

**‘EVERYTHING ... AS A GLOSS ON EVERYTHING ELSE’:
LIFE AND WORK IN PAUL AUSTER**

by

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Meiping Zhang, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines a variety of philosophical implications in Paul Auster's works, crossing American culture with Continental thought. Focusing on such subjects as solitude, community, the idea of America, the idea of the work (of art), the ontology of film, the disastrous and the ordinary, it aims to develop intersections of Auster's works with the thoughts of Stanley Cavell and Maurice Blanchot.

Blanchot has already been introduced into recent Auster criticism. But this is not the main reason why I use Cavell, instead of Blanchot, to set the tone for my study. Contrary to past research, which tends to divide into discrete areas, emphasising either Auster's postmodern textuality or critical engagement, his American roots or European affiliations, my study is concerned with how these divisions can be reassessed and negotiated. A Cavellian reading of Auster is valuable not only because the themes Cavell discovers in Thoreau and Emerson (such as Moral Perfectionism) provide insight into Auster's engagement with American Transcendentalism, but also because his way of reading is indissociable from his interests in Continental tradition, as well as in film and literature. I share these interests in my own reading of Auster; they help reconstruct the pictures of life and work, of self and other, of singularity and commonality, of ordinariness and extraordinariness.

Additionally, I look at certain Blanchotian aspects of Auster's writing, highlighting what has not been previously noted, such as the withdrawal and exigency of community in *Moon Palace*. Blanchot's ideas of unworking (*désœuvrement*) and disaster further define the ethico-ontological dimension of being. This does not essentially counter Cavell's emphasis on the ordinary but rather reveals its difficulty. On the whole my reading suggests a logic of eternal return that underlies the entwinement of Cavellian and Blanchotian strands in Auster, which reflects both human vulnerability and responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Recounting the Experience of America

The New York Trilogy is widely regarded as Paul Auster's *magnum opus*. No wonder the three volumes, in particular *City of Glass*, have attracted untiring attention from critics. Whether it has to do with the concurrent ascendancy of postmodernism and poststructuralism is a question to be assessed with hindsight and yet, I think, not necessarily intrinsic to the work *per se*. Perhaps there is nothing really intrinsic to literature, that is, nothing essentially causal to, or inevitably associated with, the birth of the work. If anything, its origin remains too complicated and obscure to be deciphered. This is not the same as saying nothing empirical can be retrieved, say, some biographical elements here, some historical references there. Or, something speculative could be added or applied, say, certain thematic, stylistic comparisons here, certain literary, cultural theories there. These attempts and threads are informed by histories and influenced by the vicissitudes of taste (to use a rather old-fashioned word) in critical reception, not only of literary texts but of theory in general. Thus, though *The New York Trilogy* is a milestone as well as a turning point in Auster's career — before that he was known for his poetry, translation and prose — and arguably in the history of American contemporary fiction, it seems that more and more Auster critics have become dissatisfied with a somewhat hackneyed postmodern and/or deconstructive analysis of this Austerian arche-text, however sophisticated and compelling this kind of analysis and text looked decades ago.¹ Yet one thing is for sure, namely, a tacit consensus among the critics that Auster, as with many of his contemporaries, is undoubtedly a postmodern writer or, more precisely, novelist.

This thesis departs from the above consensus. By rethinking (and even questioning) the postmodern thread in Auster's writings, my first task is to trace their genesis through a reassessment of past research, to pull together Auster's European affiliations and American inheritances, his textual experiment and critical engagement. This helps us identify key issues and divisions residing in Auster scholarship; furthermore, it indicates what can be achieved through an alternative to previous readings. Let me say in anticipation that the alternative I propose is chiefly based on Stanley Cavell's philosophy. His philosophical way (which he calls 'reading') — and notably his

¹ See Stefania Ciocia, 'The Career and Critical Reception of Paul Auster', *Literature Compass*, 9.10 (2012), 642-53.

attempt to splice American and Continental traditions — motivates me to reinterpret Auster's works. A literary-philosophical line across borders will be constructed to support my Cavellian approach. It basically suggests a different cultural matrix in which the experience of America is recounted and reconceived.

I sequence the chapters according to a set of topics concerning this experience. These topics, from solitude to community, from the ordinary to the disastrous, follow a logic of eternal return that redefines the doubleness of human existence. An important task of this thesis is to uncover the ethico-ontological dimension of this doubleness, deriving its rich senses from a Cavellian reading of Auster. I thus select some of his works that best suit the purpose: *Ghosts*, *Leviathan*, *Moon Palace*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Smoke*, *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Sunset Park*, and *The Invention of Solitude*. Interpretations of these works are so organised as to optimise the effectiveness of my philosophical approach. This of course does not mean that Auster's other works must fall outside of the purview of this thesis, but, to ensure depth of exploration, I focus on the group of works that as a whole has the greatest potential to engage with Cavell's thought, which in a way also implies the possibility of recombining European influences (for instance, Maurice Blanchot) with American experience. It is then conceivable that the development of my reading is not simply progressive; interruptions are an essential part of it, signifying, among other things, the interrupted myth of America, its unfulfilled dream. Meanwhile, alongside those interruptions, one's life and work — which in Auster's stories are never just one's own — persist. It is on the basis of this persistence that one, as a finite, partial being, continues to change, and to renew one's infinite relations with other beings. This relates to the message already present in *The Invention of Solitude* ('Everything, in some sense, can be read as a gloss on everything else.'), from which the title of this thesis is derived.

Postmodern Origin(ality) after Postmodernism: A Conspectus of Auster Scholarship

The term 'postmodernism' has become a cliché, rigidified and normalised; a tag conveniently attached to many things in our time. This rashness in thinking (postmodernity) — namely, the impulse to reduce and pigeonhole things and phenomena once and for all — is not quite, I should say, 'postmodern'; in fact, it is always embedded within human history. Thus, when poststructuralists and deconstructionists were dethroning metaphysics, it did not occur to them that later their followers would, consciously or unconsciously, put them on the very pedestal they wanted to destroy. Or, perhaps some of them foresaw the consequences, not least an unavoidable risk of helping foster certain postmodern metaphysics. This is not irrelevant to the reception of Auster's fiction, which more or less echoes this pattern with an overall shift from a nearly unanimous

exaltation of narratorial and textual intricacies in such works as *City of Glass*, through a concerted effort to explore linguistic, ontological and epistemological unreliability, to a decline of interest in the kind of cerebral process unfolding in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, which is perceived by some critics as a regrettable contrast to what immediately precedes it, namely *The Brooklyn Follies*. According to this view, *The Brooklyn Follies*'s ebullient style and promising signs of engaging with other individuals hold stronger appeal, whereas a claustrophobic scenario, as staged in *Travels*, has run out of steam and amounts to a feeble reprise of Auster's old themes.² Admittedly, the latter might stand out against the polyphonic texture of his later writings; yet I doubt there is some irredeemable flaw in this book *per se*, as other critics have offered alternative readings that strike me as equally convincing and more patient.³ The recurrence of solitude and confinement in one's texts is not necessarily a pointless repetition; appearing in different contexts, they can open up new possibilities for both writing and reading. The matter will come back later, but for the moment what I want to point out is that the case of *Travels*, its divided readership, illustrates our changing attitude towards certain motifs and narrative techniques, not only in Auster but extended to contemporary literature at large. Their fortunes are yoked, willy-nilly, to the shifting landscape of postmodernism, which is outlined by our waning enthusiasm, growing weariness and spasmodic discontent. Put differently, after an initial period of linguistic (and generally philosophical) preoccupations, words and arguments have been flattening for want of refreshment; as a result, a cultural (and historical) turn, an ethical turn and even a political turn are called for. This is not a new story: behind this string of turns an age-old clash is being rehearsed between literature's engagement and detachment.

Agreeing with Stefania Ciocia, I do not think it is time to declare 'the dead end of postmodernism' (Ciocia, 649), in very much the same way I disapprove of a massive and indiscriminate application of the notion, in particular, to literary works produced in our time. For one thing, it is doubtful whether a definitional formula can help us fathom the dynamic relationship between a text and the conditions for its creation and reception. As Ramón Espejo points out, 'to question at this point in time whether or not Auster is a postmodern writer is probably beside the point. Labelling authors may have been necessary (or fashionable) at certain times in the history of literary criticism, but it falls largely outside what is now deemed relevant'.⁴ The fact is that individual texts, such as *The*

² A succinct summary of critical disfavour can be found in Martin Butler and Jen Martin Gurr's essay, 'The Poetics and Politics of Metafiction: Reading Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*', *English Studies*, 89.2 (2008), 195-209 (pp. 195-96).

³ For instance, see Butler and Gurr's reading of *Travels*. Focusing on the poietic and political potentials in Auster's metafictional strategies, it tries to counter those arguments about its postmodern artifice and superficiality.

⁴ Ramón Espejo, 'Coping with the Postmodern: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy', *Journal of American Studies*, 48.1 (2014), 147-71 (p. 150).

New York Trilogy and *Moon Palace*, can generate divergent strands of reading about Auster's 'postmodernism' (if we still keep the term). Consequently, the key is at once to salvage the writer's unique hybridity from postmodern conventions and to recognise the former's role in challenging and reshaping the latter. As early as 1995 Dennis Barone had claimed that 'he [Auster] has synthesized interrogations of postmodern subjectivities, explications of premodern moral causality, and a sufficient realism', which was, I believe, eclipsed by the then still tremendous — yet perhaps less than mature — fervour for the triad of postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction.⁵ Then, it is not until recent years that more Auster critics have come to pick up this thread. Echoing Barone, Debra Shostak in 2008 made a further claim: 'Certainly, Auster's early work trades in the currency of a metaphysics and linguistic self-consciousness associated with the postmodern condition. Yet much of Auster's fiction, especially from *Moon Palace* onward, evidences both a mimetic texture and theoretical presuppositions characteristic of realism'.⁶ In the same year Brendan Martin in his book *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* highlighted certain modernist residues that could inform Auster's writings. In the section on *The Invention of Solitude*, he notes that 'It is modernism rather than postmodernism that influences A.'s [the narrator's] concerns with regard to consciousness'.⁷ Different from Shostak, who seeks to reconceive a symbiosis between postmodernism and realism, Martin deploys various modernist and postmodernist discourses to make a case for the writer's eclecticism. His formulation, though deficient in boldness, retains a moderate amount of heterogeneity in a postmodern understanding of Auster. Like Shostak, he also references Barone's reading (for instance, of *Mr. Vertigo*) when discussing Auster's intermittent deviation from postmodern norms: 'In opposition to the tenets of literary postmodernism, emphasis throughout *Mr. Vertigo* is firmly placed on, "... a stable subject rather than a shifting one"' (Martin, 27).

Charting the scholarly reception of Auster helps to show that his allegiance to modernism, postmodernism or a renewed sense of realism has in fact been the subject of much debate. It is not as though scholars were finicky about classification; the real issue, I believe, overlaps with deep concern about the nature and function of writing. In other words, how does the writer deal with issues of moral, social and political interest? To what extent do his words sink in as a form of diagnosis and engagement? It recalls Ciocia's apologetic argument:

⁵ Dennis Barone, 'Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel', in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 1-26 (pp. 6-7).

⁶ Debra Shostak, 'Under the Sign of *Moon Palace*: Paul Auster and the Body in the Text', *Critique*, 49.2 (2008), 149-68 (p. 151).

⁷ Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 19.

While I understand, and in fact fully sympathise with, the current yearning for literature of relevance and substance, I cannot help but think that this urge casts — retrospectively and unfairly — too reductive a judgement on Auster’s overall achievement as a writer capable of combining the investigation of the highly intellectual and rarefied with an interest in — to use Barth’s own words — the ‘still-human hearts and conditions’. [...] Auster has always tackled political and ethical issues, if only by way of the personal [...]. Indeed, this has been Auster’s way of carrying out one of the lessons of postmodernism.

(Ciocia, 650)

The world is recast in the stories a writer tells, and reading is the process of unravelling a myriad of threads woven into those stories. What is unravelled depends on how we unravel it. Yet the latter should not act as a Procrustean straitjacket on the former. This may explain why the charm of postmodernism is wearing off. Its overused, essentialised formula has become an inadequate tool for creative reading and, at worst, an unwelcome instance of intellectual abstraction and prescription. Hence for Ciocia any reading heavily reliant on ‘a wide definition of the political’ (646) — which entails a recycling of postmodern theories — is very likely to set itself up for failure in advancing new interpretations of Auster’s engagement. Martin’s study, cited by her as an example, unfortunately falls short of the kind of insight an alternative reading can possibly achieve through a closer examination of the sociopolitical subtext. In addition to this New Historicist way of fleshing out the skeleton of postmodernism, there are other alternatives put forward to obviate the danger of self-enclosure and to reinstate the meaning of reality. For instance, James Peacock contends that ‘reality endures in the ethical performances of reading itself, in complex negotiations between reader, author, and character, and in the history of reading informing the relationship with any given text’.⁸ Granted, these recent attempts to enrich our reading of Auster are constructive and noteworthy. If Barone nearly two decades ago favoured Linda Hutcheon’s interpretations of postmodernism and ‘historiographic metafiction’ and maintained that ‘Auster’s postmodern ironies are more philosophical than overtly political’,⁹ then both Ciocia and Peacock are renewing their efforts to engage readers’ responses and to amplify some definitive associations of his fiction with the outside, especially a post-9/11 world.

Doubtless, the role of 9/11 in shaping another watershed in Auster’s literary development and in complicating our postmodern condition is remarkable and far-reaching. It has accordingly accelerated the changes in Auster scholarship, as if it suddenly became possible for a writer to be solipsistic and *engagé* at the same time. However paradoxical, this is his predicament and possibility.

⁸ James Peacock, ‘The Father in the Ice: Paul Auster, Character, and Literary Ancestry’, *Critique*, 52 (2011), 362-76 (p. 363).

⁹ See *Beyond the Red Notebook*, p. 5. Moreover, Auster’s philosophical irony seems more Borgesian, as Barone goes on to adduce Borges in his discussion. Harold Bloom also draws a parallel between Auster and Borges, though focusing on their shared interest in fable and romance: ‘Auster can be said to cross Hawthorne with Kafka, as Borges did.’ See his introduction to another collected volume on Auster, *Paul Auster*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Bloom’s Modern Critical Views (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2004), p. 1.

On the one hand, it seems that Auster's work vacillates between two poles of enclosing itself within its own vessel (say, self-referentiality) and opening itself to the outside world (say, social criticism). On the other hand, the two poles are not as far from each other as we tend to believe. That is why I am less than inclined to neatly split his career into two distinct phases, one obsessed with existential claustrophobia and solipsism and the other brimming with American optimism and solidarity, one characterised by deconstructive textual indeterminacy and the other cultural-historical allusions and critiques. This tendency to dichotomise these strands in Auster, viewing them as somewhat incompatible, is bound up with another tendency to neglect the complex relationship between the social-cultural-historical and the philosophical at large, as well as a slight confusion of the message conveyed by the work (for example, alienation and confinement) with what the reader can make of this message (not invariably a yielding to nihilism). The doubt I cast upon these assumptions has to do with a long-neglected prehistory of Auster the postmodern novelist, namely his poetic origin.

Although some interesting excavations have been done in recent years, especially Andreas Hau's monograph on Auster's poetry and early prose, again, this aspect seems to me not a newly discovered point of entry but virtually a return of the genesis that is always there and yet always out of sight.¹⁰ Like Barone's overshadowed appraisal, 'a contest between prose and poetry that colors much of his writing', as described by Stephen Fredman in 1996, also failed to reverberate through Auster criticism.¹¹ According to him, 'it is not self-enclosure that constitutes an "unnatural act" in Auster's writing, but rather *the intrusion of poetry into narrative prose*' (Fredman, 11; my italics). This interpretation expresses other shades of meaning than those under the postmodern rubric: (1) the 'poetic concerns', indissociable from the images of confinement and book in Auster's prose and fiction, are not formal ('Auster's fiction, however, is not especially lyrical in its rhythm or its diction') but (2) topical in that they both underpin his essayistic narrative and echo those major issues concerning modern poetry/poetics: 'the materiality of language, the relations between words and objects, the commanding presence of silence, the impact of prose upon poetry, and the ways in which, as Marian Tsvetaeva puts it, "In this most Christian of worlds / all poets are Jews"' (quoted by Auster, AH 114)' (12). The last point reminds us of the fact that Auster's 'postmodern' cast of mind is at times strikingly modern and Jewish in a Jabèsian sense. Whereas Hau in his monograph dwells on the influences of Martin Buber (for instance, his 'I-thou' relationship) and Paul Celan on Auster's poetry, Fredman adopts Jabès's idea of '(poetic) book' (16) and expands on the Jewish imagery

¹⁰ Andreas Hau, *The Implosion of Negativity: The Poetry and Early Prose of Paul Auster* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2010). Besides, Peacock adumbrates some of the ideas related to Auster's poetics and Jewish sensibility in *Understanding Paul Auster* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

¹¹ Stephen Fredman, "'How to Get Out of the Room That Is the Book?': Paul Auster and the Consequences of Confinement', in *Paul Auster*, pp. 7-41 (p. 7).

employed in *The Invention of Solitude*, which is by no means constricted by its theological meaning. Indeed, the import of this book consists not only in its inventive treatment of autobiography as a genre but, moreover, in its redefinition of (writerly) solitude as a form of existential authenticity ever so intensely open to the call of exteriority. The ‘book’ does not ‘fold in on itself’; Auster’s conversation with Jabès may give some clues to the interface between Jewish thought and modern poetics.¹² But Talmudic reading alone cannot reveal to a writer the full sense of Jewishness. Most importantly, it is the Jewish condition (marked not only by the Diaspora but also by the Shoah) that brings the writer face to face with the extremes of experience, which, by challenging the capacities of memory and speech, push the act of writing to its limit.

