER OF BABEL” (70). Whether these letters are part of message that Stillman intentionally wants to send to Quinn or whether they simply derive from the accidental combination of causal decisions are matters that the novel leaves open to debate and interpretation. What remains is their consequence: Quinn thinks he has finally found the key that leads to a possible solution, but this never happens (Stillman will disappear before the message is completed). What is more, the

result is “so oblique, so fiendish in its circumlocutions” (71) that its only appearance horrifies Quinn and makes him doubt of its existence:

He had imagined the whole thing. The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he had wanted to see them. And if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke. Stillman had nothing to do with it. It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself. (71)

The ambiguity of Stillman’s actions and the mind’s interpretation of a chance event, force the protagonist to make his next move. In order to find out what are Stillman’s real intentions he decides to approach the old man. This turns out to be a critical passage in Quinn’s life since it is at this point that the change of identity, and therefore of role, that was potentially latent now reaches its ultimate manifestation. While in the first part of his assignment, in which the sleuth limits himself to just shadowing his man - Auster “was no more than a name” for Quinn, “a husk without content” (61) - in the second part that starts with their first encounter, it is Quinn’s real name that is turned into a mask, a mere attachment of his true self. “Since he was technically Paul Auster, that was the name he had to protect. Anything else even the truth, would be an invention, a mask to hide behind and keep him safe” (74).

After these encounters that do not provide any useful information to solve the case but destabilize once more the protagonist’s ontological certainties, Stillman apparently vanishes from sight and Quinn’s role is put into question.

Taken for granted that the case needs for him not to be Quinn the writer, but Paul Auster the detective, he has always regarded this role as his only alternative to a promise of stability. Eventually he comes to the realization that it is impossible for him to be Paul Auster, since the identity of Paul Auster, the only one that results in the telephone book of New York, is already embodied by a real person who lives in Manhattan. The encounter with this Auster, that admits not to be a detective but a writer, turns out to be another momentous event in Quinn’s life. From now on in fact, the protagonist’s only desire is to having back his previous role and identity that was attached to it. However when he confronts his image on a shop mirror he “did not recognize the person he saw as himself. [...] he tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult” (120 - 121). Unable to see himself as Quinn he wards off the problem by admitting that “it did not really matter. He had been one thing before, and now he was

another. It was neither better nor worse. It was different, and that was all" (121). Although it seems to be a trivial detail, this transformation led to some important consequences. Back in his apartment in fact, after having discovered that the Stillman case is over (the old man has apparently committed suicide), Quinn finds his place completely changed and occupied by another person. After having staked all his money into a project that reaches a dead end and after having lost his apartment, which is the only thing that keeps him attached to the city, Quinn finally admits the failure of his detective task hence the meaninglessness of his life. Quinn acknowledges that he is not leaving in the coherent world of a detective fiction where every little detail is significant and bears secret connections with other facts or elements within the story. He lives in a world where "nothing is certain" (104) and every decision is always an "arbitrary submission to chance" (56). The protagonist's search for a meaning beyond those contingent events that take place in his life is therefore a pointless activity, as that of studying the formation of the clouds in the sky trying to predict what would happen to them and decipher their hidden meanings, as Quinn takes delight in doing (118). Finally he becomes aware that his decisions are entirely subjective and the images that come out are a mere production of a paranoid mind that always needs to satisfy his desire for meaning. "Nothing lasted for long" because the sky as well as the world "did not rest" (119).

### **Blue in *Ghosts***

At the beginning of the novel Blue seems to share the same position Quinn has in *City of Glass*. The fact that "he needs the work" and "he is waiting for something to happen" (137) informs the reader that he has been inactive for a period. Nonetheless Blue's life is very different from Quinn's: not only he has a role, working as a private eye for an agency in New York, but he is also not alone, since a future Mrs. Blue keeps returning in his thoughts. The appellative future would also imply that Blue's life, at least at the beginning, has a direction. However when he takes up the assignment everything suddenly changes, his life ceases to be future-oriented and it becomes suspended in a never-ending present reinforced first, at the beginning, by the intervention of the narrator who reveals that "the place is New York, the time is the present and neither one will ever change" (137) and then, during the narration, by the appropriate choice of the grammatical tense. As already suggested in the introduction to this chapter the story is get going by White whose stepping into Blue's office and life sets the stage for the whole

account. "White wants Blue to follow a man named Black and to keep an eye on him for as long as necessary" (137). The protagonist accepts the assignment with the awareness of committing himself on a case that is not different from the others he has been involved in the past, "perhaps even easier than most" (137). His employer has arranged everything renting a flat opposite to the building in which his man lives. Moving in there Blue takes with himself all the tools of the trade "his thirty-eight, a pair of binoculars, a notebook" (138) legitimizing once more his conviction of working on a common task. For the first days Blue seems to follow his old procedure that is based on the assumption that every case has its own meaning and, in order to unveil it a good detective should proceed gradually, first examining the facts and only then trying to give his personal interpretation. In particular, "his method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further" (148). Therefore he confronts reality suspending any form of judgment (140). Even the weekly reports he has to send to White are characterized by this approach and for this reason "action holds forth over interpretation" (148) and only "known and verifiable facts" (148) are inserted. As time passes, Blue realizes that the task he has committed himself to, has nothing to do with his previous works: his man occupies himself with reading, writing and eating. "Blue grows more and more discouraged" (141) and this uneasiness derives primarily from the fact that he is working on what he calls "a case with nothing to do" (141).

Like Quinn who peruses Stillman's movements through the streets of New York, Blue as well does not accept the evident meaninglessness of this project; he "keeps looking for some pattern to emerge, for some clue to drop in his path that will lead him to Black's secret" (154). Since "he knows that no rhyme or reason can be read into anything that's happened so far" (154) Blue's ignorance about the events should have detained him to make any contrived assumptions, but his desire to get to the truth and his certainties of inhabiting a reality that can be rationally explained are strong enough to influence his thoughts.

Blue's mind start to conjure up new plausible theories which initially were discarded as childish and preposterous notions. Black and White are therefore first assumed as brothers competing for an inheritance, once as rival scientists and then as FBI agents or members of an espionage organization.

Day by day the list of these stories grows, with Blue sometimes returning in his mind to an early story to add certain flourishes and details and at other times starting over again with something new. Murder plots, for instance, and kidnapping schemes for giant ransoms. As the days go on, Blue realizes that there is no end to the stories he can tell. (147)

Moreover he buys and reads a copy of *Walden* by Thoreau “thinking that perhaps there is some message in it for him, some glimpse of meaning that could make a difference” (154). The name of the publisher in fact, is coincidentally that of Black.

Deceitful meanings and misleading clues keep emerging rendering impossible for the detective to solve the mystery. Nearly at the end of the account these suspicions even endanger Blue’s sanity. Are White and Black conspiring against Blue? Is Black being paid by White to do nothing? Is Black just one man or he has a double somewhere? These are questions that leave Blue puzzled and disoriented.

When he finally finds the courage to act and confronts Black in his apartment he realizes he has been working on a case that has no essential purpose. Black and White are the same person a fact that becomes evident when Blue discovers his own reports on Black’s desk. For the sake of a meaning he is initially sure to find, Blue finally acknowledges that he has sacrificed an entire year of his life as well as the possibility of a future. The novel ends with Blue vanishing from the city concluding in this way that transformation into a shadow that initiates at the beginning of the story.