In this light, Fredman’s thoughts on the ‘particularly Jewish concern with memory’ and the ‘ways in which the postmodern is inescapably post-Holocaust’ (8) provide a unique marker in the quest to probe the influence of Auster’s Jewishness on his literary practice. Pertinent to this line of thinking is Josh Cohen’s discussion of Auster, Jabès, and a wider sense of ‘Jewish writing’; that is, ‘an underlying conception of writing which, in the case of each writer, both defines their Jewishness (and their relationship to the traumatized Jewish past) and situates them within a broader literary genealogy which encompasses Mallarmé and Beckett as well as the Talmud and Jewish mysticism’.¹³ If, as Cohen suggests, ‘Jewish experience is always framed as that which exceeds conceptuality, which defies all normative experiential categories’ (Cohen, 105), it can mean that the connection between ‘Jewishness’ and ‘writing’ should not be narrowly conceived as a cultural phenomenon (at least not reducible to the conventional sense of cultural property). Nor does it lead to a fundamental premise rising above history. In fact what is at stake in their connection is precisely an experience that is both rooted in and troubled by history. And it is precisely the difficulties arising from historical phenomena — further from the need of capturing them in writing — that enable Auster to arrive at a creative fusion of divergent experiences, to find emotional resonance in the relation of one experience with another. This issue is picked up by Alys Moody, who looks into Auster’s aesthetics of exile and its manifestation in his symbolic depiction of Jewish and Native American subjects: ‘Auster implies that Jews and Native Americans, along with other exiled and excluded peoples, hold out the possibility of alternative American Edens, rooted in multiple

¹² Paul Auster, ‘Providence: A Conversation with Edmond Jabès’, in *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews and The Red Notebook* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 144-69 (p. 164); hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *AH*. See also Auster’s essay on Jabès, ‘Book of the Dead’, in *AH*, pp. 107-14.

¹³ Josh Cohen, ‘Desertions: Paul Auster, Edmond Jabès, and the Writing of Auschwitz’, *The Journal of the Midwest Language Association*, 33.3 (2000), 94-107 (p. 96).

experiences of displacement and dispossession'.¹⁴ Nevertheless, at the end of her essay she also hints at a dilemma that may affect the representation of symbolic ethnicity in Auster's novels:

While the operations that Auster performs on Jewish- and Native American identity are not dissimilar, each involving a reification of symbolic ethnic identity sharply divorced from the actual lived experience of either American Jews or Native Americans, these maneuvers pose acute problems when applied outside of one's own ethnic group. What appears in Auster's engagement with Jewish identity as a playful attempt to think through the aesthetic dimensions of his own symbolic identity risks being read as stereotype, primitivism, and exoticism when applied to Native Americans. But without the attempt to move beyond his own ethnic identity, Auster's aesthetics of ethnicity risk a troubling myopia and forfeit the opportunity to think through the colonial experience as one of shared exile.

(Moody, 89)

While understanding her scruples, which, placed within the context of American Studies, are not unfounded, I cannot help wondering whether the dilemma could be cast in a different light. For one thing, I am not sure whether Auster's 'attempt to think through the aesthetic dimensions of his own symbolic identity' can be deemed 'playful'. For another, I am keen to know in what sense the experience taking shape in a fictional work can be deemed 'actual' and 'lived' (or for that matter 'virtual'). Does it mean a factual correspondence or, let us say, strict verisimilitude? Yet the experience captured in writing has its inner dimension that does not presuppose a direct correspondence, not to mention that the so-called extratextual material itself seems malleable enough. Granted, the symbolic quality Moody attributes to Auster's characterisation may be susceptible to cultural stereotypes, but this is not unrelated to our own susceptibility to preconceived views on identity and experience. Contrariwise, writing's claim for authenticity in one sense is more concerned with a unique outlook on experience that extends beyond the realm of identity politics. It implies the initiation of a singular and compelling universe, which does not discard historical and cultural baggage but instead tries to engage with it in a new way. In this regard, narrative imagination can help the individual mind or psyche to penetrate the penumbra of human reality, wherein lies something — some truth perhaps — that exceeds the deterministic confines of ethnicity. This is a lesson imparted by *Moon Palace* through its powerful evocation, but also subtle rendering, of personal experience of what we call 'America'.

I have tried to stress the original experience initiated by each single piece of writing; at the same time, it is clear to me that the only way for it to come into its own is through reading, despite the risks of reduction and misinterpretation. Here coming into its own does not mean gaining satisfaction from its completion. Let us recall the fact that a modern writer, in the fashion of Kafka, is acutely conscious of the nature of this original experience, which cannot reach the ultimate state of

¹⁴ Alys Moody, 'Eden of Exiles: The Ethnicities of Paul Auster's Aesthetics', *American Literary History*, 28.1 (2015), 69-93 (p. 85).

realisation but constantly searches for an impossible fulfillment. From this perspective, reading should be conceived as a step to further the search, not to terminate it. Put differently, for the writer this search is not a futile act (though it may appear so, as in Kafka and Beckett) but based on a hope (against hope) that his/her initiation and incomplete inquiry might be developed through the reader's own experience of the work. One can begin to see why the hunger artist figures so prominently in Auster's early writings, less as an artistic ideal than as an existential model geared to the upheavals in modern times. 'In the end,' Auster writes, 'the art of hunger can be described as an existential art. It is a way of looking death in the face, and by death I mean death as we live it today: without God, without hope of salvation' (*AH*, 20). In view of such precursors as Kafka and Reznikoff, the exercises *performed* by Auster's protagonists, as Izabela Zieba argues, 'maintain their dissatisfaction not only with the world, but also their imperfect selves, guarding them from the dangers of ever resting in satisfied forgetfulness'.¹⁵ Not only is this dissatisfaction literalised by (self-)starvation but it is further enhanced through unremitting efforts to observe and describe the world one inhabits or 'has been exiled to' (*AH*, 39). The latter sense is crystallised in Auster's reading of Reznikoff. With 'hunger silence, and sweat', the objectivist poet roams the streets of New York and endeavours to capture the subtleties of urban landscape and everyday existence.¹⁶ Having been exiled twice, first as a Jew, then as a Jewish-American, he acquires a peculiar sense of being in the world as a stranger, a double outsider. This might seem to be a great misfortune to most people, and indeed to glorify it as an aesthetic virtue would sound self-congratulatory and thus undercut the argument for social criticism. That is why Zieba's reading of Auster and Reznikoff foregrounds the meaning of 'witness[ing] the trauma of immigrant displacement, the poverty, and the ugliness of everyday life' (Zieba, 119). Moreover, to extend the performative aspect of the art of hunger, she hints that the reader, or the task of reading, is implicated in the whole purpose of witness.

However, in order not to short-circuit the process of taking things in, we should beware of jumping to conclusions about this witness. There is something about the witness of poetry that connects up with the genesis of Auster's work, which is disclosive of justice and yet irreducible to any kind of polemic. As Reznikoff insists, what preoccupies a poet is *not* 'a conclusion of fact' but how things are presented to the eye (*AH*, 47). On this objectivist feature, Auster remarks: 'the act of witness has become synonymous with the act of creation — and the shouldering of its burden' (*AH*, 47). The conjunction of witness and creation, as well as the burden they give rise to, signifies the potential and limits of a writer's testimony. The central issue is doubtless concerned with ethics, but

¹⁵ Izabela Zieba, 'Paul Auster and Charles Reznikoff: The Hunger-Artists of Jewish American', *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33.1 (2014), 101-24 (p. 118).

¹⁶ Reznikoff's own phrase; quoted in *AH*, p. 46.

one cannot reach that point without first delving into what we might call the phenomenology of witness or, more simply, perception. This line of inquiry is evident in Auster's gloss on Reznikoff's commitment to 'clarity' (*AH*, 36), his tenacity in pursuing a poetic sensibility that spells 'a way of being in the world': 'The poem, in all instances, must be an effort to perceive, must be a moving *outward*. It is less a mode of expressing the world than it is a way of being in the world' (*AH*, 44). On the one hand, it is true to say that one is *thrown into* the world; on the other, one *lives in* the world by discovering it. That is to say, a world undiscovered is a world forgotten. Given what we have discussed, particularly a Jewish-American sense of displacement, the writer's ceaseless attempt to engage with the world appears to be inextricably linked with the fate of uprootedness. That said, it should be noted that Auster's reflection also invokes other sources of influence. In the current case it involves Merleau-Ponty's observation on the reenactment of 'creative genius' through perception or contemplation (*AH*, 37). At stake in the process of 'moving *outward*' is a genuine concern for haecceity, the 'thisness' of things, not, say, Platonic generality. This phenomenological account does not just centre on the discovery of external particulars; it implies the necessity of conceiving our relations to them, as Auster further explains:

For the building of a world is above all the building and recognition of relations. To discover a thing and isolate it in its singularity is only a beginning, a first step. The world is not merely an accumulation, it is a process — and each time the eye enters this world, it partakes in the life of all the disparate things that pass before it. While objectivity is the premise, subjectivity is the tacit organizer. As soon as there is more than one thing, there is memory, and because of memory, there is language: what is born in the eye, and nevertheless beyond it. In which, and out of which, the poem.

(*AH*, 40)

What this passage suggests to me, as a clue to the poetics Auster affirms, is that invention is not the most proper word to describe the nature of writing. We do not invent the world; rather, we reinvent our relationship with other entities, hence with the world as a whole. And the whole is not simply the sum of things but requires a series of configurations, which are carried out not only through the eye but through memory and language. It is dynamic, fluctuant, and, like the Heideggerian mood (*Stimmung*), transcending the line between inner and outer.

Similarly, in Auster's reading of Oppen, 'the primal act of seeing' is the bedrock on which existence is based (*AH*, 116). As for Reznikoff, for Oppen the acts of seeing and writing are immediate manifestations of 'one's awareness of the world, one's concern for existence'.¹⁷ The words 'awareness' and 'concern' again point to the importance of being responsible for registering one's place in the world and the world's place in one's self. These are by no means self-serving.

¹⁷ Oppen's words; quoted in *AH*, p. 115.

What Auster discerns in Oppen's poetry is precisely the feeling of being in common. It is arguable that a shift from 'early preoccupations with things and individual perceptions to larger questions of society and the possibility of community' (*AH*, 117) has also been played out in his own *oeuvre*. Nonetheless, let me reiterate the point made in my earlier comments: there is no absolute demarcation between the two seemingly disparate quests. Just as he recognises in Oppen 'a human voice speaking outward from the way deepest chasm of solitude' (*AH*, 118), he is not unaware that this 'human voice' is always already a voice among others. Herein lies the writer's 'inner commitment': 'the moment one posits the necessity of seeing the world — that is to say, of entering it — one must be prepared to take one's stand among other men. As a consequence, speech belongs to the realm of ethics' (*AH*, 118).

At the moment I do not intend to pursue in greater detail the ethical dimension of speech and writing, for its details depend on the specific texts I am going to study. These will be elaborated in due course. What has already become clear, though, is that the objectivist poetics is another formative influence on Auster. Moreover, if this influence can be deemed profound in any way, shape, or form, it is because from the very outset it overlapped with other aspects, such as Jewish tradition, Continental phenomenology and existentialism.¹⁸ And when we consider Auster's penchant for existentialism, another philosophical *topos* in his work, once again it comes as no surprise to see that not many critics relish the thought of returning to it. Like the shop-soiled concept of deconstruction, it could easily be jettisoned or simply ignored. But my question is: without enough deliberation and thorough assessment, why should a subject be judged as trite for good? Even if so many things have been said about the so-called existentialism in Kafka, Beckett, and Camus, to name but a few, it does not entail that this element in Auster should be dismissed as repetitious. For one thing, it can be treated individually by him due to the very dynamics and economy of literary writing, whose operation differs from general conceptualisation. For another, once a translator of French intellectuals, Auster is well acquainted with French philosophy and literature — existentialism and beyond, say, Proust, Mallarmé, Joubert and Surrealist poets. Tom Theobald's *Existentialism and Baseball: The French Philosophical Roots of Paul Auster* is a good case in point, which provides an insightful reading of Auster alongside Surrealism, as well as existential phenomenology and literary theory largely framed by Sartre and Blanchot. When Nigel Rodenhurst in 2011 asserted that this book was 'a giant leap when placed against the prevalent failings within Auster criticism to date', his recommendation simultaneously (and sadly) indicated

¹⁸ For example, Auster in his piece on Reznikoff touches upon the poet's complex relationship with Judaism. In Oppen's case, as Peter Nicholls points out, the poet's interest in Heidegger can be traced back to at least 1929. See Peter Nicholls, 'Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen', *Journal of American Studies*, 31.2 (1997), 153-70 (p. 163).

that, despite all complaint about reaching saturation in certain deconstructive/poststructuralist readings, actually not too much but so little had been done in a philosophical fashion.¹⁹ The extent of deficiency in this respect has also been noted by Matthew McKean: ‘they [critics] default in the end to viewing his early writing simply as anti-detective fiction rather than going further to explore the real extent to which Auster asks particular kinds of philosophical questions and mobilizes fiction to work through them.’²⁰

By the ‘philosophical fashion’ I do not mean some methodology systematically formulable; I would even go so far as to say that applying the word ‘philosophical’ here is little more than expediency, given that philosophical-literary thinking can never remain the same in the wake of critical and cultural theories. More crucially, the purpose of a philosophical reading is not to privilege some abstract, universal ideas over concrete experiences, but to underline the difficulty and necessity of (re)balancing the physical and the metaphysical, the factual and the textual, the existential and the contemplative, and to see how Auster’s work can possibly be a site where they (en)counter. Consequently, I will not *directly* echo the increasing research interest in sociohistorical specificities mentioned above (say, 9/11, the Iraq War and so on), because this approach, if misused, may turn out to be nothing other than an ossified antipode to postmodern textuality and playfulness. It is vital that our reading experience is not solidified but constantly mobilised. Since Auster’s way of connecting with our social and political circumstances is less than plain and straightforward, I would rather favour an oblique way of weighing this undercurrent in his writing, treating it as a sort of inconclusive diagnosis. In this respect there is no reason why a philosophical interest in Auster’s work cannot take some diagnostic effects. Although certain deconstructive and poststructuralist platitudes have lost their efficacy, philosophy, it seems to me, remains open to numerous directions of thought that penetrate deep into the human condition. Whatever circumstances one finds oneself in, and whether they *appear* continuous with or disjoined from what we call social conditions and historical events, they are within the realm of the human. And particular questions about becoming human — its (existing and potential) problems and (missed and future) possibilities — lie at the heart of the dialogue between literature and philosophy. Even though the old tradition of humanism has been swept aside, the issue of humanity, with its depth and breadth, is far from settled. While it can no longer be comprehended in its totality and such terms as ‘universal’ and ‘essence’ have come under attack, there is still an area — a sort of invisible or impenetrable common ground — that a

¹⁹ Nigel Rodenhurst, ‘Review of James Peacock *Understanding Paul Auster*’, *Journal of American Studies*, 45.4 (2011), 1-3.

²⁰ Matthew McKean, ‘Paul Auster and the French Connection: *City of Glass* and French Philosophy’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 21.2 (2010), 101-18 (p. 102).

postmodern brand of relativism fails to see. In literature this area emerges through our exposure to the complexity of moral sensibility. Together with the idea of authenticity, a way of understanding ethics in relation to the human condition is congruent with a renewed exigency of philosophical-literary thinking.

It is against this background that I concur with Theobald that ‘an earlier, more humanist period of French thought’ underlies Auster’s thematic concerns.²¹ Exploring the Surrealist influence in *The Invention of Solitude*, the Sartrean motifs of responsibility and freedom in *The Music of Chance*, the relation between self and Other in *The New York Trilogy*, and the Blanchotian themes of death and the writer’s bad faith in *Leviathan*, he seeks to bring to light Auster’s inheritance of the French literary and philosophical culture that sets him apart from many American writers, both traditional and postmodern. Granted, it is important to stress ‘the French philosophical side of Auster’s protean transatlanticism’ (Theobald, 30). Besides, it could be argued that Auster reads American Transcendentalism and Renaissance through foreign eyes. Nevertheless, although Theobald tries to avoid compartmentalising Auster’s *oeuvre* and keeping his French and American strains apart, it still seems to me that he runs the risk of delimiting his scope by just skimming over Auster’s American literary ancestry, whose philosophical value is not readily detectable. In my view, a philosophical investigation can be bolder and more imaginative. That is to say, what my project will perform is a reading of the work *per se*, which *does not have to* be yoked to the author’s intellectual background, and which might reveal far more than can be verified. In this regard, I would like to consider what the American side can mean to the work *philosophically*, alongside the European counterpart. If the latter clue is partly biographical, then the former one may be no more than a speculation.

As suggested, I aim to draw upon Cavell’s singular thoughts, which unceasingly prompt one to ponder the possibility of crossing the boundaries between literature and philosophy, between American and European traditions. This is essentially about experiment and dialogue. Notwithstanding the risk of sounding nebulous, some of the key concepts cannot and should not be fully bodied forth before immersion in an individual work. Otherwise, no equal footing can be established in an exchange between literature and philosophy, narrative and thought, and hence no renewal of each. This vagueness, far from pointless and ineffectual, can hopefully unleash writing’s particular potentials as it unfolds, not to mention that Auster’s texts themselves are not only narrative-driven but also laden with perceptions — sometimes incisive, sometimes tentative. Nurturing and challenging one another, they become intertwined in an elaborate way. In this light, a philosophical approach to literature concerns nothing about rigorous, systematic theorisation any

²¹ Tom Theobald, *Existentialism and Baseball: The French Philosophical Roots of Paul Auster* (Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), p. 7.

more than literature itself does. As Auster said in an interview, ‘The deeper I get into my own work, the less engaging theoretical problems have become. [...] There’s something calling out to you, some human call, that makes you want to listen to the work. In the end, it probably has very little to do with literature.’ It may as well explain why he thought there was no absolute break between his poetry and prose, for writing is in a sense continuous and ‘genreless’.²²

The issue of ‘genreless’ prose (as exemplified by *The Invention of Solitude*) is addressed by Hau in his monograph. He certainly takes note of the significance of this shift: ‘if Auster’s poetry was preoccupied with his encounter with language, his prose is primarily concerned with his encounter with the world at large’ (Hau, 199). Yet again, apart from textual and theoretical analyses, his method, perhaps more so than Theobald’s, differs radically from mine in that he sometimes resorts to biographical information, while acknowledging its inadequacy, to buttress his arguments:

I have attempted to show how even seemingly unrelated factors such as aesthetics and financial situation do interact, and not only with each other but with a host of additional factors that for the most part are beyond the reach of scholarly analysis. The author’s personal life, unquestionably, is an area of great importance, yet it is impossible, perhaps even for the author himself, to reconstruct all the events from his biography that were crucial in his metamorphosis into a writer of prose.

(Hau, 166)

To be sure, I do not take issue with this view, which to some degree pertains to the question of genesis broached at the beginning of this introduction. But, as I said, my direction is much more speculative and experimental. If there is anything definitive about a philosophical method, which I know I have been hesitating over formulating, it is a lack of interest in gaining a better purchase on biographical details, amassing historical material, and treating them as crucial evidence or primary support for research. Although they could be important, their importance is variable and subject to countless reconstructions and reassessments. Therefore, what also needs to be considered is the chance of their constraints on the possibilities of the work, which should be opened up in the very process of idiosyncratic reading and configuration of fragments from unexpected sources. It seems to me a better as well as more promising way of tracing the *origin*, not by lamenting its loss but by being *original* in one’s experience of the work.

Indebtedness and Originality: A Literary-Philosophical Line

Cavell’s philosophy is a major influence on the direction to be taken in my study. Before I outline

²² At least, according to what he said in the same interview in 1987, ‘I don’t think myself as having made a break from poetry. All my work is of a piece, and the move into prose was the last step in a slow and natural evolution.’ Both this quotation and the previous one in the text come from Joseph Mallia, ‘Interview with Paul Auster’, in *Conversations with Paul Auster*, ed. by James M. Hutchisson (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 5-12 (p. 6, p. 11).

what can be achieved through a Cavellian reading of Auster, it would be useful to characterise and understand the intellectual context in which this reading is set. As the review of Auster scholarship has shown, those who take a philosophical interest in Auster's work tend to place exclusive emphasis on his affinity with the French intellectual tradition; whereas those who are concerned with his portrayal of American experience tend to overlook its philosophical implications. And it is quite conceivable that his allusions to writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman may be regarded by some postmodern readers only as an intertextual adjunct to fictional narratives. With these in mind, I think it necessary to propose a line of American writers that can offer a refreshing perspective on Auster's literary practice. This attempt at recontextualisation is consistent with what has been stated at the end of the first section. A context is a frame; and the fact that its meaning is oftentimes shaped *in retrospect* suggests the great extent to which it depends on that which is contextualised. The rationale at work here is essentially a hermeneutic one, which allows reciprocity and tension to develop between the text and the context into which it is introduced. It also means *weaving together* different texts, as implied in the original sense of the word 'context'.

Let me elaborate a bit more on why this interactive mode of understanding is vital to the line I am about to illustrate. To begin with, it bears on the ideas already articulated in T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and Borges's comments on Hawthorne. I invoke the two as they are cited at the outset of Alike Varvogli's discussion of the nineteenth-century legacies that Auster assimilates. Despite their different emphases, both Eliot's account of 'tradition' and Borges's thesis of 'mutual debt' are predicated on the belief, as Varvogli puts it, 'that literature is also read backwards from the present'.²³ In her 'backwards' tracing of literary legacies in *The New York Trilogy*, the Emersonian and Thoreauvian substrata begin to reemerge in the cases that preoccupy Quinn and Blue. Switching back and forth between Auster's text and those of the past, her analysis demonstrates the ways in which Transcendentalist preoccupations are recontextualised in the 'age of suspicion' (Varvogli, 25) and rendered more contested than ever in the later fiction. Another complicating factor, she remarks, is the already existing tension between Transcendentalists and Romantic writers like Hawthorne and Melville, which works its way into the whole fabric of the *Trilogy*. So understood, major concerns in the three novellas can be mapped onto Auster's ambivalent attitude towards his American antecedents, which reflects a serious engagement with their works. As Varvogli maintains, 'his inclusion of texts such as Emerson's *Nature* or Thoreau's *Walden* does not imply an intention to ridicule them, nor an unquestioning acceptance of them' (Varvogli, 25). It is this unresolved ambivalence that becomes a productive force in Auster's reinterpretation of past traditions.

²³ Alike Varvogli, *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p. 21.

A question that particularly interests, or returns to, me is whether this reinterpretation, a manifestation of ‘mutual debt’, necessarily precludes the possibility of originality. According to Varvogli, Emerson’s advocacy of originality — ‘his belief in the authenticity and originality of the Romantic genius’ (Varvogli, 23) — underlies the centrality of authorship that Auster appears to disavow and dismantle. Her reading of *City of Glass* presents, I would say, a credible picture of the post-Romantic reorientation of language, reality and subjectivity, in which mediation becomes the counterpoint to an extreme form of origination, as epitomised by Stillman Sr’s linguistic experiment. But let me inquire further into the Romantic-Transcendentalist framework by re-posing the question of originality at the juncture of Europe and America, of philosophy and literature. This is not to deny all the charges levelled against such notions as originality and genius; my point is that these notions are actually less easy to nail down. Emerson’s frequent returns to what we call originality, in ‘Self-Reliance’, ‘Originality and Quotation’, and so on, may serve as an index of America’s proclamation of its independence. But what is America (or, as some prefer to call it, Americanness)? Similarly, in ‘Self-Reliance’ Emerson asks: ‘Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded?’²⁴ If one’s answers to these questions are as yet unsatisfactory, one’s sense of independence has to remain undetermined. Emerson’s words are thereby not meant to dictate to his reader what path to follow, though the critical impulse in them may lead one to think so. And he is aware of the possibility, the risk or even the fate of being misunderstood: “‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?’ (NSE, 183). For him the risk is worth taking because ‘a foolish consistency’ will be far more fatal to the quest of thinking. This helps explain why originality is a matter of concern to him. To look into the meaning of it in Emerson, one has to take into account his distaste for conformity and slavish imitation, his disinclination to let go of creative bursts for the sake of consistency, a consistency that undermines the flux of becoming.²⁵ Genius is an activity; and originality resides in a happening or a change, rather than a stable state or a set goal. Nothing in this conception, it seems to me, entails an outright rejection of the condition of indebtedness (hence of inheritance). On the contrary, what occurs is a shift of position, a change of view, or a transformation of tongue. In this regard, the inherited tongue — words and thoughts — can be transformed, not into that which is believed to be Adam’s, but into one’s own.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 187; hereafter, *NSE*.

²⁵ In ‘The American Scholar’, Emerson writes: ‘The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn’ (*NSE*, 88). As Packer observes, ‘Active means creative, and creative means original; hence anything purely or merely repetitive belongs to the death instinct, and “imitation is suicide.”’ See B. L. Packer, *Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1982), p. 115.

Has my account of Emerson's originality deconstruct the myth of prelapsarian tongue? Or have many of our assumptions about deconstruction failed to see the stake of his originality? To be original is to be misunderstood. This statement may sound hyperbolic, but the intricate branching of Emerson's thinking, which produces manifold effects of reading, attests that the Romantic-Transcendentalist framework is not a closed, obsolete system. The way in which Auster revivifies its import, leaving it open to the ambiguity of fictional narrative, contains a double gesture of indebtedness and originality. It perfectly illustrates the point Emerson makes in 'The American Scholar':

One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

(NSE, 90)

A good reader needs to be an inventor who capitalises on the past. Accordingly, as Packer points out, 'The assets of the past are only valuable if they are liquid, convertible by the "active soul" into funding for new production, turned into a form of portable property' (Packer, 116). In Emerson's words, the wealth must be carried out, in reading as well as in writing; more precisely, one thing is coupled with the other in the creation of the American scholar. Here both the scholar and America exceed their literal meanings. Though different in many ways from the American poet, another Emersonian persona, the scholar can and perhaps should become an artist, a writer, or a poet. More to the point, the American scholar is someone who descends from a literary-philosophical lineage that originates in the Romantic-Transcendentalist period. In this sense, my account of the Emersonian originality also points to the originality of literature or, better still, literature's original consciousness of itself — as if for the first time — as a question, as a quest, as something that at once converges with and departs from philosophy.

Not that the relationship between philosophy and literature had not existed prior to the Romantic period. Yet this point of entry carries at least two far-reaching implications: one can be briefly called the aftermath of Kant; the other the aftermath of Transcendentalism, which interrelates with the idea of America. What needs to be pointed out beforehand is that the motif of nature, its manifestations in English Romanticism as well as in America, will not be detailed in this introduction. The motif is of course extremely important, as many studies have revealed, but my current task is to draw up a line of American writers who 'carry out the wealth' (to borrow Emerson's phrase) of Continental thought. And it must be borne in mind that to carry out this wealth is at the same time to face the fundamental questions it brings along and leaves unsolved. These questions, bequeathed by Kant to

his successors, are concerned with the limits of knowledge, the possibility of freedom, and the necessity of ethics. Moreover, what forms an essential part of the Kantian legacy is ‘an entirely new and unforeseeable relation between aesthetics and philosophy’.²⁶ According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, it is Kant’s philosophy, not the eighteenth-century literary and aesthetic traditions, that ‘opens up the possibility of romanticism’. In other words, literature’s original consciousness of itself, as developed in romanticism, cannot be dissociated from ‘the crisis concerning the possibility of the philosophical in general that transcendental Aesthetics initiates’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 30).

As is well known, Kant denies us access to ‘*intuitus originarius*’ (originary intuition), which is regarded by him as humanly unattainable. It follows that what we have access to are appearances, not the thing in itself. A key message we can derive from the Kantian block, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy do, is ‘the weakening of the subject’: ‘What results from this is a cognition [*connaissance*] within the limits of possible *a priori* experience, but such a cognition is incapable of restoring anything like a subject. Except, of course, for those who are satisfied with a “subject of the cognition of appearances”’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 31). Obviously the romantics will not be satisfied with ‘a subject of the cognition of appearances’; in this regard, romanticism is no different from speculative idealism. In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s account, both attempt to address the problem of the subject, its knowledge of others as well as of itself; both are preoccupied with the Idea of the subject or its ideality. What distinguishes one from the other, though, is how much weight art is supposed to carry, or, more crucially, whether the work-subject is completed in its totality or dissolved in an unstoppable tendency towards fragmentation. The latter tendency can be said to culminate in modernism, or anyway certain strains of modernism that resonate with thinkers like Adorno and Blanchot. Whether this underscores the continuity or discontinuity between romanticism and modernism is subject to further specification. Whether this has any reverberations in so-called postmodernism is yet another issue. But all categorisations and periodisations aside, the essential truth, as summarised by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, is that ‘we still belong to the era it [romanticism] opened up. The present period continues to deny precisely this belonging, which defines us (despite the inevitable divergence introduced by repetition). A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernible today, in most of the central motifs of our “modernity”’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 15).

It goes without saying that the weakening of the subject is only a part of the story we can tell about ‘modernity’, and various readings of this part either produce or modify other parts of the story.

²⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 29.

Here I do not wish to exclude America from this complicated story, to treat it as an exception. Its exceptionality or newness is rooted precisely in those old dreams created by religion and philosophy, an Eden or a utopia, to say the least.²⁷ Yet there is indeed something shrouded in mystery about America's own reflections on its condition and discovery — as part of the human condition and discovery. Perhaps all this amounts to Cavell's question in *The Senses of Walden*: 'Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? Or has it — in the metaphysical riot of its greatest literature?'²⁸ He later reiterates in *In Quest of the Ordinary* that this form of question signals a want of recognition of the full significance of Emerson and Thoreau in finding an American expression of philosophy. As he goes on to explain, 'Whether you accept Thoreau as a philosopher depends on whether you accept his invention of a discourse, along with his other beginnings, as a beginning of a philosophical discourse.'²⁹ This by no means implies that everything should or can start from scratch; rather, a new mode of speech consists not of new words but of displaced words. Let us recall Emerson's advice in 'The American Scholar': 'One must be an inventor to read well' (*NSE*, 90); or the act of borrowing an axe that Cavell takes from *Walden* to figure Thoreau's 'literary-philosophical borrowing': 'It is difficult to begin without borrowing [...] I returned it sharper than I received it' (*IQO*, 20). In each case, to find oneself in, or at least approaching, 'America' is to inhabit the space it creates for reading and writing, which mingle with different ways of seeing and living.

To some the philosophising of America might raise more questions than it answers; for instance, it might further mystify the nature of philosophicality (hence of literariness). What, after all, does *this* philosophical way represent? Surely not 'the nationality of philosophy', which Cavell is quick to dismiss (*IQO*, 19). One can sense that the question is tricky. Here the trap in philosophical discourse is no less insidious than what we encounter in literary representation. Instead of putting forward propositions or prescribing rules, Cavell draws our attention to the two-way process of reading and writing. That gives us some idea of what this philosophical way resists or else departs from; for if an American expression of philosophy can be found, first and foremost, in the writing of America, this expression probably will not be recognised as 'philosophical' from the point of view of American pragmatism, logical positivism and the analytic tradition in general. Besides, an American

²⁷ On the concurrence of Kant's Copernican Revolution and the revolutions in the public sphere, Cavell comments: 'The two editions of the First Critique, in roughly the first half of the 1780s, were bracketed by the American and the French Revolutions, as though these private and public pairs of events were two faces of the same revolutionary project in human history, namely the realization of a universal realm of reason and freedom in human existence.' See Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 125; hereafter, *CW*.

²⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 33; hereafter, *SW*.

²⁹ Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 11, p. 19; hereafter, *IQO*.

employment of Continental ideas, as exemplified by Emerson's approach to German Idealism, appears no less problematic from another professional point of view, namely the point of view of European systematisation. Indeed, Emerson's approach is concerned neither with technical precision nor with theoretical abstraction. Commenting on Emerson's view of Hegelian dialectics, René Wellek quotes from Emerson's *Journals*: 'it needs no encyclopedia of volumes to tell, I want not the metaphysics, but only the literature of them.'³⁰ He takes this to be Emerson's general attitude towards German philosophy and rightly contends that 'Emerson expected something even greater from Germany. [...] Neither Schelling, nor Oken, nor Hegel (the list is significant) ultimately satisfies' (Wellek, 60). This 'something' is embodied in 'a poet sage', 'the lurking Behmen of Modern Germany', who, as Wellek notes, 'refused to reveal himself'. No wonder in 'The Poet' Emerson declares: 'I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance' (*NSE*, 281). It was not long before his idea of the poet met its embodiment. For Walt Whitman, as well as for Emerson, 'America is a poem'.