### **Unnamed narrator In *The Locked Room***

Almost at the end of *Ghosts*, Black relates to Blue, disguised as the homeless Jimmy Rose, the story of Wakefield, one of Hawthorne’s fictional creations, who one day without bothering to inform his wife simply steps out of his house, not coming back until the end of the story. This short passage anticipates the plot of the third and last chapter of the trilogy in which the nameless narrator’s childhood best friend, named Fanshawe - which is also the character of another of Hawthorne’s tales - “told [his pregnant wife] that he was going to New Jersey for the afternoon to see his mother and then he did not come back” (203). After having assumed his death, Fanshawe’s wife, Sophie, proceeds in realizing his husband’s last dispositions hiring the Narrator as a testamentary executor. Fanshawe as a prolific but disinterested writer has left a great number of works unpublished and the Narrator is asked to read his way through this large material

deciding whether it is worth publishing or not. When Sophie requests his help, our anonymous protagonist is not having a great time: short of money, he lives completely alone in a dingy apartment where he passes the time writing, not the great novel he has always desired to do, but modest literary reviews as he himself confesses: “for the past eight or nine years, my life had been a constant scrambling act, a frantic lunge from one paltry article to the next, and I considered myself lucky whenever I could see ahead for more than a month or two” (245). In other words, he is dissatisfied and directionless, he feels his life has already come to a dead point, and even if in his early thirties, “he felt old, already used up” (209).

For this reason the offer, though catching him slightly off guard, is perceived by the protagonist as that occasion he has been waiting for long to come, as his last “chance to redeem himself” (210) to become who he has always wanted to be.

The Narrator therefore immerses himself into Fanshawe’s material, that, once analyzed, turns out to be an extraordinary collection of works (poems, plays and especially novels) in which the writer has been able to prove all his talent and artistic genius. The Narrator gradually sets disposition so that every single piece of this extensive body of work is published. Artistic recognition together with a great income, mainly due to the sales of the first novel, asserts Fanshawe’s posthumous literary success. Through the works of Fanshawe the Narrator fulfills his desire of gaining popularity among the greatest writers.

This great period is also characterized by the Narrator’s romantic involvement with Sophie who results first in the marriage between the couple and then in the adoption of Fanshawe’s son, Ben. Job career and family therefore, provide that purpose he lacked at the beginning of the novel giving to his life an entirely new significance.

It is at this point, when the process of occupation of the vacant space left by Fanshawe seems to be completed - the nameless protagonist has in fact inherited the outcomes of his erstwhile friend’s endeavors in literature and in love - that the Narrator’s life starts to crumble again.

The harmonious and perfect world he has managed to recreate around himself suddenly collapses the day he receives an anonymous letter, which is immediately considered as a message from Fanshawe, a clear sign of his inescapable presence. This is a turning point in the life of the protagonist who rapidly precipitates into the abyss of paranoia. The Narrator’s obsession turns Fanshawe into a haunting presence that threatens his mental stability. Though released by the preoccupation of finding a job and busy with the

gratifying duties of domestic life, his mind cannot completely enjoy this period. The uncanny image of his supposedly dead friend keeps following him impeding his concentration.

I went into my room every morning, but nothing happened. [...] I started a number of projects, but nothing really took hold, and one by one I dropped them. [...] I let my mind drift without purpose, hoping to persuade myself that idleness was proof of gathering strength, a sign that something was about to happen. (246)

With nothing to do his only activity is that of copying parts of books, something that perfectly conveys his aimless present situation. The Narrator's life experiences therefore another halt, with no future prospects he feels once again directionless. However, after a month, one of those unexpected and contingent events, that shape the existence of Auster's fictional characters, finally provides him a way out from this impasse.

During a conversation with the editor of Fanshawe's works, a new idea sets in and it almost immediately attracts the Narrator's weak mind. "Whatever it was I put up very little resistance to it. It came at a vulnerable time for me, and my judgment was not all it should have been. This was my second crucial mistake, and it followed directly from the first" (246).

The idea the Narrator and the editor discuss in this encounter is that of writing a biography about Fanshawe. The fascination this project displays derives primarily from the fact that the Narrator will have an excuse to do some research on his friend's past and finally solve the mystery of his disappearance. His obsession only foments his desire to find out where his counterpart is hiding, in order to confront him and finally eradicate his existence from this world. In his mind in fact, it is all a matter of returning to the time prior to the letter, when his stability was granted by the awareness of Fanshawe's death and hence of occupying a vacant and stable role. "I wanted to kill Fanshawe. I wanted Fanshawe to be dead, and I was going to do it. I was going to track him down and kill him" (268).

In his mistaken convictions a rational approach to the facts would permit him to unearth the mystery and grasp a solution. As a result of it, his job is soon compared to that of a detective since it basically consists in "piecing together the story of a man's life [...] gathering information, collecting names, places, dates, establishing a chronology of events" (269). After having talked with Fanshawe's mother and having met few acquaintances from his past, he attempts to sketch out, Quinn-like, his counterpart's

movements. "Faced with a million bits of random information, led down a million paths of false inquiry, I had to find the one path that would take me where I wanted to go" (283). This path leads him to France where Fanshawe has actually lived for a long period of his life. Despite his convictions, his quest irremediably fails: he not only loses track of Fanshawe, but he loses track of himself. The month spent in Paris without his wife and little son endangers his mental sanity. He literally drowns into the multitude of void associations and correspondences his mind has constructed finally claiming that "there were no leads, no clues, no tracks to follow. Fanshawe was buried somewhere, and his whole life was buried with him" (289).

As Fanshawe remains hidden from sight, the Narrator survives a mental breakdown and comes back to New York. Here he strives to win back his wife and child, who he has previously abandoned committing himself to Fanshawe's original mistake.

The novel and the quest end in Boston where the Narrator is sent after having received a second letter from his friend. Unlike Blue in *Ghosts*, the Narrator is not able to confront directly his counterpart. Fanshawe in fact, hides his figure behind the door of a locked room, which finally concretizes with its impenetrability the quest's ultimate failure to get to the truth. Unable to comprehend Fanshawe's behavior and to read his memoirs included in the red notebook that should motivate his choices and explain his whole life, the Narrator is left with nothing: no answer is provided. Fanshawe's enigma remains unsolved and his disturbing presence goes on haunting the protagonist until the very last page. Fanshawe's repeatedly threats to kill himself can never be staged for good and therefore even the protagonist's desire to occupy a vacant position will never be realized. In conclusion, the Narrator's sureness of finding his old stability faces the inevitable unpredictability of life. As he himself admits: "the circumstance under which life shift course are so various that it would seem impossible to say anything about a man until he is dead" (255).

### **Other Detectives**

When *The New York Trilogy* was published literary critics and scholars immediately understood that this was a mystery novel of sorts, distant from the traditional conventions of the genre that dated back to the first works of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, and innovative in respect with the hard-boiled detective fiction à la

Raymond Chandler. Dealing with a barely new model<sup>27</sup>, the majority of these critics (Rowen, Russell and Sorapure among others) refer to the term anti-detective fiction, which was first introduced by the critic William Spanos. This term appeared for the first time in the essay *The Detective and The Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination*, where it has been defined as “the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination” whose “formal purpose is to evoke the impulse to detect and/or to psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime” (154).

The three stories I have previously examined, perfectly embody this frustration, considering that the protagonist-detective embarks on a project to unearth a mystery only to confront the fact that no solution is finally offered: the mystery, if there is any, must remain unsolved.

If we look at Auster’s entire body of work to find other examples of this peculiar genre, we will notice that *The New York Trilogy* stands out as a limited case. Though vaguely reminiscent and indebted to this work in fact, Auster’s following texts abandon the typical unrealistic and noir atmosphere which has pervaded the three installments, venturing out into the exploration of other territories. The books I have considered so far in fact, do not revolve around the same situations or themes. In *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* for instance there are no references to private investigators or tail jobs and there is no allusion to a mystery that needs to be solved. As for the *Leviathan*, a novel that presents many aspects in common with the trilogy and in particular with *The Locked Room*, my approach will be slightly different. As I will explain presently, I will focus my attention entirely on Sachs, the protagonist of this story, and his quest, that is much more personal in respect with his biographer Aaron, whose search will remind the reader of the nameless narrator of the third part of the trilogy.