In a sense (or for a time) Whitman does live up to what Emerson envisions in 'The Poet': the poetic genius that appears so inexhaustible and liberating. Nevertheless, 'there is a price to be paid for these ecstasies', as Packer reminds us, 'nothing is got for nothing' (Packer, 196). The fact is that 'The Self does not simply return to normal after an ecstasy; it disintegrates' (Packer, 197). It is why there is a need to distinguish between 'the Whitman of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*' and 'the Whitman of 1855', between 'the Emerson of "Experience"' and 'the Emerson of "The Poet"' — in short, between 'the skeptical idealism of Hume' and 'the mystical idealism of the Mahabharata' (Packer, 198). Moreover, one state is an inevitable correlative of the other. Their correlation, I think, sheds light on the inextricable relationship between poetry and philosophy. Although Emerson asserts that 'while the drunkenness lasts we will sell our bed, our philosophy, our religion, in our opulence' (*NSE*, 278), philosophy remains, for better or worse, a source of inspiration to poets. Whitman's interest in Hegelian thought is a case in point, which seems both intriguing and problematic. The connection between his representation of American identity and Hegel's conception of the Spirit (*Geist*) has left contested legacies. As one would expect, freedom, or the *realisation* of freedom, is the subject of much debate.³¹

This is not the place to delve into all its aspects; but undoubtedly the politics of Hegelianism, as a contentious issue in itself, greatly affects one's view of Whitman's poetics. In Glaser's reassessment

³⁰ René Wellek, 'Emerson and German Philosophy', *The New England Quarterly*, 16.1 (1943), 41-62 (p. 59).

³¹ See Brian Brodhead Glaser, 'Reassessing Whitman's Hegelian Affinities', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 29.1 (2011), 19-32.

of Whitman's Hegelianism, Hegel's Spirit is favoured over Kant's Reason so that the notion of freedom can be located in communal life rather than autonomy. What must be pointed out is that his reading is largely based on the American interpretations of Hegel (such as Robert Pippin's version), but suppose a French version is adopted (of course in France the reception of Hegel is not uniform)? Hegel's critique of Kant, his way of resubstantialising the subject, eventually leads to 'the philosophy of the Spirit', that is, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it, 'the philosophy (henceforth the System) of the Subject itself, in its ideality, or, in other words, in its absoluteness' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 34). In this version, the '*System-subject*' is the kernel of Hegel's idealism. Its political overtones are palpable because this System comes to fruition in the State: '[for Hegel] the State, as the "moral idea in action," constitutes the highest moment of ethics and thus — from the perspective of its *realization* — the final moment of the System' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 133; my italics). The romantics, while allured by the ideality of the Subject, nevertheless pin their hopes on art; this is, by and large, in line with Kant's efforts to unify Understanding and Reason in the realm of aesthetics. Viewed in this light, what a political reading of Whitman cannot sidestep is the question of the State, which is *not* the same thing as communal life. It is worth asking whether an Americanisation of romanticism, as manifested in Transcendentalism, somehow turns into an Americanisation of speculative idealism; and, if so, whether this Hegelian turn unwittingly betrays the freedom it exalts.

For the present it is not my intention to use a Continental critique of Hegel to upend a constructive (some would say, democratic) representation of Hegelian intersubjectivity in Whitman; or what is described by Glaser as 'a Hegelian ethics of identification' (Glaser, 30). However, I do wonder why one has to side with either one version of Hegel or the other when appraising Whitman's work. De-emphasis of the State in American Hegel interpretations seems to precisely confirm the 'veritable romantic *unconscious*' Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy talk about. That is, the nation was once imagined or idealised as a community, whose displacement is now perceptible in various attempts to either reinterpret or escape the national bard's vision. If it is necessary to go beyond or descend from the altitudes of Hegelian Spirit and Whitmanian Self, what route can we take? Not only one, to be sure.

Along the axis of modernist poetry there are at least two routes: one taken by Ezra Pound; the other by Wallace Stevens. With Pound, the impacts of Nietzsche and Bergson are substantial. They may not be direct sources of inspiration, but it is unquestionable that, via Remy de Gourmont and T. E. Hulme, Nietzsche's thought on metaphor, as well as Bergson's view of immediate experience, has

found their way into Pound's poetics.³² With Stevens, the traces of Heidegger and Blanchot are discernible.³³ These modernist poets display affinities with Continental thinkers in the epistemological and phenomenological fields. Also critically important is their shared concern for the nature of language, which no doubt ties into knowledge and experience. As Schwartz demonstrates, modernist poetics, along with New Criticism, owes a heavy debt to Continental thought (particularly Nietzsche), suggesting that the two traditions are not as separate as they seem. On the whole these routes in modernist poetics help to shape objectivist poetry and thereby add to the whole of Auster's intellectual milieu.

It may seem strange that so far I have not highlighted the connection of American fiction with European philosophy. Yet for current purposes it would not be imperative to single out a particular type of literature for special mention. If writing is America's (philosophical) way of expressing and reflecting on itself, it matters little whether this is done in poetry or prose. Do we distinguish Emerson from Whitman simply because the former composes what we call 'essays' and the latter 'poems'? Probably not. The distinction is more likely to bear on the effects of a Kantian Emerson and a Hegelian Whitman, on what they make of the self, of freedom, of their conditions and consequences. Of course it does not mean that expression is unimportant, as though it were secondary to what we think of as substance. To develop a means of expression, or what Cavell calls the 'invention of a discourse', is nothing less than a step toward the true existence of life and work. It is a step toward freedom. But this freedom cannot be possessed individually; it is shared with others and exposed to risks. An existentialist account of this would be that the condition of being free binds individuals to choice and responsibility. As we know, something in this account strikes a chord with James Baldwin. For Baldwin, ethnic relations need to transcend cultural and historical determinism. Precisely because the relations are rooted in history and susceptible to external forces, everyone should take the responsibility of examining and changing them. It is in the process of facing reality that one discovers the opening of choice; and it is in this discovery of choice that one realises that freedom is not so much an ontological fact as a moral achievement, or burden, of the human, which has to take into account human relatedness. As Lapenson puts it, 'The philosophical question so pertinent to Baldwin is: What is freedom? The examination of freedom has to be

³² Stanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). See Chapter II.

³³ See Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Routledge, 2005). In addition, Stevens, in his letter to Paule Vidal on July 29, 1952, mentioned his interest in Heidegger's work on Hölderlin. See *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. by Holly Stevens (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 758. I am not suggesting, of course, that Stevens had Heidegger's work in mind when writing poetry. What I am suggesting is that, given his attention to philosophy, and his contact with French intellectuals like Jean Wahl, it is not surprising that he would finally cross paths with Heidegger's work.

illuminated by the resisted fact that the relationship of whites to African Americans is “literally and morally a *blood relationship*.”³⁴ From this perspective, Baldwin’s existentialist stance on freedom is not utterly at odds with Whitman’s idealist position; rather, the former is in one sense a revision of the latter. Nothing is more telling than the epigraph to *Giovanni’s Room*: ‘I am the man; I suffered, I was there.’ This quotation from *Leaves of Grass* testifies to a complex bond between the two writers; complex because the dialectic Baldwin observes in interpersonal relationships is barely able to achieve a Hegelian synthesis. Nor can the self fully recognise its authentic existence, which ‘has been misplaced’ in, let us say, self-deception: ‘I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home.’³⁵

Baldwin’s direct contact with existentialism illustrates a postwar connection between American writers and French thought. Auster’s case differs from his, but on the whole the assimilation of philosophical ideas, as well as the expatriate experience, has a huge impact on their ways of understanding American life. The question of finding the American self, as well as its constant displacement, is central to the literary-philosophical line I have been delineating. It will also feature in my subsequent unpacking of Cavell’s idea of Emersonian/Moral Perfectionism. For the moment there is one last case we need to look at — Philip Roth. His thoughtful engagement with fundamental questions about art, identity and power, as Patrick Hayes shows, is deeply influenced by Nietzsche.³⁶ Hayes’s interpretation of Roth offers an interesting case about literature’s capacity to go beyond good and evil. What is germane, to both what I have said (in the first section) and what I am going to say, is the sort of ‘ethical turn’ he sets against the Nietzschean aesthetics embodied in Roth’s work. As he claims elsewhere, this ethical turn, spearheaded by Martha Nussbaum, is in many ways a revival of the ‘culture of redemption’ in postwar America; and it is against this background that Roth’s work conveys a different message.³⁷ Specifically, it exhibits a Nietzschean resistance to antithetical values, which are often presupposed by conventional moral norms. In addition, its emphasis on performance and self-creation bespeaks a Nietzschean valorisation of the vital, unadulterated and transgressive force of art.

While in agreement with Hayes on certain points — in fact what he reveals about the aesthetics of

³⁴ Bruce Lapenson, ‘Race and Existential Commitment in James Baldwin’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 37.1 (2013), 199-209 (p. 206).

³⁵ James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 18-19.

³⁶ Patrick Hayes, “‘The Nietzschean Prophecy Come True’: Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* and the Aesthetics of Identity”, *The Review of English Studies*, 64.265 (2012), 492-511 (p. 496). According to Hayes, Roth’s allusions to Nietzsche can be found in his working notes and novels.

³⁷ See Patrick Hayes, *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 7-15.

identity and theatricality sounds somewhat applicable to Auster as well — I nonetheless believe that a genuine concern about ethics should not be excluded from aesthetic evaluations of life and art. After all, doesn't ethics also extend beyond its normative, not to say moralistic, boundaries, that is, beyond what Emerson derides as 'conformity'? More to the point, one must be aware that the Nietzschean model itself is perspectival. I am not sure whether Cavell would be regarded by some as an exponent of 'redemption' and 'therapy' (it depends on what you make of these notions), but in his formulation of Moral Perfectionism, Nietzsche, alongside Emerson and Thoreau, is given great attention. The 'consecration' proposed by an Emersonian Nietzsche is to 'the realm of culture', which has nothing to do with 'cultural institutions, or institutionalized culture'.³⁸ It is rather concerned with 'the capacity for self-criticism, the capacity to consecrate the attained to the unattained self' (*CHU*, 49). Therefore, there is nothing in this capacity that runs against self-creation; one might even say that the Emersonian/Nietzschean self-criticism requires first and foremost the creative powers of perception and imagination that enable me to, in Nietzsche's words, 'see above me something higher and more human than I am' (quoted by Cavell from Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*; *CHU*, 51).

I do not wish to appear defensive about the moral value of literature and art, let alone the desire to domesticate them. There is no denying that philosophy's relations to them can become quite tense when the issue of domestication, hence of resistance, arises. Yet it is also true that the indefinable enterprise we call literature has never ceased to generate original responses to philosophy, as exemplified by the writers discussed above. This may not have transformed philosophy, but it has transformed our way of approaching the space between the philosophical and the aesthetic, which, in Cavell's picture of it, contains 'a perfectionist relation to a text': 'Would it help for me simply to assert that a perfectionist relation to a text (words ordered by another) is an emblem of the relation perfectionism seeks from another, as if there is no respite from attention to the course of one's life? Is this morality?' (*CHU*, xxix). We will look at how this 'morality' — if it can be called so — develops in Auster's work.

Vulnerability and Responsiveness: A Cavellian Reading of Auster

A Cavellian reading of Auster, as I understand it, should include at least the following aspects. First, we should note that a major concern for Cavell is the threat and truth of scepticism. This has much to do with his engagement with the later Wittgenstein, notably *Philosophical Investigations*, whose 'originality', according to him, consists in an approach 'that undertakes not to deny skepticism's

³⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 48; hereafter, *CHU*.

power (on the contrary) but to diagnose the source (or say the possibility) of that power' (*IQO*, 170). Likewise, one might say that Cavell's own approach also aims to capture and work through the complex sense of scepticism, which has been extended by him to other fields like literature and film. As James Conant rightly observes, 'it is worth noting that in Cavell's own parlance the term *skepticism* ranges over a much wider intellectual landscape than in its conventional usage. For Cavell, it names a particular picture of knowledge [...] one which expresses a natural human disappointment with the reach of knowledge.'³⁹ In my reading of Auster scepticism will not be singled out as a discrete matter; its sense is so broad and all-encompassing that limiting it to one textual analysis or two cannot help us see the full picture, which should instead be embedded in the whole thesis. But without doubt those portions concerning *Ghosts*, *Leviathan*, *Moon Palace*, *The Book of Illusions* and *The Invention of Solitude* are expressly pertinent, where scepticism with respect to other minds is a deep-rooted problem that manifests itself in sundry forms. In other words, there is an essential link between scepticism and the other subjects I will touch upon, such as solitude, human doubleness, sincerity, the ontology of the work, community, the disastrous and the ordinary.

The doubleness of human existence is a crucial point that underpins Cavell's notion of Emersonian Perfectionism. It is derived from Kant's two 'standpoints' (or two worlds) propounded in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. To understand the underlying cause of this perception, we need to go back to the linchpin of Kant's philosophical enterprise, namely his effort to delimit the bounds of knowledge in order to make room for faith. What Cavell discerns in this Kantian 'settlement' is its ambivalence (*IQO*, 31). If Kant's view is that we can only secure our knowledge by confining it to Understanding and leaving Reason to take care of itself, the implication may be that our existence is intrinsically divided. And we do not know (do we?) whether we should be satisfied or dissatisfied with this settlement.

we simultaneously crave its [i.e. Kant's central idea of limitation] comfort and crave escape from its comfort, that we want unappeasably to be lawfully wedded to the world and at the same time illicitly intimate with it, as if the one stance produced the wish for the other, as if the best proof of human existence were its power to yearn, as if for its better, or other, existence.

(*IQO*, 32)

Yearnings are not the same thing as faith; they foreshadow either a loss or a regain of faith, something that recurs in Auster's stories. Perhaps the true message behind the Kantian settlement is that we are neither determined nor free; or, as suggested by Cavell, 'an insight that the human being now lives in *neither* world, that we are, as it is said, between worlds'. Put otherwise, it is as though

³⁹ Conant, 'On Bruns, on Cavell', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.3 (1991), 616-36 (p. 620).

we haunt the world or have not yet entered into the world, a world that is supposed to be a realm of ends. (The idea of haunting the world has its variant in Cavell's contemplation on film and spectatorship.)

What Emerson would make of this condition — 'the most unhandsome part of our condition' — is of much interest and importance.⁴⁰ His modification of Kant constitutes the stake of rethinking our experience, which seeks to build linkages between the sensuous and the intelligible, the passive and the active, the personal and the impersonal. Hence the division of our existence into two worlds is at the same time the condition of possibility of perceiving 'our rejected self, our beyond' (*CHU*, 58). Additionally, since Kant's moral law has become inaccessible to us (in Cavell's words, 'our relation to the law no longer has *this* power for us' [*CHU*, 58]), his realm of ends can be said to be supplanted by the realm of culture. Sometimes it is embodied in true friendship and attunement, which I will expand on in the chapter on *Smoke* and *The Brooklyn Follies*. But sometimes it also takes on other significances, as manifested in Emerson's (and Nietzsche's) rejection of religious institutions, or in Thoreau's dissent from a political authority that represents nothing but a debased form of law. Democracy faces its moment of truth in crisis and aversion; 'if Emerson is right,' Cavell writes, 'his aversion provides for the democratic aspiration the only internal measure of its truth to itself — a voice only this aspiration could have inspired, and if it is lucky, must inspire. Since his aversion is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a continual turning *toward* it' (*CHU*, 59). In this regard, *Leviathan*, not least its characterisation of Benjamin Sachs, will be the primary focus of my analysis.

The idea of America remains the cornerstone of Emersonian Perfectionism. As indicated in the previous section, it is a point of contention. I think that contention will go on, whether it be a suspicion of the idea's Americanist overtones or a critique of its obliviousness to the sociopolitical specificities.⁴¹ And it should go on, so as to open the idea to further questions as well as answers. Meanwhile, what literature can provide, as distinct from social research or journalism, is a universe or a space that is either entered or not at all. This of course does not ensure a practical solution. Nonetheless, because it does not serve a given reality (I do not say it has no connection with reality), something new or unexpected may come to pass in both writing and reading. Then it explains why

⁴⁰ From Emerson's 'Experience': 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition' (*NSE*, 288). This is one of the Emerson quotes that figure prominently in Cavell's discussion, as also evidenced by the title of his book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.

⁴¹ For instance, Cary Wolfe, from a Marxian perspective, criticises the 'essentially isolate journey of moral perfectionism' and the 'reductive idealism of Cavell's concept of politics and the social'. See Cary Wolfe, 'Alone with America: Cavell, Emerson, and the Politics of Individualism', *New Literary History*, 25.1 (1994), 137-57 (p. 144, p. 147).

Cavell lays considerable emphasis on ‘a perfectionist relation to a text’, as well as on ‘the genius of the text’:

So the question Emerson’s theory of reading and writing is designed to answer is not “What does a text mean?” [...] but rather “How is it that a text we care about in a certain way (expressed perhaps as our being drawn to read it with the obedience that masters) invariably says more than its writer knows, so that writers and readers write and read beyond themselves?” This might be summarized as “What does a text know?” or, in Emerson’s term, “What is the genius of the text?”
(*IQO*, 117)

In this light, the discovery of America — its voice, ideal, and loss — can be seen as a discovery of one’s unconscious aspirations, which are buried deep inside a work (of art) that keeps imagination alive; Emerson would tell us that ‘In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty’ (*NSE*, 176). An Austerian inflection of this Emersonian journey of discovery, particularly in *Moon Palace*, is that this ‘alienated majesty’, confounded with traumas, can strike one as both sublime and terrifying. We may ask: What is the genius of Blakelock’s *Moonlight*? What is there in this painting that Fogg and Effing behold or strive to behold? Further, it is worth asking how Fogg’s relation to Effing’s confessional memoir captures a perfectionist sense of relation to a text, and how this relation transforms the meanings of edification and communication.

If by my non-materialist approach I can temporarily suspend the unfavourable judgement that cultural theorists and New Historicists tend to pass on Cavell’s vision or idea of America, there is yet a more critical task I need to carry out within the literary-philosophical frame: namely, to test my Cavellian reading of Auster with certain strands of European thought, especially Blanchot. I consider this test as constructive and perhaps even necessary because some subjects mentioned above, such as solitude, the ontology of the work, and the disaster, are doubtless interwoven with Blanchot’s ideas. Failure to address the issues they raise would then undermine the complexities of life presented in Auster’s work. Does this imply a division between (American and European) cultures? But we should not forget that *this* division occurs within a single experience of life and work, just as one’s psyche is divided into seemingly separate parts. Although one part (of reading, of experience) might be measured against another, their interplay is contingent not on some fixed rules but on peculiar, if not utterly inscrutable, situations. Consequently, the subjects to be glossed in the following chapters will guide us to a site of endless reading for superimposed layers of thought and feeling. For instance in *Ghosts*, the experiment with solitude has multiple meanings that neither cancel out nor fully reconcile with one another. The question remains whether the excess of self-consciousness is the cause or the effect of solitude; or whether writing helps to enact or impede one’s existence. Black’s case is ultimately a metaphysical mystery. Blue’s writing of solitude is a struggle with the solitude of

writing, recalling the kind of ‘nonsecret’ Blanchot speaks of: ‘To keep the secret is evidently to tell it as a nonsecret, inasmuch as it is not tellable.’⁴² From a Cavellian point of view, Black’s melancholia reveals the ineffability of the common. It is in this sense that his secret cannot be told (for he has no secret), and that Blue is bound to be perplexed by something he cannot fail to know/experience. A different complication appears in *The Book of Illusions*. To better understand the difficult act of bearing witness, to know how one is at once connected with and disconnected from reality, we have to look into the ontologies of film and writing as expounded by Cavell and Blanchot. Their distinctive features give a deeper insight into the final climacteric of the novel.

The last and perhaps most important line of thinking centres on Cavell’s notion of ‘the ordinary’ and Blanchot’s notion of ‘the disaster’. What it signifies in my reading of Auster is a double movement of withdrawal and return. Then, what withdraws and what returns? I do not think this is easy to answer. Does it make sense to say that what returns is a *different* ordinary, something — as in Auggie’s Christmas story, Fogg’s ‘realm of ordinary miracles’, and Nathan’s ‘Hotel Existence’ — that transfigures our relations with reality? In *Little Did I Know* Cavell explains that what is meant by the ordinary is ‘an eventual or virtual ordinary’, in which ‘we have always and never existed’.⁴³ This ‘virtual ordinary’, by withdrawing from a full presence, opens up the possibility of recurrence, which is perceptible only in moments of rediscovering the self, the other and the world. At the same time, we should be aware that the ordinary, so understood, seems not only difficult to approach and retain (like Emerson’s ‘unapproachable America’) but, in the abyss of history, endlessly adjacent to the disaster. This recalls the end of *The Brooklyn Follies*, as well as those vignettes in *The Invention of Solitude*. Hence, in accordance with the structure of Nietzsche’s eternal return, the disaster will always be part of what recurs, in life and in writing. Perhaps writing can never help us recover what we have lost in life. Nonetheless, it is the function of writing to give voice to our sense of loss and, moreover, to acknowledge the unspeakable and the untraceable. It is additionally the task of reading to further writing’s acknowledgement, as a way of redeeming human vulnerability and limitedness, and also as a way of showing human responsibility and capacity for transformation.

⁴² Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 133; hereafter, *WD*.

⁴³ Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 530; hereafter, *LDIK*.

CHAPTER ONE

Experiencing as Knowing: Writing Solitude in *Ghosts*

Auster's *New York Trilogy* was seen by early critics as one of the fine examples of anti-detective fiction.⁴⁴ This approach to *Trilogy* often goes hand in hand with a deconstructive take on the issues foregrounded in the text, especially language and authorship. While I agree that language remains one of the cornerstones of philosophical thinking on literature, I also believe that we can finesse it by considering different perspectives. Distinct from the other two fully-fledged stories, *Ghosts*, with deceptive simplicity, provides a good point of entry into a philosophical investigation of the quasi-detective mystery.⁴⁵

Initiated by the colour analogy Auster mentions in relation to *Ghosts*, my investigation aims to tackle these questions: What does it mean to know a person? And what does it mean to 'experience' (in Auster's words) a person? Do knowledge and experience correspond to each other? Their epistemological concerns chime with Cavell's inquiry in *The Claim of Reason* as to the problem of knowledge and whether one has to ultimately search for answers outside of epistemology. As we shall see, one of the answers can be located in the relations that develop between Blue and Black. The most difficult conundrum for Blue is that in the case he investigates there is no secret to be revealed — only the experience (and a surfeit) of solitude, which any individual may be susceptible to. In the beginning Blue is blind to this. He is predisposed to detective work, an epistemological practice through and through. But little by little it begins to dawn on him that the point is not to garner information and keep a detailed log of Black's activities; the point is to adopt the latter's mode/form of life, where the meaning of experience lies. Inspired by Cavell's development of the Wittgensteinian themes, not least of privacy and (shared) forms of life, my argument is that knowing a person is more than (or, epistemologically, less than) knowing the

⁴⁴ For instance, see Alison Russell, 'Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction', *Critique*, 32.2 (1990), 71-84. See also Madeleine Sorapure, 'The Detective and the Author: *City of Glass*', in *Beyond the Red Notebook*, pp. 71-87.

⁴⁵ Similar in nature to my reading of *Ghosts* is Bruno Penteadó's, which is mainly framed by psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, particularly its dependence on the other for speculation and identification (for example, one's image in the mirror and how it relates to the uncanny). Although many of his interpretations differ from mine, I agree that the 'theoretical' value of *Ghosts* should be more fully explored. See Bruno Penteadó, 'The Ghost in the Mirror: Notes on Paul Auster's *Ghosts*', *European Journal of American Culture*, 32.1 (2013), 43-53.

facts about him/her. Alongside this argument, I will look at the part solitude plays in the ontology of writing, the way in which it intersects with the experience of otherness, and, finally, why the condition of solitude suggests an open secret about our commonality.

The Thoreauvian sense of doubleness is crucial. It is worth noting that, by reinventing the experience of ‘Walden’, *Ghosts* leaves its effects open to interpretation.⁴⁶ To be specific, by bringing in interaction — even and precisely if its gesture appears to be the withdrawal of interaction — between two characters, the novel reopens the question as well as the possibility of doubleness through a doubling of solitude. In addition, it allegorises the conjunction of writing and reading, in which the Thoreauvian experience is enacted (in writing) and channelled (through reading) and leads up to a resolution of the case, or, let us say, a case of resolution. The idea of resolution in my discussion derives from the message that Cavell discovers in *Walden* about ‘the nextness of the self to the self’ or ‘the answerability of the self to itself’ (*SW*, 109). What he means by ‘resolution’ rests on a reinterpretation of doubleness, one that seeks to maintain balance between action and reflection, or, as expressed in *Walden*, between the self as an actor and the self as a spectator. However, it is not my intention to directly apply Cavell’s formulations on this score. In other words, precisely because the case in *Ghosts* is not wholly a positive one, its extension of philosophical ideas is all the more worthy of our attention. Hence, not only should we note that the balance in question fails to work properly in the novel, but we need to know what lies at the heart of the problem. For instance, with Black it is mainly the chronic severance of the relationship between inner and outer (I am not saying, however, that writerly solitude must be the sole cause of this severance); with Blue the issue looks more complicated as he is the one whose transformative experience is fleshed out. It will come back later. For the moment I want to highlight the most important: although resolution (or what Cavell calls ‘answerability’) is predicated on doubleness (or what Cavell calls ‘nextness’), the latter does not entail the former. It is why reflection, which seems to imply both freedom and suspension, must be alternated with choice and progression (which may even be driven by chance), otherwise it can pose a potential threat to one’s sense of being and time.⁴⁷ If Blue’s experience of solitude suggests an avenue towards empathy, this empathy also leaves room for distance and difference, which means

⁴⁶ Sometimes I put quotation marks around the word Walden, because, apart from the actual place and the book it denotes, Walden can represent a non-place where the experience of solitude is, in various senses, transformative. And those senses will be explored in this chapter, including its conjunction with the experience of otherness and/or commonality.

⁴⁷ Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy’s discussion of freedom and decision, especially where Heidegger is concerned. As Heidegger writes, ‘Resoluteness, by its ontological essence, is always the resoluteness of some factual Dasein at a particular time. The essence of Dasein as an entity is its existence. Resoluteness ‘exists’ only as a decision [*Entschluss*] which understandingly projects itself’; quoted by Nancy in *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. by Bridget McDonald (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 138. It may be worth mentioning that Cavell’s reading of *Walden* also alludes to some Heideggerian themes.

eventually he has to confront Black so that (provisional) resolution can be reached and a new journey can begin. The implication, as far as each reader of *Walden* is concerned, is that leaving ‘Walden’ is as important as entering into it.

A Colour Analogy

An intriguing feature of *Ghosts* that distinguishes it from the other two stories in *The New York Trilogy* is the use of colours as characters’ names. In a letter to J. M. Coetzee written many years after *Ghosts*, Paul Auster recalled this ‘little novel’:

Many years ago, when I wrote my little novel *Ghosts*, I gave all the characters the names of colors: Black, White, Green, Blue, Brown, etc. Yes, I wanted to give the story an abstract, fable-like quality, but at the same time I was also thinking about the irreducibility of colors, that the only way we can know and understand what colors are is to experience them, that to describe “blue” or “green” to a blind man is something beyond the power of language, and that just as colors are irreducible and indescribable, so too are people, and we can never know or understand anything about a person until we “experience” that person, in the same way we can be said to experience colors.⁴⁸

This nature of colours — the linguistic difficulty inherent in saying plainly (namely, without resorting to scientific/physicalist formulations) what any particular colour is — has been associated by Auster with the difficulty of articulating who anyone is.⁴⁹ His insight into the analogous irreducibility of colours and people offers a phenomenological perspective that may be too commonplace to be noted. It seldom occurs to us that for someone born with visual impairment to ‘understand’ — first of all, to see — colours is well-nigh impossible. Under certain circumstances, explanation of some phenomena cannot solely depend upon language, especially given a simplistic view of it, which underscores nothing but transmissibility and signification. Yet this is not the end of the argument: on the one hand, it shows that the power of linguistic techniques is by no means boundless and should not be taken for granted; on the other, it points out our superficial understandings of the ways in which, as well as the situations in which, these techniques (not least naming) actually operate. That is, we fail to grasp the complexities of acquiring and using language, for instance, their (epistemological, psychological, etc.) conditions and consequences that go beyond, before, as well as deep into the function termed ‘naming’. Therefore, if it sometimes does not work, as in the case of describing what colour means to a person born blind, the reasons

⁴⁸ Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), p. 82.

⁴⁹ In Eric Berlatsky’s essay, the colour theme is viewed in a different light. Starting with *Ghosts*’s references to Beecher, Lincoln and Jackie Robinson, he discusses the racial/postcolonial implications in the story. His argument is that these implications, along with the history of racial division and oppression, are embedded in the postmodern text, which thus prevent the master/slave dialectic from being completely dismantled. See Eric Berlatsky, “‘Everything in the World Has Its Own Color’”: Detecting Race and Identity in Paul Auster’s *Ghosts*”, *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 64.3 (2008), 109-42.

probably lie somewhere other than in the linguistic domain. More precisely, we should say there is no *pure* domain of language as such; nor does language consist in a mechanical process of attaching names to things (and persons) or, in a metaphysical sense, a logical purification of the relationship between them. This invokes Wittgenstein's observations in *Philosophical Investigations*, one of which is the well-known critique of 'ostensive definitions'. Cavell offers his reading of Wittgenstein's concerns in *The Claim of Reason*:

Against the dominant idea of the dominant Empiricism, that what is basic to language [...] are basic *words*, words which can (only) be learned and taught through "ostensive definitions", Wittgenstein says, among other things, that to be *told* what a word means (e.g., to know that when someone forms a sound and moves his arm he is *pointing to* something and *saying its name*, and to know *what* he is pointing to) we have to be able to ask what it means (*what* it refers to); and he says further: "One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name. But what does one have to know?" (*Investigations*, §30).⁵⁰

In other words, before our learning and understanding the words 'blue', 'black' and so on is first and foremost, to use Auster's word, our 'experience' of colours. This is what we have *already* to know, as it were, intuitively through our vision and historically in our lives. Whereas for a blind person those words mean little, if not nothing, because the person has neither access to nor idea of what they refer to in (his/her representation of) the world. This has less to do with the properties of physical objects than with the immediately, subjectively felt, something synonymous with the so-called 'qualia'. It partly explains why Auster was inspired by colours and incorporated their metaphorical import into *Ghosts*, and why Wittgenstein distinguished the expression 'to point to the colour' from the expression 'to point to this thing' (*Investigations*, §35). Notably, I am *not* claiming that their attitudes toward private sensations coincide. If attention to these sensations challenges a reductive version of naming, their (linguistic) representability nevertheless remains a question. With Wittgenstein his austere restraint upon wording inner experience like colour-impression and pain dominates his remarks on psychological language. In particular, he draws our attention to a fundamental difference and our confusion between two types of grammar — observation and sensation. Akin to the peculiar expression 'to point to the colour', the proposition 'I have a toothache' is a far cry from such a structurally identical sentence as 'I have 5 shillings'. His grave doubt over the legibility of private experience, as shown in his examination of the idea of 'a private language', makes him *look like* a behaviourist who denies privacy (of sensations and of the language that is supposed to express them) and clings to a verificationist belief in outward expressions (say pain-behaviour). Meanwhile, insofar as the subject in question is concerned, Auster's work does not

⁵⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 173-74; hereafter, *CR*.

evade the unknowability of otherness and its uncanny impacts on our lives, as if he tended to prioritise privacy at the expense of human commonality. It goes without saying that the issue is much more complicated than it seems, especially to those who deem it counterintuitive to link Auster with Wittgenstein. The point of dwelling upon something seemingly irrelevant is that it is after all *not* irrelevant and worth excavating. Therefore, I will follow the thread (especially the colour analogy) given above to further uncover the meaning of ‘experiencing’ otherness in what seems common and natural.

A Language and a Form of Life

Image is tied to imagination, thought to experiment. As Auster seems to suggest, the image of colours can be sharpened by the imagination of its vanishing from one’s world. The truth is that, when imagining the absence of an important condition (for instance, vision) for construing words, concepts, and their applications to things and contexts, we begin to look closely into the meaning of seeing colours. Likewise, by imagining the case in which knowing a person becomes incredibly hard, we begin to mull over the meaning of knowing others. What does it mean to *know* another human being? Is it the same as knowing a physical object? Can this activity simply boil down to knowledge, which further boils down to pieces of information that can be either substantiated or disputed?

I am at this point not particularly eager to answer these questions, not because they are unimportant but because too important to be condensed into a few words. Let us first bring them back into *Ghosts*, where they have been encrusted with enigma. It is unclear whether this quality is brought out by a medley of genres, namely fable and detective story. Perhaps there are some connections, but never definite. As to fable, I take it as a grey zone mediating between the representational and abstract sides of the story. It allows one to step back and forth in the course of reading, at once close to and distant from what is going on. Each fable begins again as a new reader encounters it. Here is the beginning: ‘First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, [...] The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change.’⁵¹ (Needless to say, Auster’s adoption of the present tense, which is another distinctive feature of this second volume in *Trilogy*, has also enhanced a sense of the present.) The present is the present; it does not need to be specified because for a solitary it is no more than subjective and psychological. But why mention the solitary? Does the notion have anything to do with the novel? Auster obviously does not give many clues or hints at the outset, nor even half-way through the narrative. That is why

⁵¹ Paul Auster, *Ghosts*, in *The New York Trilogy* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 131-92 (p. 131); hereafter, *NYT*.

its tempo appears to be modelled on that of a detective story. Indeed, he constructs at the very opening a semblance of detective story — Blue is a private detective, White his client, who asks him to tail Black. Furthermore, detective fiction usually revolves around one's search for facts, information, and knowledge that have been (deliberately) hidden. In other words, the genre is markedly, to apply the philosophical terms, epistemological and teleological in nature: the detective — it would be best if he/she were mostly a beholder (from without) — undertakes the mission of unveiling a mystery with a view to a successful resolution and thus is constantly tantalised by that which is *behind* the case; bemusement is simply a prelude to sorting out clues and discovering 'something out of the ordinary' (*NYT*, 177). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Auster's contribution to the so-called 'anti-detective fiction' has been widely discussed. Contesting the metaphysical position (including a promise of full knowledge) on which both traditional authorship and detective work are predicated, this kind of deconstructive writing exposes the self of the author-detective to fragmentation and inconsistency through a failure of identifications (first and foremost, a failure to obtain identity). Hence it can no longer remain a binary question about good and evil.