Although in these three texts the framework evolves into something different, there is one thing that remains unchanged: the epistemological quest of the characters in a reality deprived of any meaning.

Even if they are not hired to solve a nerve-racking case or to track down a missing person, Fogg, Nashe and Sachs still commit themselves to a quest for understanding which is, in certain ways, analogous to Quinn’s and his companions’. The epistemological

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<sup>27</sup> Critics normally hint at Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, and Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, and few other works by Jorge Luis Borges and Alain Robbe-Grillet as initiators of this genre.

work of interpretation they undertake is so intense and meticulous that it resembles a detective assignment in all its aspects. If the detective is “the one who looks, who listens who moves through the morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them” (*Trilogy* 8) their role is not very different. From the outset they are introduced as directionless and incomplete characters that aspire to reach some form of relief in their life providing it with a specific purpose. In their opinion, they believe they will obtain the answer to their questions through a correct understanding of reality and its transcendence. Even if they do not work on a real detective case Fogg, Nashe and Sachs are still meaning seekers, subjects in pursuit for the ultimate truth.

Their quest, just like that of Quinn and his companions, has to confront the reality they inhabit. As I have pointed out in the long paragraph that opens the second chapter of this dissertation, Auster’s world is fundamentally governed by the forces of chance and contingency. In such a universe “Where all is intractable, where all is hermetic and evasive”, as correctly claimed by Auster through the voice of his alter ego A., “one can do no more than observe” (20). Subjective interpretation and further judgment in fact, would be pointless since there is no possibility to reduce a reality that for its very nature is ambiguous and unpredictable.

Nonetheless characters do not limit themselves to a mere observation of the facts, they always go beyond them and in this respect they act according to their nature. They succumb to the tempting idea of finding out a secret pattern that will connect and, in their opinion explain, those different elements that make up their stories.

They do not accept the fact that some events are merely accidents, void of any significance and for this reason they strive to find out a specific logic beyond them, as a good detective would do. That is why those happenstances that normally refuse any plausible explanation, such as striking coincidences and weird connections, acquire a certain importance and are seen as tools to understand how reality functions. But this superimposition is the consequence of a deceit that the mind triggers when confronting the unpredictable; in spite of recognizing the work of randomness these characters attach a meaning that is totally artificial. Auster points out this aspect in his *The Invention of Solitude* where, as the fictional character A., he admits that:

he craves a meaning. Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a connection between two fragments he is tempted to look for a meaning in that connection. The connection exists. But to give it a meaning, to look beyond the

bare fact of its existence, would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world, and he knows it would not stand. (158)

Going beyond the simple observation of facts and attaching a meaning to void chance events is what turns a common detection into a form of paranoia. As for the detectives of the trilogy, Fogg, Nashe and Sachs rely on those unpredictable occurrences that happen in their life endowing them with a meaning even where there is none. This deceit can be finally ascribed to apophenia, that phenomenon that has been defined as the “unmotivated seeing of connections accompanied by a specific feeling of abnormal meaningfulness” (Brugger). It is this “abnormal meaningfulness” that persuades the characters to continue their research for truth, a research that ends with the same frustration and disillusionment of the Trilogy. Artificial meanings “do not stand”, they simply help the characters to temporarily evade the bitterness of a reality deprived of an intrinsic significance.

The last part of this chapter will be divided into three sections. Each of them will examine the quest of a single character. Following the order of publication of the novels I will deal first with Fogg in *Moon Palace* (1989), then I will move on talking about Nashe in *The Music of Chance* (1991), and finally I will conclude my analysis with Sachs in *Leviathan* (1992).

### **Fogg in *Moon Palace***

*Moon Palace*, spanning the incidents and mishaps of three different generations, has been widely referred to as a detailed account of the American society, starting from the Edison and Tesla controversy at the beginning of the century and ending with the Moon landing and the Vietnam War in the early 70s. This novel has been read as well, as an attempt made by the author to oppose the two incompatible natures of America: the peaceful Indian heritage and the gritty industrial present.

Although historical elements do saturate the entire novel and a sentiment of nostalgia permeates the passages that refer to native peoples, *Moon Palace* is primarily Marco Stanley Fogg’s biography written by himself. It is the story narrated by a former undergraduate student at Columbia University, a modern Tom Sawyer, whose picaresque adventures lead him to live many different situations: from a down and out experience in New York to a love relationship with a Chinese girl named Kitty Wu; from

the job as a daily companion of an eccentric old man to the mysterious encounter with his unknown father. Immersed in the revolutionary ethos of the America of that period<sup>28</sup>, the protagonist of this book is an intellectual who “reflects the aspirations and mindset of the collective American national consciousness at a time of intense and unprecedented social and political upheaval” (Martin 77). In that pursuit of stability that represents his ideal of happiness, Fogg confronts an indifferent world in which he will never obtain the object of his desire but only realizes, as many other Auster’s characters, the futility of his quest.

At the beginning of the novel Fogg is introduced as the sole exponent of his family parentage: one of the many fatherless sons that populate Auster’s fictions, he lives with his mother until her premature death at the age of 29. Only eleven, with a life that seems to have no direction and no meaning, the kid moves to Chicago where he lives with Uncle Victor, his mother’s elder brother. Raised by this cheerful and bizarre man, who earns his life playing the clarinet in a mediocre band, Fogg manages somehow to overcome the early trauma of his childhood by finding some sort of equilibrium. It is in this period that Fogg struggles to find his way turning his life into a series of existential experiences. He moves to New York where he starts studying at Columbia, he accepts a job in a bookstore and he spends the summer going out with some friends and “falling in and out of love with a girl named Cynthia” (17). But everything suddenly changes again when he discovers that his Uncle has suddenly dropped dead somewhere in Boise while on tour with his band. The unpredictability of the event, that in many ways reminds the reader of Auster’s father “death without warning” (*Invention* 5), dismantles those few defenses Fogg has striven to erect against the strokes of chance. Viewed as the worst blow he has ever had (2) this loss produces a series of traumatic changes in the protagonist’s life. The death of his beloved Uncle not only awakes the old anguish that seems to have been fully absorbed, but it also deprives the protagonist of his only connection with the rest of the world “my one link to something larger than myself” (2), leaving him completely alone to cope with his grief and sorrow. From this moment on Fogg acknowledges the fact that he begins “to vanish into another world” (3). He gives up on life and stops caring about the future; with no interest to look for a job, he goes on with his studies only to keep faith to the promise he once made to his Uncle. What is

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<sup>28</sup> As Auster himself confirms in an interview: “the action begins in 1969 and doesn’t get much beyond 1971” (*Conversations* 12).

more he severs all the ties that connect him to the society refusing any kind of help that may derive from his university especially in the form of scholarships and loans, intensifying in this way his destitution and loneliness. With no money and no friends to count on, he embarks on a transcendental experience, aimed at resurrecting what it seems to be the lost meaning of his life. This solitary business, a course he has carved out with almost ascetic persistence and resilience, consists of a strict regime of self-degradation.

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 on a militant refusal to take any action at all. This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition. (20)

In his opinion in fact by reducing his body to a “gathering zero” (24) he wishes to bring out his true self. In the same way, by committing himself to a gradual annihilation the chaotic meaninglessness of the world will rearrange into something sensible, into a message that, correctly interpreted, should provide him a new direction, a new role for his life. At least this is what he will confess later on in the novel: “I decided to give up the struggle [...] I thought that abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form of pattern that would help me to penetrate myself” (78).

The first step in this process of self-degradation consists in reaching an inner state of “palpable, burgeoning emptiness” (24) that is achieved throughout the selling of all his material belongings. Fogg therefore progressively divests himself of his inheritance selling the extensive collection of books that once belonged to his Uncle. Once sold, the books leave a fundamental void in Fogg’s apartment since they were contained in several boxes that, assembled together, had formed his imaginary furniture. Following that analogy, which in Auster’s poetics equates the room to the self, the external emptiness mirrors the void present within the character.