Different from its function in *City of Glass*, the anti-genre element in *Ghosts* does not by definition lead to deconstructive interpretation as such. What attracts my attention is instead a series of interchange between the observer/follower and the observed/followed, between the client initiating investigation and the object of investigation. Admittedly, the upshot is disorientation spawned by the confusion of action and reaction, of cause and effect, just as a short direct route is replaced by a two-way street, if not a Möbius band. But this does not necessitate the failure of Blue's job, which depends upon what we make of the case and what it means to fail or succeed in seeing through phenomena. If we were Blue, we would ask ourselves: What is behind phenomena (say the surface of Black's daily life); might there be nothing *there*? Would it be the case that our concern about something or nothing originates from our yearning for totality (of Black the person) as if it were not enough to know something *about* him but *him*? With these questions in view, I think it still important to start from a discussion of the linguistic-philosophical implications of *Ghosts*. Yet dissimilar to a deconstructive perspective on language and its philosophical import, my Cavellian-Wittgensteinian approach tends to slow down a rush for negative readings and leave room for reconsidering the problem of detection along with both reading/writing and knowing/experiencing; the former pair further leads to the issue of solitude, and the latter to privacy. In this light, I must point out that there is an American writer/thinker central to both Auster and Cavell — Thoreau. Particularly, the literary and philosophical inspirations from and responses to his *Walden* have criss-crossed in *Ghosts* as well as in Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*. It turns out that *Walden* becomes the

major clue, the pivot on which everything turns.

A specific problem of detective methodology foregrounded in *Ghosts* relates to writing reports, which is, very critically, a matter of objective representation. We can get a clear picture of Blue's principle from the following passage:

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. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there.

(NYT, 144)

And yet the old method does not work in Black's case; or Blue thinks so. As a detective, he habitually surmises that there must be something worth detecting. But no matter how vigilant he remains, no significant sign of secrets emerges. What's worse, the report completed in a matter-of-fact manner only amplifies the dullness in everything Black does: reading, writing, and occasionally walking. Blue is muddled by what happens, which, it seems, amounts to what he writes. He begins to suspect the possibility of words 'to obscure the things they are trying to say' (NYT, 145). Maybe he should give the issue a second thought: it is essentially not the words (as though their meanings were set once and for all) that obscure the things but one's understandings and uses of them. The latter largely determines whether, under certain circumstances, the former can produce meanings or not. The current situation is that Blue is being *gradually* dragged out of the flow of life where these words previously functioned without notice. Indeed what becomes strange is not so much language as his life, which is, as we will later see, getting attuned with Black's solitary life. It recalls the philosophical (and non-philosophical) experiences Cavell glosses 'as one of being sealed off from the world' and 'as one of looking at the world as one object ("outside of us")' (CR, 238). It is worth noting that in *Ghosts* this does not come to pass overnight. Nor is Blue at the moment aware of its encroachment. But his confirmation or reaffirmation of the correspondence between words and things, as well as a jump from knowing specific objects to knowing the world, prefigures a precarious tendency to treat the world as an object apart from him: 'these words [lamp, bed, notebook] fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world' (NYT, 145). The existence of the world does not need to be proved; Blue did not in the past give it much thought. He may prove it now and feel satisfied with the apparently immediate link, but that at the same time opens up the possibility that it may be disproven next time. That is to say, our relation to the world is natural, which nonetheless does not entail that it can by no means be distorted, sometimes precisely through an epistemological effort to grasp or even fix it.

That said, I am not suggesting that Blue's rumination, which shows an early sign of anxiety about his grasp of the world, should have been avoided in his situation. Can anyone resist that sceptical temptation without being susceptible to another impulse to instrumentalise his/her relations to words and things? It is hard to say that Blue's old conviction in the transparency of words does not contain a dose of the latter. As Cavell comments on our loss of sensibility and seriousness when dealing with language, 'It seems to me that growing up (in modern culture? in capitalist culture?) is learning that most of what is said is only more or less meant — as if words were stuffs of fabric and we saw no difference between shirts and sails and ribbons and rags' (*CR*, 189). Being natural does not mean being insensitive to the nuances words produce, for they are tantamount to the nuances of life and culture. It requires an attempt to experience the meanings of words *in* various forms of life, which at the same time means we should think twice about the teachability of language. What can be taught is perhaps only a tip of the iceberg. Hence, 'Instead, then, of saying either that we *tell* beginners what words mean, or that we *teach* them what objects are', a Cavellian-Wittgensteinian way of learning language could be put as follows: 'We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world' (*CR*, 178). This is, of course, not only the case with children. A new form of life — namely, solitude (though it may be regarded by some, including Blue, as an deprivation of forms of life; I will return to this point in the later part) — can by the same token remould Blue's relation to language. When 'initiated into' it, he gains a different perspective on the meanings of words, literal and figurative, personal and cultural. They are no longer transparent but steeped in colours, so to speak, which, unlike labels, cannot be torn away from things/words without disfiguring them.

He thinks how strange it is that everything has its own color. Everything we see, everything we touch — everything in the world has its own color. [...] Take blue for example, he says. There are bluebirds and blue jays and blue herons. There are cornflowers and periwinkles. There is noon over New York. There are blueberries, huckleberries, and the Pacific Ocean. There are blue devils and blue ribbons and blue bloods. There is a voice singing the blues. There is my father's police uniform. There are blue laws and blue movies. There are my eyes and my name.

(*NYT*, 179)

In counting things relating to blues, whites, and blacks, Blue recollects them in the seemingly haphazard, kaleidoscopic images and associations. Colours are not objects and vision not merely perceptual. To talk of colours is to talk of one's impression of colours, one's memory of them. In this regard, there is nothing universal about them, nothing other than the inextricable constituents of one's life-world. Blue (here in both senses of the name) brings forth the constellation of natural phenomena (birds, fruits, sky), personal belongings (his father's police uniform), and cultural, historical connotations (blues, blue ribbons, blue bloods). It can connect with two wholly conflictual

things (blue laws and blue movies). And when blue devils are mentioned, we cannot help invoking Thoreau's description of Walden Pond in the 'Solitude' chapter: 'What company has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it has not the blue devils, but the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters.'⁵² It should come as no surprise to find that such words as the Pacific Ocean pop up too, which, in Thoreau's vocabulary, analogises with 'the private sea' (*WCD*, 255).

Given that Blue is slogging away at *Walden*, it seems possible for the Thoreauvian sensibility to unconsciously seep into the detective narrative, linguistically and thematically. Yet once perceiving the trace, we realise that the former is in no way subordinate to the latter; it is instead, as already stated, the pivot on which everything turns. It virtually alters the nature of the case and thereby the meaning of a private eye's job. By saying 'alter' I just mean a departure from stereotypes. Since we still need to probe the relationship between *Walden* and the case in question, any idea about Blue's job is far from definitive. What we know now is that the two instances juxtaposed above — one about writing reports; the other pondering over colours — reveal an imperceptible change in Blue's idea of language, which correlates with an ambiguous and gradual change in his mode of life. When discussing the first instance, I claimed that Blue is being dragged out of the old form of life. But at that moment it was hard to pinpoint what exactly is awaiting him and whether he is aware of it. Even though he senses that something goes awry, that his old methods can hardly do the trick, he is unable to think up alternative ones. This is because he 'can only surmise what the case is not. To say what it is, however, is completely beyond him' (*NYT*, 145). That being said, Blue does not give up. He gathers that *Walden* is the key to the case because Black is often reading it in his room and doing nothing else. Thus he starts to read the book himself. He is right in that it is indeed the key; he is wrong in that it is again not the sort of key that leads to something clandestine, unknown, or even unknowable. One side of the truth is: as long as Blue cannot make out what the case is, he has to fall back on old habits and assumptions to fill the vacuum. The other side is: the very depth of this case lies in nowhere other than its surface. In other words, whether Blue can understand the case does not hinge on whether he can glean more information. Everything essential has been unfolding right before his eyes; this is one thing, but to *see* it is another.

In one sense, Blue knows everything there is to know about Black: what kind of soap he buys, what newspapers he reads, what clothes he wears, and each of these things he has faithfully recorded in his notebook. He has learned a thousand facts, but the only thing they have taught him is that he knows nothing. For the fact remains that none of this is possible. It is not possible for such a man as Black to exist.

(*NYT*, 167)

⁵² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience: Complete Texts with Introduction, Historical Contexts, Critical Essays*, ed. by Paul Lauter (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 133; hereafter, *WCD*.

When it comes to Black, it is hard for Blue to see the surface as it is. He may think that things would be different if he could see them from a vantage point. This characterises the mindset of a detective, who is inclined to take the surface of the case as a false appearance; call it a detective's scepticism. Nevertheless, it does not occur to him that the obstacle in obtaining and assessing the 'facts' might be *himself*, that is, he simply does not believe a man can live like that. Similarly, he finds it gruelling to listen to the writer of *Walden*. For 'a devoted reader of True Detective' (*NYT*, 139), Thoreau's rambling monologue about 'nothing' does not make much sense. Blue has a rough idea about what *Walden* is not (say not a story at all) the way he knows what the case is not (say not a life at all). Yet since there are few clues to follow up, he sticks with it, first as 'nervous and wretched' as Emerson once felt in reading Thoreau, then 'go[ing] slowly, more slowly than he has ever gone with words before' (*NYT*, 160). No doubt, the interconnections are coming to light between the book and the case, between the writer who wrote this book and the client who initiated this case; perhaps only in the form of mystery to Blue, that is, the former's repetitiveness and the latter's 'blankness' (*NYT*, 143) either manifest or obscure each other. Less than uneventful, Black's *non*-life runs parallel with the kind he finds in *Walden*: 'Blue thought that he was going to get a story, or at least have something like a story, but this is no more than blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all' (*NYT*, 160). Whether watching Black and reading *Walden* are tortures, tests, or experiments, and whether he takes this clue seriously, the irony is that, when finding himself entangled in this tail job for almost a year and finally suspecting that he is likewise being watched, Blue somehow recalls the following sentences in *Walden*: 'We are not where we are, but in a false position. Through an infirmity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out' (*WCD*, 260).

He comes to realise that his position and Black's are at bottom interchangeable: he is entrusted with the task of following Black, but at the same time he himself may be watched by someone else — say Black or 'the role of Black' (*NYT*, 168) played by several men — at White's request. In other words, Blue seems to be an observer in one case and in another the one being observed. Of course, in most cases keeping watchful is advisable. This is, however, complication overdone; or, to use Thoreau's words, supposing a case and putting himself into it. Granted, the case is not straightforward, but its core, contrary to a detective thriller, consists in uncanny plainness, so plain that both upsets and bores the detective. Later Blue will discover that 'There never was such a man as White' (*NYT*, 179), that Black virtually pays Blue to watch him, to record his life, and to prove his existence; in turn he can be said to prove Blue's existence as well. Paradoxical enough, their interdependence in the midst of isolation underlies the shared form of life I will discuss. It marks the

peculiar mode of solitude in *Ghosts*, from which we can discern a double or circular case but on no account two separate cases. This recalls what Thoreau writes in the opening chapter of *Walden*:

I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, [...]; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.

(*WCD*, 39)

At that point, given Blue's ostensible distaste for *Walden*, given the fact that he is not a writer, it is not surprising that he does not appreciate this kindred's message from a distant land, not to mention that the writer's exhortations to the reader to recognise 'the case that is' and to resist 'make-believe' (*WCD*, 260) fail to come home to him. Put otherwise, even though Thoreau's words are present to him, he does not fully grasp their gist. Here a decisive factor behind his half-understanding is a lack of 'the spirit in which it asks to be read' (*NYT*, 160). As is more or less expressed in the preceding passages, whether he can understand the case as well as the book is not a matter of knowing; explanation can hardly convince someone who disbelieves what he sees and reads. From having no idea about what the case is to supposing two cases, Blue is still missing or even *refusing* something, which involves not so much information as experience. The latter is what I take to be the spirit, and what distinguishes attaching labels to things (in report writing) from projecting words (when evoking one's impression of colours). Perhaps someone would like to translate the word 'spirit' into 'context'. In a way I do not object to this translation, as long as we bear in mind that a context might be irreducible to direct information all the same. For instance, it might rely on the construal of yet another context or else heavily on imagination and sympathy. From this perspective, Blue at first resembles the kind of reader, as Cavell suggests, 'who cannot yield to Thoreau's words, or does not find them to warrant this power to divide him through' (*SW*, 12). Distinct from speaking, writing, or the written language, is construed by Thoreau as the 'father tongue', whose 'reserved and select expression' (*WCD*, 109) cannot be 'heard' without the reader's rebirth, which means whether *Walden* beckons or denies one's entry depends upon one's decision 'to invest interest here or not' (*SW*, 49). Rebirth, enlightenment, or edification, they signify not so much a religiously pallid conception of sacred words (worn out with a genuine lack of comprehension) as the 'true circumcision' (*SW*, 16), which prompts you to 'stand face to face to a fact', to 'see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow' (*WCD*, 106).

In other words, writing, or the 'father tongue', does not carry some truth of celestial nature. Nor is it a voicing of prophecy: '[...] the word be spoken and confessed aloud. The time for such

prophesying is absolutely over' (*SW*, 30). In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell elucidates Thoreau's differentiation through a parallel distinction between 'the child's acquiring of' 'a first language' and 'the adult's acquiring of' 'poetry' (*CR*, 189). This comparison further extends to Wittgenstein's view on secondary/figurative meaning for which employing ordinary language games is not a royal road. What these associations indicate, among other things, is a new kind of difficulty in our 'second inheritance of language', which is not due to more stringent and complicated rules but due to an absence of agreement based on ratiocination or, in Blue's case, an established form of life. (Of course, in some sense a detective can also embody reason.) We see that Thoreau himself discovers this truth about language, which is exactly the source of our nervousness. As Mark Ford notes, 'The difficulties posed by *Walden* to Blue, and any number of readers from 1854 to the present day, derive largely from its refusal to ground itself in a stable terminology.'⁵³ Cavell makes a similar observation in *The Senses of Walden*: 'Once in it [*Walden*], there seems no end; as soon as you have one word to cling to, it fractions and expands into others' (*SW*, 13). But what is at issue here, namely, what Thoreau and Cavell want to uncover apart from the instability of words and knowledge, is the *necessity* of the self to go through this very instability. Any struggle and, possibly, illumination can only come to pass from within the straits of experience: 'True circumcision is of the heart. [...] understanding such circumcision requires that you have undergone it' (*SW*, 16-17). Accordingly, the emphatic assertion of the present in *Ghosts* (to recall its opening passage and the present tense in which it is written) becomes performative in the sense that it not only marks the beginning of a fictional narrative but enacts the presence of the writer's words. By presence I want to call attention to the initiation of experience enabled by words, that is, by their strange power and powerful strangeness. Thus the Thoreauvian experience can be a boon only insofar as it is a test.

Arguably, Blue is going through the tests posed by Thoreau and Black, but he often seems to lack an *awareness* of the necessity for experience. It is as though he were dragged out of his detective routines and thrown into some far more grotesque woods of reflection. As such, the spirit for reading this book — deciphering Thoreau's prophetic repetitiveness, understanding his labouring and mourning, his wrestling and experimenting with words and life — eludes him. Or, is it really so? Is Blue absolutely indifferent to or even repulsed by this spirit, which, in his eyes, amounts to 'seeing the world only through words, living only through the lives of others' (*NYT*, 166)? The riddle is that, entering *Ghosts*'s simultaneously psychological and allegorical world, we somehow begin to sense the concealment of another layer of meaning but not the layer itself. Hence the subject of *Ghosts* also applies to itself: Under no circumstances will words on the page present themselves as the only

⁵³ Mark Ford, 'Inventions of Solitude: Thoreau and Auster', *Journal of American Studies*, 33.2 (1999), 201-19 (p. 202).

and the last place where the fact rests. What seems to Blue to be the hard fact at one time — his loathing for *Walden* and for Black's empty life — can become soft-edged and ambiguous at another. That is to say, behind the outright denial of understanding may lie his unconscious collaboration. In one of his probing conversations with Black, the latter virtually assumes Blue's role of detective and unburdens himself with a tear. This is a defining moment. Blue arrives at the conclusion that Black and White are the same person, yet this time hardly in a celebratory mood: 'Somehow, the facts have finally let him down, and he finds it hard not to take it personally, knowing full well that however he might present the case to himself, he is a part of it, too' (*NYT*, 179). Being a part of the case is perhaps the situation any seasoned detective wants to avoid. As mentioned, detection is an epistemological practice concerned with knowledge; it may even presuppose the independence of the detective. Yet, as Auster would ask, in what case do we have to 'experience' someone in order to 'know' him/her? Bearing this in mind, we realise that the double case *Ghosts* invents, the experiment with solitude, and the testimony to one's being, are meant to present the situation in which, in order to know the object of investigation, the subject/agent needs to become the object himself.

Hence the experiment is not trapping a man in a book by his alter ego who does nothing but read and write. This impression is at best a literal summary. Admittedly, *Ghosts* creates a space under extreme pressure of outward poverty, a no-man's-land. The impoverished mode of life, devoid of interesting, significant facts, is not only monotonous but suffocating. But this picture, obtained extrinsically, can be reductive or even misguided, like the way Blue spies on Black through the window. It dismisses the implications of Auster's writerly experiment: (1) How to completely enter one's own mind and how to then depart from that state. As we shall see, what is potentially problematic is that one can find it hard to switch freely between one state and the other. In *Ghosts*, this 'too much in my mind' (*NYT*, 189) is connected with the idea of 'Walden' largely through a recognition of writing as 'a solitary business' (*NYT*, 172). (2) Is this 'too much in my mind' a manifestation of impenetrable privacy? Or is it rather a manifestation of human commonality? This seems a binary opposition, but I would argue that *Ghosts* attempts a balance, though precarious, between the two perspectives in the paradox of solitude. As such, the novel becomes ambivalent about the possibility of knowing a human being: Does Blue in the end understand Black? It is worth noting that the word 'knowing' is, if epistemically conceived, somewhat misleading here. As I have pointed out, the story (namely, the case) is ultimately not about *knowing* (the facts about) a person; it is about *understanding* a human being through *experience*, who may withdraw into his/her own mind, may live in isolation, may either find it difficult to or refuse to communicate. All are part of humanity.

Doubleness in Solitude and the Doubling of Solitude

I do not intend to make short work of the problem here, as if an acknowledgement of humanity were an easy remedy for a distraught writer, as well as a sceptical detective. It may even seem to make light of solitude that inevitably accompanies writing and thinking. The mental excess emanating from the Thoreauvian character opens to the outside instead of culminating in excludedness. In other words, it is not so much interested in egoism (though it could be so) as symptomatic of the self's fear of losing contact with the external world, as well as the ensuing doubt over its own existence. That said, the reproducibility of Black's 'invention of solitude' is not a function of his fear aforementioned. Nor does he know whether and when the doubling of solitude will happen. It turns out that this ungraspability and unformulability of human commonality (in a sense what Wittgenstein calls 'criteria'), rather than consoling him, compounds his problem. For Blue the first stake is laid upon understanding Black, not least his mode of life. Unsure whether this process pivots on speculation or participation, he hovers between the impossibility of knowing and the possibility of understanding. Both of them suffer from infectious angst, which is not subject to cursory observation but open to empathetic experience and performance. But the one who enters and leaves 'Walden', echoing the writer of *Walden*, learns the meaning of finding or losing the way. This points to the second stake, which challenges Black's prolonged suspension, the state as opposed to choice and settling explicated in *The Senses of Walden*.

Solitude goes hand in hand with thinking; one of its senses is concentration. This is particularly true of the activity we call 'writing', which is performed by a human being. And reading also keeps one alone — someone as a matter of fact separate from the person who writes. That is to say, being alone is an ontological fact inherent in the acts of writing and reading. Moreover, the writer's solitude eventually leads the reader to nowhere but himself/herself. This is the basic as well as metaphorical relationship between Black and Blue. This is also what *Walden*, as Cavell points out, aspires to achieve: 'alone is where he [Thoreau] wants us. That was his point of origin, and it is to be our point of departure for this experiment, [...] this adventure "to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone" (XVIII, 2)' (*SW*, 50). Its further implication is that to get along with ourselves is, first and foremost, to get along with our loss of the world: 'Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations' (*WCD*, 156). Here that which differentiates the writer of *Walden* from other writers is his courage to reveal the authentic yet shaky grounds on which our being rests. The point of entry is reading. More often than not, a book is to readers what social activity is to its participants. It creates an illusion of our absorption in something outside

ourselves, be it fictitious or real. Nevertheless, a dearth of intriguing ingredients in the book steers us back to our existence in reading (what am I doing here and now?), the present⁵⁴ — or space; here temporal/spatial identification and differentiation seem to lose their importance — hovering outside of time. This recalls the ‘new idleness’ that disturbs Blue, who, ‘for the first time in his life, [...] finds that he has been thrown back on himself, with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next’ (*NYT*, 141). The trouble is empty speculation, an epistemic practice yet free from anything consequential and graspable. This, camouflaged with the outward emptiness or poverty, could be deceptive. Behind it might be inward turbulence (equally, behind outward hustle might be empty mind). Because of this inconsistency between the inner and the outer, it is necessary to seriously inquire into our relations to the self and to the world. Then, from what position? Isn’t departing from oneself inadequate? But the word ‘depart’ has the double meaning of ‘originate’ and ‘leave’; that is, from ‘the narrowness of my experience’ (*WCD*, 39) I want to reach out to other lives. If this instruction given by Thoreau is circuitous yet expressive, Black’s reticence allows himself to drop even fewer hints. More precisely, if Thoreau’s self absorbs the outside phenomena and transforms them into part of it (and part of *Walden*), Black’s self resembles a wall that everything bounces off, or, let us say, a mirror that merely reflects the image of the spectator, or the absence of one. This definitely runs counter to the initial purpose of the spectator, who has little interest in his own image; instead he wants to see through the mirror, to walk behind it. What is the point of hiring a private detective to follow a man if no secret is there to be revealed? The biggest secret is that there is no secret around him; the secret *is* him, whose existence resides solely in solitude and nowhere else.

That is why, phenomenologically speaking, nothing (say, his past) inside Black, a solitary from the very outset and a sort of archetype, needs to be turned outside in the writing of *Ghosts*. What has been turned outside is Blue’s inner life: the cases solved together with Brown, the movies previously seen (*Out of the Past* in particular), and the Brooklyn Bridge as an indelible association with his father. As his doubt reveals, ‘This isn’t the story of my life, after all, he says. I’m supposed to be writing about him, not myself’ (*NYT*, 145). Thus one might say that the pith of *Ghosts* is about how Blue, after futile attempts to project ideas on to Black, metamorphoses into another solitary. ‘That is how it begins’ (*NYT*, 133, 134); the sentence has been reiterated in order to pronounce, as it were, the beginning of metamorphosis, the beginning of the experiment. This kind of pronouncement, as I indicated in the previous section, has a performative function. Not simply describing things, it *makes*

⁵⁴ The present also connotes ‘presentness’: ‘the repetitions of “pages” are capped by his [Thoreau’s] emphasis on those who “have come to this page” (I, 7), who are present at the very word the writer has printed there: then that is where you are living now, and what you are working at, and “[you] know whether [you] are well employed or not” (I, 21)’ (*SW*, 48).

something happen. The basic idea, namely the distinction between performatives and constatives, came from J. L. Austin's speech act theory. Deconstructionists like Derrida, Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller later developed its literary implications. According to Miller, the initiatory potential of words is vital to literature:

Every sentence in a literary work is part of a chain of performative utterances opening out more and more of an imaginary realm initiated in the first sentence. The words make that realm available to the reader. Those words at once invent and at the same time discover (in the sense of "reveal") that world, in a constantly repeated and extended verbal gesture.⁵⁵

It is through words — more accurately, their performative capacity — that the reader gains access to a new world. The reader's response to them, then, constitutes his/her experience of that world. Miller's formulation of speech acts in literature is a good supplement to my Cavellian approach. But let me nuance the point made here. Not only does the performative gesture in *Ghosts* initiate a Thoreauvian experiment, but it helps to reveal paradoxes in it. These paradoxes characterise Cavell's reading of *Walden*: presence and withdrawal, intimacy and distance, interest and disinterest. Michael Fischer in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* suggests that 'the deepest paradox that Cavell unearths in *Walden* is that leaving is not simply compatible with meeting and settling down but necessary to them'.⁵⁶ This of course resonates with my reading of *Ghosts*. Yet before we come to this final point, I want to take a closer look at Auster's depiction of solitude, whose pattern, though concerning otherness, also betrays human commonality.

In the space opened up by *Ghosts*, being a solitary and observing one gradually become the same thing, in the sense of, to use Black's phrase, 'a certain similarity of form' (*NYT*, 172). The process of metamorphosis demands, first of all, Blue's imitation of Black's hermitic life. Writing reports at the desk, wrestling with *Walden*, and following Black in the street, Blue gradually settles into the other's daily routine, namely, being initiated into a new form of life he has never experienced before. Needless to say, he will not take it as imitation (or initiation) but as surveillance to be achieved unconditionally: 'Anything less than constant surveillance would be as no surveillance at all' (*NYT*,

⁵⁵ J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 38.

⁵⁶ Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 117. Fischer offers a subtle interpretation of the relations between Cavell's philosophy and deconstruction. He discusses those preoccupations both share while pointing out their different approaches. Miller is among the deconstructionists Fischer discusses; in other words, I am aware that Cavell might conceivably be ambivalent about some of Miller's ideas (especially those in his early works).

141). After a period of ‘ennui and “the blues”’,⁵⁷ he begins to discern the ‘*inherent* paradox of his situation’, that is, ‘the closer he *feels* to Black, the less he finds it necessary to think about him. In other words, the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is’ (*NYT*, 155; my italics). In other words, the two men begin to share the logic, as it were, of solitude, which effects their correspondence in behaviour, if not in feeling. Importantly, Blue’s discovery accounts for the intrinsic nature of solitude: What renders two solitaries in tune with one another is a structural similarity. Yet this structural similarity intimates something deeper than a mere structure or form. Granted, Blue can by no means be identical with Black; this is the unavoidable distance between two subjects, not least two solitaries fixated upon self-consciousness. But at the same time, it is precisely the discrepancy inherent in solitude between outward appearance and inner experience — which contributes to a sense of separateness — that makes possible that structural similarity or closeness between two isolated entities. It is in this sense that their positions are interchangeable. This idea resonates with the ‘underlying perception, or paradox, of *Walden* as a whole’ (*SW*, 54). As Cavell further explains, ‘what is most intimate is what is furthest away; the realization of “our infinite relations,” our kinships, is an endless realization of our separateness.’

Isn’t this our strangest commonality? And isn’t Black’s ‘secret’ known to all of us, more or less? ‘About human beings there are only open secrets or open questions’ (*CR*, 459), says Cavell. What Auster appropriates in *Ghosts*, as well as what Cavell discovers in Wittgenstein’s discussion of privacy, is our substitution of secrecy for privacy. A ‘philosophical or metaphysical idea of privacy’ (*CR*, 330), as it seems to me manifested in *Ghosts*, is not concerned with the sort of secret that can be concealed, which means it can equally be revealed if the insider lets certain people (say, a detective) into it. In turn, a secret that either everyone or no one knows can hardly be called a secret. And this is exactly the quasi-secret that Black hopes to share with Blue through keeping it to himself. Let us look further into the aforementioned conversation, the usual ‘hide and seek’ (*NYT*, 176) between them, even though both are already clear, in varying degrees, that there is no more to hide and seek. When the life insurance salesman played by Blue asks the private detective played by Black whether his quarry knows he is watching him, Black replies: ‘Of course he knows. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? He’s got to know, or else nothing makes sense’ (*NYT*, 178). As I said, Black unburdens himself; he utters every word in the spirit of confession. But his confession can only find

⁵⁷ I extract this phrase from the context of *Walden*, which interestingly coincide with Blue’s state of mind: ‘he [the farmer] wonders how the student can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui and “the blues”’; but he does not realize that the student, though in the house, is still at work in *his* field, and chopping in *his* woods, as the farmer in his [...]’ (*WCD*, 132). This perhaps best exemplifies Thoreau’s generally positive attitude towards solitude (e.g., ‘I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time.’). It evokes Black’s remarks for their apparent resonance yet essential dissonance in tone: ‘In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he’s there, he’s not really there’ (*NYT*, 172). In other words, solitude smacks to Black of ghostly existence, as shown in his conversation with Blue, then disguised as a wise fool named Jimmy Rose.

its power in the other's voice, namely, in Blue's. At the same time, some details about Black's body language shed new light on the issue concerning outward behaviour and inner process: his sudden avoidance of meeting Blue's eyes, his trembling voice, his tear. All these signs seem to suggest that there is more to be considered than merely affirming the distance between inner and outer. In a way we can also think: if Black's body appears to hide what is going on within it, this is not quite because it is a wall through and through. The truth is that nothing is more revealing than his bodily attempt to conceal his thoughts. As Cavell puts it, 'Whatever in me I have to conceal I may betray exactly by the way in which I conceal it' (*CR*, 459). Then the rub is not that Black is unable to express himself but that he can never ensure an absolute control over the conditions of (in)expression. That is to say, (in)expression is bilateral, so whether his inner experience gets known to the other or not is not solely up to him. He cannot set his mind at rest by *always* treating the problem as either others' permanent inadequacy of knowledge or his permanent confinement to his own mind, as if his fear of non-existence were decided as impenetrable and singular once and for all. Rather, it is open to what Wittgenstein terms 'seeing an aspect' and hence 'aspect-blindness' (*CR*, 368), especially when the picture is essentially about human separateness, the kinship among Black, Blue and Thoreau. Because we can only understand our privacy through being alone, it seems both difficult and superficial to voice one's own solitude. But this does not mean the sensibility of solitude is unknowable, which is, in Cavell's words, 'like the secrets of philosophy, always open ones, ones always already known before I present myself to them' (*CR*, 367). If it is truly foreign to others, how is Blue sometimes able to feel 'so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what Black is going to do, [...] he need merely look into himself' (*NYT*, 153)? Further, this 'harmony' does not derive from knowledge and evidence but 'remains something of a mystery to him'. And if the mystery cannot be unravelled, then it cannot be hidden either. This recalls Wittgenstein's point paraphrased by Cavell: 'if the other *cannot* offer his thoughts or open his feelings then he *cannot* be hiding or keeping them either' (*CR*, 367). Both Black and Blue understand what solitude means, because they themselves live a solitary life and read the book (namely, *Walden*) that *displays* the meaning of solitude. Solitude does not belong to *each* of them; instead *both* of them belong to solitude. The former partakes of egoism, the latter of a certain degree of commonality inherent in the formation of solitude.

Indeed, it is fundamentally the 'infinite extent of our relations' (*WCD*, 156) that defines the connection between Blue and Black, which engenders a curious amalgam of tension and sympathy. I have elaborated on the aspect of sympathy. Let me try to talk more about tension. Despite various signs of harmony, Blue cannot completely dispel a deep sense of strangeness: 'There are times when

he feels totally removed from Black, cut off from him in a way that is so stark and absolute that he begins to lose the sense of who he is' (*NYT*, 153). Let us bear in mind that Blue is hovering between speculation and participation. As such, distance occurs when he shifts to a detective mode of inspection. This is mainly that which I highlighted in the course of analysing an unsuccessful application of the epistemic method to knowing the totality of a human being, which is not only misplaced but almost tragically ineluctable in *Ghosts*. Along with it I also pointed out a close tie between Blue's temporary failure to recognise what is present to him and his resistance to Thoreau's words. If his detective mentality oftentimes stands in the way of his understanding of the case, then Black falls prey to another kind of blindness. At once intense and insecure, anxiety about the self — in particular its estrangement from the empirical world — gets the better of Black, compelling him to search for *another* self to witness and prove his own existence. Of course we notice that this is the anxiety that sometimes seizes Thoreau too, for instance, when he maintains that we have 'lost the world'. But the tone of despondency is read by Cavell to signify also that we 'are lost to it'. He goes on to explain: 'The fate of having a self — of being human — is one in which the self is always to be found; fated to be sought, or not; recognized, or not' (*SW*, 53). A thing has two faces. Few see both; most of us choose one and miss the other. It is at this point of modification that Black nevertheless irreversibly diverges from a Thoreauvian solitude. Without doubt, Black virtually perceives that solitude is, after all, far from self-contained, but he in turn relies too much on another self-consciousness for recognition and assurance, only to compound his problem. On the contrary, the idea of 'doubleness' that underlies the Thoreauvian solitude envisions a double state in which the self is an actor and a spectator simultaneously: 'However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you' (*WCD*, 131). Here, perhaps in order to register the 'impersonality, or impartiality, of *Walden's* double' (*SW*, 102), Thoreau claims that 'that is no more I than it is you'. Yet when taking into account the case of *Ghosts*, I need to, in some ways, stress that it is rather crucial to differentiate 'I' from 'you' (namely, others) — pace the writer of *Walden* — with respect to the part played by the spectator. In my view, doubleness is predicated upon the fact that there is, in any event, only *one* self in the working of this double state.⁵⁸

In turn it is important to note that the recognition Black demands of Blue is not — or departs from

⁵⁸ This somehow relates to what I said in the introduction about the poetics Auster affirms and develops in the course of his early practice. A combination of witness and writing sensitises one to the relations between personal and impersonal, between self and other. It seems to me that the Thoreauvian doubleness is in one sense not so much a state as a task that requires one to keep vigilant to the likelihood of going unbalanced.