Consequently Fogg cuts up all his superfluous expenses buying for himself the cheapest clothes and disconnecting the telephone and electricity; he gives up smoking, drinking and eating out as well. These changes are so abrupt and sudden that his closest friends are even startled by this transformation (25).

Finally his last act involves a total refusal of food. His restriction to a meal a day is a choice that does not depend only on his financial problems, but it is a decision the individual consciously embraces. Eating less and less, he reaches the final stage of his process, that ideal of the absolute zero. Fogg commits himself to the same route another Auster's character already traced. In *City of Glass* Quinn undergoes the same task learning that:

The greatest danger [...] was in eating too much. If he took in more than he should, his appetite for the next meal increased, and thus more food was needed to satisfy him. By keeping a close and constant watch on himself, Quinn was gradually able to reverse the process. His ambition was to eat as little as possible, and in this way to stave off his hunger. In the best of all worlds, he might have been able to approach absolute zero, but he did not want to be overly ambitious in his present circumstances. Rather he kept the total fast in his mind as an ideal, a state of perfection he could aspire to but never achieve. (115)

This almost transcendental experience seems to have his effect. Fogg in fact remembers this as one of the happiest period of his life. He begins to see hidden connections wherever he looks. Free associations alternate each other until reality begins to appear in a different light, "everything starts to shine, to give off a new and astonishing clarity" (31). Happenstances from his recent and past life, which have assumed with their reiterating symbolism a new kind of meaning, are mixed up with some peculiar historical events<sup>29</sup>. He feels as if the world were disclosing some hidden fundamental truth. "I was going mad, perhaps, but I nevertheless felt a tremendous power surging through me, a gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things" (32). As he later on will admit, this illuminating period only lasts few days after which he is back into the chaotic and incomprehensible "world of fragments" (32). Dealing with a precarious situation, he ponders about his future only to recognize that even plotting his next move has become problematic:

I had lost the ability to think ahead, and no 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 had gradually overwhelmed the rest. I had no ideas

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<sup>29</sup> For example he is startled by "the coincidence of having met a man named Neil Armstrong in Boise, Idaho, and then watching a man by the same name fly off into outer space (31)".

anymore. The moments unfurled one after the other, and at each moment the future stood before me as a blank, a white page of uncertainty. (40 – 41)

With no money left to pay his rent, Fogg is forced to leave his flat and find his new home in the streets. Here, in spite of recognizing the fact that his project has reached a critical point, he adamantly holds his position. Faith in contingency and aimlessness still characterizes his actions and behaviors, as the reader understands from his account:

I had no clear idea of what I was going to do. When I left my apartment on the first morning, I simply started walking, going wherever my steps decided to take me. If I had any thought at all, it was to let chance determine what happened, to follow the path of impulse and arbitrary events. (49)

Fogg lets himself be deceived by those contingencies that stumble into his life and that, in his opinion, are anything but clear evidences that the course he has traced so far, despite the countless difficulties he has overcome, is eventually the right one for him. Finding a ten dollar bill on the sidewalk and entering in a movie theater in the exact moment *Around the World in 80 Days*, the movie that has profoundly influenced his childhood, is shown on the screen, are seen respectively as “a religious event, an out-and-out miracle” (50) and a tangible proof that his life is “under the protection of benevolent spirits” (52). He later on recognizes these errors, but in line with his philosophy of radical passivity he does nothing at all to change his project. “My self-absorption was so intense that I could no longer see things for what they were: objects became thoughts, and every thought was part of the drama being played out inside me” (53). In other words, Fogg takes the momentous events that occur in his life and attributes them a meaning they do not properly have. If it is true that these thoughts comfort somehow the troubled mind, it is also true that they are mere artificial constructions that push the individual away from his reality. For this reason that “incontrollable sense of happiness and well-being” (50) they immediately generate, is nothing but an illusion that does not last for long. Deceived in this process, Fogg restricts himself to a path that does not bring him to confront the ultimate truths about the world as he initially thought, but that only leads him to face his own failure (78).

The self-destructive project Fogg has been involved in for the past two years ends not for his own decision but for the intervention of an external force, represented in his case by the love of other people. Due to the persistence and generosity of his former flatmate

David Zimmer and a relative stranger, a Chinese girl named Kitty Wu, Fogg manages to survive and recovers completely from his past deprivation regaining not only his strengths, but also his lost confidence about the future. Physically and mentally reestablished, he enters a new phase of his life in which he changes completely his outlook. Acknowledging his previous mistakes, he assumes his own responsibilities and finds a new role and therefore a new purpose for himself.

It is in this period that he starts a love relationship with Kitty Wu, the girl who saves him from death. As many other events in Fogg's life, even this one is characterized by a high degree of unpredictability: a combination of casual encounters and curious correspondences intersecting each other.

Their first meeting for example occurs by chance few days before Fogg's eviction. Short of money and friends, in a critical moment, Fogg desperately tries to track down David Zimmer. Not receiving any answers from the letters he has sent, he decides to pay him a visit only to find out that his flat has been taken over by other people. It is here that, among a group of "musicians, dancers (and) singers" sitting around a table, he first sees Kitty. Coincidence haunts their first encounter in the form of strange correspondences. As chance would have it in fact, the girl happens to be wearing the same Mets T-shirt as Fogg. As a result of this accidental event, they are introduced as spiritual twins. As their relationship progresses this mystical interconnection between the two, reasserts its validity especially in the moment of the rescue in Central Park. In Fogg's opinion in fact, Kitty's success in such a complicated task as finding someone in a city as big as New York, can only be explained by this bond that has somehow related the two individuals. This event confirms his vision in which "causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe" (61) suggesting as well the fact that he is still motivated to search for a hidden meaning everywhere. For her unexpected intrusion in his life and for her salvific effect, Kitty ceases to be considered a common girl in Fogg's eyes, and starts to bear a divine resemblance. "The beautiful Chinese had dropped down in front of me, descending like an angel from another world" (92).

With this love relationship the character definitely abandons his past condition of radical passivity letting himself be actively involved as a social being.

With a new meaning his life acquires a new direction as well and Fogg reaches that stability he initially has pursued. Future starts to be discussed again and new plans and ideas emerge continually. In addition money ends to be a problem for Fogg since his

dwindling funds are restored thanks to the inheritance that he receives after Effing's death.

An extraordinary period followed after that. For the next eight or nine months, I lived in a way that had never been possible for me before, and right up to the end, I believe that I came closer to human paradise than at any other time in the years I have spent on this planet. [...] I had been lost in the desert, and then, out of the blue, I had found my Canaan, my promise land. (222)

Even this positive phase of his life eventually comes to an end. Once again happiness in Auster's world is never a long-lasting condition, but it is always a temporary break between moments of despair. Everything in fact suddenly changes when Fogg finds out about Kitty's pregnancy. Fogg's only chance to become a father is denied by Kitty's abortion. This event destabilizes that "supernatural harmony" (271) the two of them have been able to create in a Chinatown that has acquired the connotation of a paradise (266). What it is said to be a stable relation built on solid foundations reveals all its fragility.

From this moment on his life begins to disintegrate for the second time. To cope with this loss Fogg embarks on a journey to the west with Solomon Barber, Thomas Effing's son. Their plan is to spend a brief period of time away from New York, find the cave in which Effing has lived as an ascetic and then come back. However during their journey something unexpected takes place. Opting for a "sentimental detour" (280) they head to the cemetery where Fogg's mother and uncle are buried. Here Barber, unable to control his emotion, reveals to have been more than just Emily Fogg's teacher, but also her onetime lover and therefore that father Fogg has never known to have. On the confusion that has been generated after this revelation Barber accidentally tips and falls into an open grave. Two months of operations and medical treatments are not sufficient and the man eventually dies for the injuries reported after this fatal tumble.

For the second time in his life Fogg finds himself alone to cope with the traumatic aftermath of a loss. The finding of his father and his sudden and tragic death, catch him into a downward spiral of desperation and depression only suspended by his last occasion to endow his life with meaning, an occasion provided once again by chance.

I understood that chance had taken me in the right direction. Without stopping to think about it, I had been following the road to the west, and now that I was on my way, I suddenly felt calmer, more in control of myself. I would do what Barber and I had set out to do in the first place, I decided, and knowing that I had a purpose,

that I was not running away from something so much as going toward it, gave me the courage to admit to myself that I did not in fact want to be dead. (294)

His last purpose is to find Effing's cave. When he finally finds its position he discovers that the waters of Lake Powell have recently inundated the entire zone, rendering in this way impossible for him to reach his prearranged destination. Wondering what to do next, he acknowledges his impasse: "my sense of defeat was so enormous that I failed to think of anything" (296). With another absurd twist this adventure becomes even more tragic in its consequences. The reader is told in fact that during the exploration of the lake Fogg has been robbed of all his possessions, that consist in his inheritance (received after his newfound father's death) and his car. This event, which is described as a "prank of the gods" (297), is also the final act of Fogg's quest for meaning in which the cave, the object of his desire, metaphorically stands for that truth that is ultimately unattainable in his universe. Fogg is first tempted and then eventually deluded and this delusion is finally conveyed by the conformation of this quest, which is characterized by its profound circularity. The Fogg that almost died in Central Park displays no absolute differences with the Fogg that ends the narrative walking through the immensity of the western states to the Pacific Ocean. Both of them have no material belongings and no friends to count on. Destitute and alone, the protagonist has to resume his existential quest for a meaning and a role, aware that it will be in all respects absolutely absurd.

### **Nashe in *The Music of Chance***

In the second chapter of this thesis I focused my attention on Jim Nashe and his peregrinations around the country. I argued that his journey is an attempt to find a fixed position in the world and that he seems to have finally found it in "the realm of weightlessness" (11) that is, in his car. I also asserted that all his endeavors miserably fail when he realizes that the happiness he feels is not something real, but an artificial construction he has created around himself. What I did not include in this previous analysis is the fact that this quest for order proceeds in parallel with another one, a quest for a purpose.

When Nashe leaves Boston to start his restless meanderings he is at point zero: he has no role, thus his life has no essential meaning. He has been a husband, but only recently his wife Thérèse walked out of him; he has been a father, but his position has been

usurped by his brother-in-law; he had a career at the fire department, but he decides to give it up. Relieved of what in any case made his life significant and supported by an unexpected colossal windfall, he takes the road opening himself up to the forces of the unpredictable. “For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out” (1). The decision to end his previous life is metaphorically conveyed by the act of killing his old self: “He felt like a man who had finally found the courage to put a bullet through his head – but in this case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds” (9). The real event that marks this transition from his urban stillness to these “new worlds” mobility occurs one day and it is part of those phenomena that may be included under the term that gives the title to this book: music of chance<sup>30</sup>.

He was planning to go back to Massachusetts, but as it happened, he soon found himself traveling in the opposite direction. That was because he missed the ramp to the freeway – a common enough mistake – but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up to the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. (5)

This fortuitous error generates a series of consequences that he cannot expect and that, as he hoped, might give a new significance to his life. Welcoming his new role as a wanderer he changes his usual routine conforming himself to the exigencies of the road and this new life that is made up of constant shifting, few unavoidable stops and the always impending presence of contingency. Dragged from one place to another, he finally ends up consuming almost all of his inheritance. He realizes that the essence of his new life as a wanderer depends primarily on money, as the engine that keeps him going. Once he acknowledges that he has no funds anymore he reaches a point in which he is stuck, “the problem could no longer be ignored. His future was precarious, and unless he made some decision about when to stop, he would barely have a future at all” (16). It was then that he bumps into an unexpected encounter (the second chance event that opens up a new phase for his life), whose singularity is anticipated at the beginning of the story: “three days into the thirteen month, he met up with the kid who called

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<sup>30</sup> Generally speaking, the first part of the book in its entirety is “a collage of chance events” (Woods qtd. in Barone 146). Nashe’s legacy derives from the substances his father gathered playing the stock market and its reaching Nashe passes through a chance meeting with his father’s lawyer.

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” (1). Nashe cannot help noticing the exceptional nature of this event that happens precisely when he is craving for a sign. Though only implicit, the synchronicity of it is clear:

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)

After this encounter Nashe’s life undergoes another transition, it ceases to be characterized by travels and mobility and it becomes characterized by stagnation, high rate risks and uncertainties; in other words, he divests himself of the role of the wanderer and assumes that of the gambler. In particular, he stakes all his money into the poker game this stranger named Pozzi is going to play and that he is also confident of winning. Nashe knows that this is a “crazy scheme” (33), that what he is going to face is a “blind leap of faith” (33), but nevertheless he is “willing to take the risk” (33). What is supposed to be an insane and inexplicable decision, namely that of trusting this kid, acquires a certain sense in light of those positive signals and striking coincidences that keep leaping out after their encounter.

The first of these positive signals comes from the name. Pozzi’s friends call him Jackpot (22) which is a proof, according to Nashe, of the guy’s natural talent for poker and his inclination towards success.

Another sign is the attraction that Nashe shows for Pozzi. Even though his looks would have discouraged anyone from trusting him (he is introduced in the novel as a beaten and penniless character), Nashe feels a sort of magnetic attraction, something he cannot control or even explain. “There was something fascinating about this kid, and it was hard not to grant him a sort of grudging respect” (33).

And of course after that there are those strange coincidences that, emerging in Pozzi’s story of his life, help to create a secret bond between the two men. “All during Pozzi’s reminiscences, Nashe had inevitably thought about his own boyhood, and the curious correspondence he found between their two lives had struck a chord in him” (45). Pozzi and Nashe were both abandoned by their father, a vanishing figure who disappeared

from their life when they were just children. Grown up with their mother, they harbored the same harsh sentiment, an enduring and profound anger that constantly emerged from their soul. Furthermore they both received an unexpected windfall: in both cases a huge sum of money that has changed their life completely. Woven together, all these coincidences and positive signals create a precise pattern in Nashe's mind. The protagonist's mistake of course is that of endowing this pattern with an abnormal meaning and that of taking this meaning as an absolute truth. Though the character is aware of this deceit, he cannot avoid it as it is explained later on in a passage:

Once a man begins to recognize himself in another, he can no longer look on that person as a stranger. Like it or not, a bond is formed. Nashe understood the potential trap of such thinking, but at that point there was little he could do to prevent himself from feeling drawn to this lost and emaciated creature. The distance between them had suddenly narrowed. (45)

This faith that relies simply on some fortuitous events draws Nashe into the abyss that is characterized by his last change of status (from gambler to prisoner) and the failure of his quest.

When Nashe first meets Flower and Stone, the two amiable eccentrics Pozzi is going to play with, he lets himself be confused by the kid's previous comments on the couple and he immediately labels them as two buffoons, another version of Laurel and Hardy. This thought accompanies Nashe during all his permanence at their mansion and it is even reinforced by the infantile and almost ridiculous behavior of his hosts. "Pozzi had been right all along: Flower and Stone were no more than grown-up children, a pair of half-wit clowns who did not deserve to be taken seriously" (79).

Nevertheless when the game starts it turns out to be anything but easy. After a promising beginning Pozzi starts losing heavily. Not worrying about this drastic situation, Nashe provides the kid with another twenty-three hundred dollars (his last remains) and then, not seeing any improvement, he even offers his car as a collateral. When Pozzi loses again, in order to take back his car, Nashe decides to "risk everything in the blind turn of a card" (185), as he later on would comment. But again Pozzi is beaten by Stone. At this point, compelled to pay back the debt they have incurred into, the two men remain at Flower and Stone's mansion to erect a wall with the ten thousand stones that belonged to an Irish castle the millionaires had bought and imported from Ireland. The game that in Nashe's ideas should have given him back his lost freedom,

here unfolds all his tragic consequences: they become prisoners of two individuals that force them into an absurd and senseless task they, though regretfully, must accept. As a consequence of the game (an event which, together with the skills of the player, presents a great degree of unpredictability due to the element of chance) Nashe's role varies again for the third and last time.

Nashe realized how thoroughly things had changed for them. He and Pozzi had been stripped of their status, and henceforth they would no longer be treated as invited guests. They had been reduced to the level of hired hands, tramps who come begging for leftovers at the back door. (102 - 103)

Having lost their status of gamblers, Nashe has to recognize the fact that "he and Pozzi no longer counted" (103); "they had been relegated to the category of nonpersons" (103). They have lost their humanity becoming mere instruments exploited by the two millionaires. This stripping up of his temporary role and purpose and his new assignment comes as an example of the tragic failure that he has been facing from the very beginning. Seeking for a purpose he lets himself be influenced by those events that subvert the linearity and predictability of his life or that, in Woods's words, "disrupt the logic of causality" (qtd. in Barone 146). Regarding them as transitional and momentous events that put an end to each phase of his existence, he conjures up a new meaning, something totally artificial, that deceives his mind. Apophenia is a constant presence, a phenomenon that keeps returning in the life of the individual who cannot but experience this downward movement toward failure. At the end, even a rational character as Nashe, the one who has displayed in the long run the greater skepticism towards what happens around him, is affected by this existential trap. The message is clear: no one is immune to the effects of apophenia since everyone acts according to his nature; thus tragedy is a common denominator in all Auster's stories.

*The Music of Chance* terminates with Nashe, who, driving his car at full speed, faces the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. Though the end of the novel is left suspended - the reader does not know whether Nashe avoids or not the collision - previous events hold no promises of anything good.

The first hint of a possible tragic ending comes from Pozzi's second beating which happens suddenly one day during their seclusion in the meadows and which leaves the kid completely unconscious and half dead. After the kid's beating and his consequent abandonment of the mansion, Nashe starts to experience a period of depression mainly

caused by loneliness. He spends his days through nostalgia and sorrow, drinking himself into a stupor and listening to requiem masses (163). He sinks “to the depths of a lurid, imponderable sadness” (163) and refuses any form of consolation and distraction that may derive from reading books or other leisure activities. “His domestic routines became dry and meaningless, a mechanical drudgery of preparing food and shoveling it into his mouth, of making things dirty and cleaning them up, the clockwork of animal functions” (163). Eventually he gets “close to the point of mental collapse” (170). Deprived of anything precious he had (from his daughter to his friend and money) Nashe finally recognizes that his life has no significance, no ultimate purpose. Therefore his last journey on his car may be interpreted as his final attempt to feel that old sense of happiness before the collision.

### **Sachs in *Leviathan***

*Leviathan* is the story of Benjamin Sachs told from the perspective of his friend Peter Aaron. The account traces back their first meeting at Nashe’s tavern in the West Village and it portrays the series of events that bring Sachs to his tragic death, somewhere in northern Wisconsin. In this novel as in many other Auster’s books, the main protagonist goes under a process of self-reflection that forces him to reconsider his life and his own identity. In a desperate search for a purpose, he calls into question the role he has been impersonating for a while, that of the writer. According to Sachs in fact, the written word has lost all the power it had to convey a profound message. He realizes that the act of writing has become an obsolete and irrelevant practice since the ideas and the thoughts that a book contains hardly ever reach a great audience in contemporary society. Having lost faith in the power of language and influenced by some anarchic theories, he embarks on a rather more “active” project. Wishing to resurrect that idea of freedom he assumes America has lost during the last century, he aims at destroying its very symbol: The Statue of Liberty. Under the guise of the Phantom of Liberty he attacks the small-scale replicas of the monument that are present in many cities around the country. It is exactly in one of these attacks that a bomb he is arming accidentally goes off and blows him to pieces.

What I want to point out in this section is how the choice of becoming a terrorist, and therefore of divesting himself of his previous role of writer, does not depend only on the scarce consideration he attributes to it. Sachs’s transformation into the Phantom of

Liberty is by far a result of a series of contingent events that happen in his life and that are so incredible they cannot but hide, in his opinion, a peculiar meaning.

A portray of this character is provided, as we have said, by his friend Peter Aaron, the narrator of this story. From the very beginning the reader is told that Sachs is a fond admirer of Thoreau and precisely of his work *Civil Disobedience*, which he uses as a model to shape his beliefs and attitudes. His admiration for the transcendentalist author is so profound that not only he wants to look like him, “he wore a beard because Henry David had worn one” (26), but he wishes to embody his principles as well, especially the one that encourages the individual to oppose any forms of corrupt and unfair state. That is why, in total accordance with the practice of passive resistance, which claims that “under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (Thoreau 24), he preferred to be incarcerated rather than fighting in Vietnam. Sachs’s political convictions permeate also his first work *The New Colossus*. Even if it is described by Aaron as “a meticulously researched book set in America between 1876 and 1890” (37) and even if there are no explicit references to the period in which Sachs wrote it, the story appears much more like a subtle critique to the new establishment and the evolving American mind-set than a conventional historical novel. In this sense the polemical tone, which characterizes the whole account, only helps to convey the dominant emotion which “was anger, a full-blown, lacerating anger that surged up on nearly every page: anger against America, anger against political hypocrisy, anger as a weapon to destroy national myths” (40). According to Sachs in fact, “America has lost its way” (38). Governed by a duplicitous ruling class, his citizens have lost the true meaning of words such as freedom, democracy and equality, ideals that were worshipped by the founding fathers. The message is clear: the conscience of America must be awakened from the lethargy that has numbed it over the last century.

While the critics positively regarded the novel pointing at Sachs as “one of the most promising young novelists to have come along in years” (48), the author himself is the least satisfied about the book and after a period in which he publishes a few essays he even decides to drop the activity of writing. “The idea of writing disgusts me. It does not mean a goddamned thing to me anymore. [...] I don’t want to spend the rest of my life rolling pieces of blank paper in the typewriter” (112). Acknowledged the fact that this practice is of no use and craving for a purpose to reach some sort of stability, it comes

the realization, as he confesses to his friend Aaron: "I want to stand up from my desk and do something. The days of being a shadow are over. I've got to step into the real world now and do something" (122). The anger and the frustration that drench his first novel are eventually directed towards something more practical, that is supposed to help not only the subject but also the world. It is at this time that he gets involved in what he calls "the waltz of disaster" (138), a swirl of unpredictable events that occur without his control.

While spending a period of recovery in Vermont, he gets lost in the woods and he finds a lift from a young man, a softball player named Dwight McMartin. On the way back home they "run into something unexpected" (152). They meet a stranger who, with no apparent reason, pulls out a gun from his car and kills Dwight. In response to this action, Sachs reaches for the bat and hits the stranger who drops dead. After this sequence of quick and absurd twists that, as he confesses, "he could never quite absorb [...] as real" (152), Sachs climbs on the stranger's car and runs away. In a secluded spot examining the interior of the vehicle, he manages to reconstruct the identity of the stranger from some evidences he has found. His name was Reed Dimaggio and apparently he has been involved into some undefined illegal activities since he was carrying in one bag the materials for constructing a bomb and in the other a large amount of money. After these discoveries Sachs comes back to New York, looks for support in his all time lover Fanny, but finding her with another man, he turns to Maria who, unfortunately for him, "was in possession of the one fact powerful enough to turn an ugly misfortune into a full-scale tragedy" (160). She is in fact the only person among his acquaintances who knows Dimaggio, having been her friend Lillian Stern's former husband. Astonished by this weird coincidence Sachs starts to look for a meaning beyond it. In other words, he refuses to admit that the events he has experienced were void happenstances and forges a new significance out of it. In particular:

He understood that the nightmare coincidence was in fact a solution, an opportunity in the shape of a miracle. The essential thing was to accept the uncanniness of the event – not to deny it, but to embrace it, to breathe it into himself as a sustaining force. Where all had been dark for him, he now saw a beautiful, awesome clarity. He would go to California and give Lillian Stern the money he had found in Dimaggio's car. (167)

This reading, which brings some clarity in Sachs's life, is in line with the character's proclivity to infer meaning from casual correspondences. It is part of Sachs's nature and

it is something Aaron points out from the very beginning of the story: “he was a great one for turning facts into metaphors” (23). Sachs has always displayed a certain fascination with eerie coincidences especially those that regard the biography of famous people.

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 themselves on those facts, he was able to read the world as though it were a work of imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real. (24)

After having gained Lillian’s confidence Sachs moves in with her. Here he finds everything about Dimaggio’s ideology and his writings, since the man has left in his room not only his books but also his main work: a dissertation on Alexander Berkman, a Russian anarchist emigrated in the United States around the end of the nineteenth century. It is after having read this book that Sachs begins to nurture a growing obsession for his victim.

I started to think about Dimaggio all the time, to compare myself to him, to question how we’d come together on that road in Vermont. I sensed a kind of cosmic attraction, the pull of some inexorable force. [...] I knew he had been a soldier in Vietnam and that the war had turned him inside-out, that he had left the army with a new understanding of America, of politics, of his own life. It fascinated me to think that I’d gone to prison because of the war – and that fighting in it had brought him around to more or less the same position as mine. We’d both become writers, we both knew that fundamental changes were needed – but whereas I started to lose my way, to dither around with half assed articles and literary pretensions, Dimaggio kept developing, kept moving forward, and in the end he was brave enough to put his ideas to the test. (224 - 225)

Moved by a strong attraction for this man and with the only intention to consecrate Dimaggio’s name, Sachs comes up with the idea of writing something about him, a book that is supposed to be a “genuine examination of his soul” (225), but after a few attempts he gives up the project. In this desperate state of being, another momentous event takes place. In order to avoid meeting an old acquaintance from New York, Sachs winds up in a used bookstore, where he hides behind a shelf full of books. Here he accidentally chances upon a copy of his novel *The New Colossus*. “It was an astonishing coincidence, a thing that hit me so hard I felt it had to be a omen.” (226) Owing to his natural inclination to attribute meaning to fortuitous events, he buys the book. Back home he

simply sits and stares at the cover and then it comes, for the second time, a startling revelation. He would use all the money he still has to express his old beliefs and do something he has never done before; he takes the decision to entirely devote himself to Dimaggio's project, which consists mainly in an active involvement, "a step into the real world". As he himself acknowledges: "All of a sudden my life seemed to make sense to me" (228) he has finally found a purpose, that not only brings meaning to his life but, according to what he thinks, it would even grant the stability he is looking for.

It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambitions. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together. For the first time in my life, I would be a whole. [...] I was no longer bewitched. I felt inspired, invigorated, cleansed. Almost like a man who had found religion. Like a man who had heard the call. (228)

Everything that has happened to him so far is a result of an accident, the killing of Dimaggio, the unexpected windfall, the encounter with Lillian and finally the vision of his book on a shelf; everything is a random event that seems to "materialize out of thin air" (*Music* 1). Distraught by his desire for purpose in his life and unable to find a satisfactory answer in an indifferent world, he constructs his own artificial reality in which every single event is endowed with a precise meaning. Once a pattern is created and taken for granted he changes his life in accordance to it. But assuming there is a sense beyond void correspondences can only bring the character to his failure. As Auster himself argues in *The Invention of Solitude* in fact, "the made up story consist entirely of meanings, whereas the story of fact is devoid of any significance beyond itself" (156). Therefore treating a story of fact as if it were a work of fiction is Sachs's serious mistake that costs him his life. Sure to have found the appropriate role and sure to have uncovered the unifying principle that would make himself a whole, he ends up been reduced into smithereens, "his body burst into dozens of small pieces, and fragments of his corpse [...] found as far as fifty feet away from the site of the explosion" (1).

## Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis, talking about the function of chance events in Auster's fictions I argued that these elements are inserted for a specific purpose, which is that of satisfying the author's needs for verisimilitude. As Auster repeatedly intimates in many interviews, in fact, it is through the introduction of contingent facts that he manages to represent mimetically his reality.

The obedience and conformity to what seems to be a moral imperative for the writer goes together with a choice that has rather more stylistic and formal intents. The use of chance in Auster's fictions responds to the authorial necessity of finding an expedient which moves the story forward. Chance therefore is not only symptomatic of a certain vision of the world, but assumes as well the important function of being the trigger for every single plot.

The same idea is confirmed by Weisenburger who, analyzing *Moon Palace*, underlines the fact that chance and contingency interfere with characters' lives "each time (they) approach a dead end or period" (qtd. in Bloom 177). That is why the novel resists any kind of division into a casually interlaced progression of parts (beginning, middle, and end), privileging instead an "alternate mode of temporality" (qtd. in Bloom 177) which is based on what Weisenburger calls phases. Thus Fogg ceases his period of starvation in Central park when he is miraculously saved by his friends, a rescue that opens up new possibilities for his existence. This structure that relies on the alternation of phases that begin and end with a promoting chance event can be easily retraced in each of Auster's novels. The character that is initially introduced as a writer may even become a terrorist, and the one who traverses the open space of America may lose his freedom and money in a poker game a stranger has persuaded him to play. In other words, the progression of life depends on those chance events that encourage a consequent decision on the part of the subject.

Phase after phase, characters experiment new forms of relocation and radical changes of role. These fundamental changes are always dependent on a misleading interpretation of those contingent events that abound in Auster's fictions. Attracted by these extraordinary happenstances that intersect with their life and that are deemed as highly significant, characters steer from their natural course and submit themselves to a different direction. As it has been suggested in previous chapters, this attribution of meaning to what is just mere randomness is an error in cognition generated by the

mind, which envisions patterns everywhere. Strange encounters, weird connections or other casual occurrences therefore, are not seen as the void manifestation of an indifferent universe, but as keys that allow the individual to confront absolute truths. Deceived by these illusions of the mind, that alter profoundly the reality of the facts, characters turn their lives into an existential quest that always achieves a degree of frustration and irresolution.

This happens for instance to Fogg when he faces the weird correspondences between his grandfather's past vicissitudes, the scientist Nikola Tesla and the message contained in a fortune cookie.

"The synchronicity of the events seemed fraught with significance, but it was difficult for me to grasp precisely how. It was as though I could hear my destiny calling out to me, but each time I tried to listen to it, it turned out to be talking in a language I didn't understand" (227).

After having studied the infinite possibilities that the question of coincidence will open, he has to acknowledge his failure: "it was too difficult a subject for me to handle, and in the end I put it to the side, telling myself that I would return to it at some later date. As chance would have it, I never did" (227). Coincidences and their ambiguous quality occupy Quinn's thoughts as well. Sifting through all the chance events he has experienced after having accepted the detective assignment, he is puzzled by their lack of logic.

He asked himself why Christopher, the patron saint of travel, had been decanonized by the Pope in 1969, just at the time of the trip to the moon. [...] He wondered why he had the same initials as Don Quixote. He considered whether the girl who had moved into his apartment was the same girl he had seen in Grand Central Station reading his book. (130)

Again no solution is offered and the questions remain unanswered. Protagonists' examinations of chance events only lead them to the awareness of inhabiting a chaotic and meaningless world. Characters' meaning-seekers 'modern' mind, founded on a strong belief in logic and reason as flawless instruments of detection, results inadequate to confront a postmodern universe, as that of Auster, which hinders a correct form of comprehension.

From the analysis of the three novellas and the three novels included in the second and third chapters, it has emerged that all Auster's characters essentially fail and that this failure is attested by those existential quests that are either left unfinished (leading nowhere) or end with a delusional response (no answers are provided). What is more, and this is also clear from those previous considerations, characters contain the germ of their failure from the very beginning, but they become aware of their presence only after a gradual process of deterioration that leads them to an inevitable downfall. In some cases however, they seem conscious of this decline. During their descent, accelerated by those erroneous submission to the artificial meanings constructed around a chance event, the majority of Auster's characters in fact, experience upsetting sensations of falling, and admit they are losing their grip on reality. Yet this ultimate realization arrives only at the end, when they finally hit the bottom and they find themselves into an abyss of desperation and death.

The three detectives of *The New York Trilogy* share this same feeling. Quinn almost at the 'end' of his case admits that "of all the things he discovered" during his investigation, his only certainty was the fact that "he was falling" (118). Similarly Blue arrives at the same conclusion facing the impenetrability of his counterpart. "All of a sudden his calm turns to anguish, and he feels as though he is falling into some dark, cave-like place, with no hope of finding a way out" (147). Even the nameless narrator of *The Locked Room*, looking backwards to the course he has submitted himself to, has to realize that he "had slipped through a hole in the earth" that he "was falling into a place where (he) had never been" (205). Their gradual decline reaches its extreme consequences when they are tossed into the streets where they spend a period of destitution and poverty. Here the fall displays all its tragic consequences impeding the subjects any form of resurgence.

The same thing happens to Sachs, whose life in *Leviathan* is even divided into a before and after the fall from the fire escape that nearly kills him. This dramatic event takes place before Sachs's voluntary exile into the woods and his consequent disappearance and it may be considered as the first cause for all the decisions that follow. Though literal and not metaphorical as it was for the other characters, the fall always symbolizes the failure of the individual that is "never the same after that" and can never recover entirely. As pointed out by Aaron, "in those few seconds before he hit the ground, it was as if Sachs lost everything. His entire life flew apart in midair, and from that moment until death four years later, he never put it back together again" (107).

Another character who experiences this impossibility of recovering is Nashe whose story starts with the words “without the slightest tremor of fear, Nashe closed his eyes and jumped” (1). The adventure in which he jumps into eventually ends up in tragedy. In spite of the attempts to get back on his old track, the protagonist will never return to his initial stability.

The only character that with his words seems to offer a solution to stop this inevitable tumble into the abyss is Fogg. This is how he comments his experience of falling:

I had jumped off the edge of a cliff, and then just as I was about to hit bottom, an extraordinary event took place: I learned that there were people who loved me. [...] I had jumped off the edge, and then at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair. (49)

The love displayed by other people, in his case by his rescuers who save him from certain death, seems to be the only solution Auster provides in order to avoid the tragic consequences of the fall. Love becomes therefore “the one thing that can stop a man from falling, the one thing powerful enough to negate the laws of gravity” (49). Fogg’s descent into a spiral of self-annihilation is interrupted when he starts a relationship with Kitty Wu. Many other Auster’s characters (Blue, the unnamed Narrator, Sachs, Nashe) experience the same situation of Fogg: they find out that being loved obstructs somehow the mechanism of the fall permitting at the same time to be saved in midair and to accomplish their existential quests. Love in fact, always infers new meaning to the individual’s existence helping him to recreate the harmony he needs to lead a peaceful life. However as it happens in *Moon Palace* these situations are not enduring since they are subjected as well to the same law of constant change that govern Auster’s entire universe. In disrupting the peacefulness that a couple has managed to construct, the writer seems to cancel out the last hope that the protagonist may find in life. Once the love relationship crumbles the inexorable mechanism of the fall restarts and the character resumes his downward movement toward failure.

According to many scholars, this analogy between contingent events and subsequent falling is innate in the etymology of the word chance. Kavanagh for example, in his *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* claims that:

The English chance, like the German *Zufall*, the Spanish *casualidad*, and the Italian *caso*, all, in terms of their roots either in Germanic fall or the Latin *cadere*, evoke the idea 'what falls out', 'what is coming down'. They leave undecided the question of whether the event in question is casually motivated or fortuitous. (2)

Monk, who studies contingent deviations in modern fiction, suggests that the association with the idea of falling will always remain unaltered whatever significance we decide to attribute to the ambiguous concept of chance. "Chance (from the Latin *cadere*, to fall) can mean a totally haphazard event (the fall of the dice) or an opportunity (your turn to throw the dice) or a lucky break (the fall of the dice that wins the game)" (2).

Derrida as well associates chance with a downward movement, inscribing its events among those that "come to us from on high" (349). According to the French philosopher in fact verticality and not horizontality is the category that best describes those occurrences that cannot be predicted in advance.

It is not clear whether the recurrence of the image of the falling man in Auster's fictions is due to this linguistic analogy with the word chance or to a biographical fact that together with many other elements has become an obsession for the writer<sup>31</sup>. Yet what remains is the fact that its presence once again demonstrates the quests' dependence on chance events as well as their inevitable negative consequences. Characters are essentially fallen creatures, or as the elder Stillman would comment Humpy Dumpy lookalikes that once fallen no one can put them back together.

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<sup>31</sup> Auster openly acknowledges in an interview the return of this image and he confesses that it may derive from a real fact happened to his father when he was a child. This is what he says: "He was working on a roof in Jersey City and he fell off, just like that. He slipped and started tumbling through the air. If not for a clothesline that broke his fall, he probably would have been killed. Though I didn't see it happen, I walked around with that image in my head all through my childhood: my father flying through space. Maybe that's the source, the thing at the bottom of my strange obsession" (*Conversation* 95 - 96).

## Final reflection

Paul Auster is a prolific writer. Author of 17 novels including one (*Squeeze Play*) written under the pseudonym of Paul Benjamin, six collections of poetry and several other collections of essays and autobiographical memoirs, he has collaborated in the writing of five screenplays, four films, in a number of various translations (mainly of French poetry) and other diverse projects.

Among this monumental body of work I chose to focus my attention only on a minor part, which included four of his most renowned books: *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Leviathan*. I first approached this material as a reader and then I looked at it with a critical eye attempting new interpretations and, where it has been possible, explanations of this fictional world. As a result of this study, I noticed that certain elements returned more than others and, considering them as clues the writer provides for a correct understanding of his work, I decided to commit myself to the path they indicated. For example I listed all those events that in these novels resisted any kind of logical explanation and that hinted at concepts like chance, contingency, coincidences, and even weird or absurd correspondences. What is more, I let myself be driven by those signs that returned with a certain frequency and that reinforced somehow my assertions. Words such as 'city', 'wilderness', 'nowhere' and 'labyrinth' helped me in the second chapter where I focused on the characters' quest for order in a chaotic world. On the other hand terms like 'nothing', 'detective' and 'truth' were useful to describe the other project of Auster's protagonists, which is that of retracing a form of meaning in meaninglessness.

In both cases I felt as if I was playing that "kind of ludic game of recognition" (170) critic Michelle Banks referred to as a practice common enough for all Auster's readers. Knowing in advance the presence of some recurring themes that recreate a precise pattern among the various books, my mind displayed a certain form of expectation. Through the use of the same words or the repetition of the same objects, names or events I confronted a kind of déjà vu during my reading, as if I had already been in that same place or as if I had already witnessed the same scene before. And yet, recognizing the presence of this common pattern and suggesting a possible explanation for this multiplicity of symbols did not provide me with any satisfying answers but maybe it is this lack of any sensible solution the key to comprehend Auster's entire poetics. In the attempt to find order and meaning among the works of the author, I ended up sharing

his characters' same destiny: deceived by apophenia and overwhelmed by the inexorable force of chance.

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