— the kind of acknowledgement that rests on human commonality. Meanwhile, it is true that a literary work can look quite banal if it is no more than a positive embodiment of philosophical propositions. Thus we notice that an idea of acknowledgement is apparently absent from *Ghosts* except implicitly underlying the common pattern of solitude. Put otherwise, most of the time Black distorts a possibility of acknowledgment into something he can grasp more firmly, say, a dead look that turns him into an apparition. In this regard, his distrust of the world is as strong as his fear of losing it; his reduction of human relations is as evident as his yearning for them. For one thing, he, unlike Thoreau, does not devote enough attention to various relations to the self, as Cavell enumerates them, ‘love, hate, disgust, acceptance, knowledge, ignorance, faith, pride, shame’ (*SW*, 53). It is not the same as saying that a thought of these relations does not occur to Black. Yet for him they may not be valid enough to sustain his position in the world; they look too fragile and ephemeral. Whereas for Thoreau some scrutiny of them counts in the process of transforming dejection into mourning, so as to relate oneself to Nature while losing both the former and the latter. We can never stop the change of things; we have to discover opportunities in the dynamics of seeing oneself at once inside and outside the world. Black should have known this, but he has been preoccupied with a book for so long (long before the beginning of the story) that he gradually forgets that the world and mind are indissociable; Walden is both earthly and ideal. Driven by chronic melancholia, he turns to the pursuit of a world that is absolutely objective as if that would free him from the shackles of his mind. It explains his objection to any additional description of private thoughts in one of Blue’s reports. An objective of objectivity, which includes the objectivity of his existence, would be best represented in these reports devoid of inner life (his as well as Blue’s). However, they merely spell a last-ditch effort to shun subjectivity. The wrong step not only involves Black’s conception of the self-world relation but also has impacted on his attitudes toward others. Admittedly, he needs others’ understanding, which is natural. We sense from his chat with Blue about some writers’ anecdotes that he can effectively convey his ideas if he wants to. But all in all the give-and-take style, due to its unpredictability, is far from congenial to his desire to fix and minimise interpersonal relations. Having a detective watch him and write reports may be the most secure type of relation, which just serves to record the facts of his life. In other words, what Black wants is a recognition that rejects the agency of the recogniser. And if the recognition can get rid of the agent, can be finalised in a form of crystal-clear words on the page, it will last longer and keep its original shape, just as the young man saw the corpse of his father in the ice, ‘still young, even younger than his son was now’ (*NYT*, 148). This is the French Alps story Blue recalls with awe; he hardly expects that someone (namely, Black) would one day say something eerily similar to him, ‘I

turned you into my death. You're the one thing that doesn't change' (*NYT*, 190). It is no longer an inspiration of awe but of horror. For the kind of objectivity or even sameness that gnaws at Black, he is condemned to remain in the same place, witnessing and recording the former's outward behaviour. As such, the reports that Black collects as a book about his life, cannot be comparable to *Walden*. The former's matter-of-factness comes from one's obsession with a world without any intervention by his consciousness; the latter's impartiality and disinterest, on the contrary, spring from the self of the writer and, moreover, his faith in an intertwining of the objectified self and the subjectified world: 'Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly' (*WCD*, 95). If Black grasped the true meaning of doubleness in solitude, he would take his cue from Thoreau to perform self-examination instead of hanging on to a stranger. Then his anxiety would not deteriorate into agony and self-annihilation but possibly be transfigured into what Cavell calls 'the absolute awareness of self without embarrassment — consciousness of self, and of the self's standing, beyond self-consciousness' (*SW*, 102).⁵⁹ Though this interpretation may suggest a moment of ecstasy derived from 'my experience of my existence, my knowledge "of myself as a human entity," my assurance of my integrity and identity' (*SW*, 104), it does not entail that revelation as such can be guaranteed. As we may know, the writer of *Walden* sometimes also has 'a very hazy day' and he 'know[s] not whether it was the dumps or a budding ecstasy' and 'There never is but one opportunity of a kind' (*WCD*, 191). What can be confirmed is the transient yet recurring moment: 'I was as near being *resolved* into the essence of things as ever I was in my life' (my italics). This sheds light on the necessity of 'resolution' (*SW*, 109), which should be given more weight, and which alerts us to the fact that this full awareness, or this 'awakening', demands our constant labour to attend to and adjust our relations to ourselves, to other selves, and to the world as a whole.

Choice and Resolution

The necessity of resolution relates to an acknowledgment of the necessity of leaving Walden to continue the journey. Thus from the standpoint of an endless process of 'trailing and recovery', 'voyaging and sailing' (*SW*, 53), the end of *Ghosts* does not strike one as wholly dismal. Blue finally confronts the fact and bites the bullet; he himself finishes the case, not as an onlooker but as a participator, and embarks for somewhere, perchance a new world; he is not overcome by a surge of contagious anxiety and despair but overcomes it instead; he comes to be his own man, a 'sailor on the Atlantic and Pacific' awakened by the voice of the 'brave Chanticleer' (*WCD*, 126). Meanwhile,

⁵⁹ In *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell expounds the idea of doubleness further through the terms he coins according to the words used by Thoreau ('beside', 'next', and 'neighbor'), namely, 'besideness', 'nextness', and 'neighboring' (*SW*, 104, 107, 108).

we know the experiment with solitude will go on. Black, the very epitome of the deepest self-doubt as well as the saddest human frailty, may be dispelled but cannot be destroyed once and for all. In this sense he is part of Blue, his latent double and his ghost and his death mask.⁶⁰ There is a trace of fatalism in how Blue understands such enigmatic cases of Gold and Mitchum's Bailey, one full of determination and the other wishful thinking, one with justice and the other guilt. When he thinks that 'Something happens [...] and then it goes on happening forever' (*NYT*, 159), he must associate this thought with his own case. More curious is the succeeding scene of his tackling *Walden*: 'One night, *therefore*, Blue *finally* turns to his copy of *Walden*' (my italics). It seems as if reading this book has been part of his fate, something he cannot but accept. But neither a single-minded devotion to justice (Gold) nor a desire to divorce oneself from his past (Mitchum's Bailey), what drives him? Curiosity about a solitary life, either Black's or Thoreau's? At this stage, it is quite clear that, whatever drives him, it no longer has anything to do with the detective's initial interest or default setting. Reading *Walden* becomes part of his fate, because he is already in 'Walden'. Therefore, if there is an element of curiosity, it means Blue will eventually realise what he has been up to. It further means Black's secret is, if viewed from a new perspective, a gateway to the secret always within Blue, which is potentially accessible to each reader of *Walden* through empathy. This is not to deny that there still can be divergent ways of reacting to that secret as well as truth of the self's existence. Black's method is to cancel out his loss by false recovery, whereas Blue does not forget that, to feel himself inhabiting the world, he must do something in it — 'the key to the case is action' (*NYT*, 165) — since each action represents the world as one more possibility. This may lead to another question: Does Blue have choice in this experiment? That is, is he able to leave Walden? The answer is yes and no. On the one hand, he takes up White's offer, writes a letter to Brown for consultation, and plays out all kinds of tricks to sound out White/Black. On the other, he is deluded, cut out from the outside, and forced to head for a showdown against Black: 'There is no choice, and if there is anything to be done, it is only the one thing that leaves no choice' (*NYT*, 183). But the binary opposition, namely, Blue's will and passivity, can only be taken at face value. In effect they can never be cleanly dissociated from one another. If what awaits Blue is the 'fate' that 'every hero must submit to', it is his will that urges him to choose to submit to that fate. Will, far from free, is constantly bound up with struggle and resistance *within* oneself: 'He struggles against it, he rejects it, he grows sick at heart. But that is only because he already knows, and to fight it is already to have

⁶⁰ 'He removes the mask from Black's face and puts his ear against his mouth, listening for the sound of Black's breath. There seems to be something, but he can't tell if it's coming from Black or himself' (*NYT*, 191). In *Ghosts*, both Black's mask and the death mask of the little boy bespeak the 'sad blankness' (*NYT*, 162) of mystery. No less noteworthy is Blue's empathy for that boy and what he must have been through: 'It could have been me, Blue thinks. I could have been that little boy' (*NYT*, 140).

accepted it, to want to say no is already to have said yes.’

Granted, choice is desirable, but many people in effect tend to mistake and evade it on the pretext, in Cavell’s words, that ‘they haven’t the means to live any other way’ (*SW*, 72). They (pretend to) remain blind to the simple fact ‘that this life has been chosen; that since we are living and pursuing it, we are choosing it’. To submit to one’s fate is not to yield to it or be victimised by it but to consider it as both necessity — which means one should not escape what befalls him/her — and the condition of possibility for change. This not only confirms the place of agency where choice resides but also clarifies the nature of choice, which, far from bringing peace of mind, above all requires our responsibility and resolution before any risk or crisis. It to a great extent explains the contrast between Black and Blue in the final scene: one intends to escape life through death but, due to his cowardice, fails to achieve it on his own terms; the other decides to take the initiative in doing ‘the unexpected’, to disabuse Black of the whole absurd story with ‘a sense of rightness’ (*NYT*, 187, 188). That is not to say the tables are impeccably turned. If there is anything worthy of regret and unexpected within Blue’s determined (in both senses of ‘resolute’ and ‘conditioned’) action, it is that to ‘erase the whole story’ and ‘say good-bye’ (*NYT*, 190) he has to vanquish rather than save the other. This is not without importance. It seems that Blue’s choice comes to pass and unfolds in existence instead of in idea. Different from Black, he is unknowingly dragged into this experiment.⁶¹ In other words, he knows next to nothing about the ‘theory’ behind it. Yet paradoxically, it is he who moves closer to the core of the experiment:

What is definite, or what is to be defined, is that he [Thoreau] *spent* it there, expended it, the whole of it. That was the point of the experiment; not to learn that life at Walden was marvelous, but to learn to leave it. It will make for more crises. One earns one’s life in spending it; only so does one save it. This is the riddle, or you may say the paradox, the book proposes.

(*SW*, 45)

Compared with Blue, Black as a solitary writer is so enmeshed in his idea as to sever it from his own existence in the world or, in Cavell’s words, ‘*placing* ourselves in the world’, which is not ‘something we may think of as an intellectual preoccupation’ but ‘a continuous activity’ (*SW*, 53). By suspending his very being for good, he can neither settle nor restart his journey of life; by *totally* obliterating time and presence in this world, he cannot effect choice. The risk involved in total suspension can be deleterious to living; it can also be ‘the place you come to at the end of the world’ (*NYT*, 181), namely, the place where no relations can thrive, whether to the self or to the other. Whereas what emanates from Thoreau’s writing is still dynamism, with energy concentrated

⁶¹ A minor point deserves our attention. As suggested in *Ghosts*, Blue is an optimist: ‘This is perhaps his greatest talent: not that he does not despair, but that he never despairs for very long’ (*NYT*, 155). Though it seems superficial to say this determines his advantage, it does recall some aspects of Thoreau’s character, as manifested in a combination of hope and despair, a love of both seclusion and society (‘I am naturally no hermit’ [*WCD*, 134]).

and expended in solitary living, fully conscious of the company of distant kindred. This pertains to a central implication of one's 'nextness of the self to the self' (*SW*, 109) or, in another expression of Cavell, 'the capacity not to deny either of its positions or attitudes', which spells the exigencies of staying on both tracks of action and reflection, as well as the difficulty of at once maintaining their distance and connecting them.

We would probably wonder if it is particularly difficult for a writer to cope with this oscillation between two states, whose excessive self-consciousness rather impedes 'the answerability of the self to itself' (*SW*, 109). It is certainly the case with Black and reminds us of Thoreau's apparently humorous statement that 'A man sits as many risks as he runs' (*WCD*, 144). But, unlike Black, the writer of *Walden* 'love[s] to weigh, to settle, to gravitate', to seek 'a solid foundation' before 'spring[ing] an arch', and to 'take the case that is' for the purpose of improving or changing it instead of leaving it at that (*WCD*, 261, 262). From his point of view, building and hoeing and watching the sunrise do not differ much from reading and writing and thinking. That said, how to make sense of the secrets of the writer's trade is never less than difficult. If a division between living and writing can be settled, as Black seems to believe, the trade will be much easier to grasp. *Ghosts* is a piece of writing about the solitude of writing, but because of its self-referentiality it must take into account the *act* of writing, which is by no means extrinsic to the story itself. Auster's description of the book about Black's solitary life is no more than elliptical, but this time not for the purpose of sublimity. The reason is rather that what matters is not its specific content but the way of its composition. More precisely, how the story is written, to all intents and purposes, amounts to what the story is about. In this light, *Ghosts* at least parallels *Walden* in that what an individual writes is not a secondary replication of what he/she does in life. As Cavell puts it, 'his [Thoreau's] writing is not a substitute for his life, but his way of prosecuting it' (*SW*, 62). Thus when complaining, 'It [writing] takes over your life' (*NYT*, 172), Black may be well aware that his ghostly life is still counting on writing. Moreover, what takes over his life is not writing but his despair about writing his own life, so the process of writing carried out by Blue cannot bring life to him if that means putting his despair at rest. To be sure, Black's mixed feelings about writing are by no means dismissible or superfluous. Nor have they been brought to an end by Blue's determination to interrupt the circle. Rather, they elicit further deliberation about such questions concerning writing and action, writing and reflection. As we shall see, these questions, some of which have been broached in *Ghosts*, will be reshaped and take on a new significance in *Leviathan*. In a sense the quandary Sachs faces is a continuation of Black's problem. However, if Blue's passing thought that Black may be a madman 'plotting to blow up the world' (*NYT*, 136) somehow reminds us of what

Sachs finally chooses to do, we see their actual reactions to the conditions of writing and living nevertheless drift from one another. When the experiment with solitude is developed into that with freedom, when personal and universal disquiet becomes one and the same, Sachs's moral vision is bound to transform Black's static and bleak world into a space constantly driven by change, first of all, of the self. Hence self-doubt works not in the direction of passive escapism but as a sign of responsiveness to, to borrow Thoreau's phrase, where one lives and what one lives for, after the loss of ideal. Undoubtedly, the origin of *Leviathan* is again inseparable from Thoreau, whose teachings contain not only the nature of writing but also the writer's relations to his/her neighbour, as well as his/her 'conscience' (*SW*, 88).

CHAPTER TWO

Pen and Bomb: A Transcendentalist Reading of *Leviathan*

If Auster's *Ghosts*, from time to time alluding to the phantasmal figures of American Transcendentalists and Romantics, illustrates an ontology of writing (namely, the invention of solitude) and an epistemology of reading (though this experience can, as shown in the previous chapter, counter the very meaning of knowledge) under cover of a hard-boiled, yet almost fable-like, detective story, then his *Leviathan* transfigures this thread into a richer tapestry of personal history intertwined with national memories, of human fallibility with institutional imperfection, of private conscience with social criticism, and of writing with transgression. Notably, Thoreau's ever prominent presence between lines and within the characters (Sachs and Dimaggio) seems to indicate that this novel may as well have been imbued with the spirit of *Walden* and, different from *Ghosts*, further represented the idea of civil disobedience, given its political and moral undertones. Thus the present chapter takes its bearings from this clue and will contain a close examination of the connection between Auster's Thoreauvian representation and Cavell's formulation of Emersonian Perfectionism. Needless to say, one reason for introducing Cavell's concept is my intention to go on exploring his reading of Thoreau, whose illumination, alongside that of Emerson, motivates a search for traces of Transcendentalism in Auster, not least in his *Leviathan*. (Perhaps it is also worth mentioning in passing the epigraph to the novel: 'Every actual State is corrupt.' We will come back later to this statement made by Emerson.)

As mentioned in the introduction, the key to Emersonian Perfectionism lies in the perception that human existence is, as it were, split between worlds. I shall try to elucidate its significance in Cavell's reflections on Kant and Emerson. It is also pertinent to consider his references to Nietzsche and Heidegger. These strands of thought can provide insight into Sachs's situation, in particular the distance between what he thinks and represents in his writing of America and what he experiences in the place called America. It additionally recalls a major theme embedded in Cavell's philosophy: what it means to discover America that has long since been lost. The quest is pre-political in the sense that it is not subject to the standards of political discourse (which can mean it *is* political, but only in a different sense). In other words, it is not meant to serve ideological agendas; nor does it fit

neatly into the logic of collective action. On the whole, the idea of America is itself far from definitive. Only in association with specific contexts and issues does it reveal its strength and depth, and some of them will be dealt with in the subsequent chapters. To make a good start, I propose that we approach it from an ethical (as well as aesthetic) concern for a better or further self. This aspiration in Cavell's account may arise from a genuine sense of crisis in the existing way of life. From a transcendentalist perspective, it is arguable that Sachs's story, especially after his sudden and nearly fatal fall, displays a Cavellian-Emersonian response to the world through self-transformation and self-invention.

Traces of Transcendentalism in Auster

The picture presented by Cavell of Thoreau and Emerson blurs the boundary between literature and philosophy, revealing their philosophicality without pinning them down in any place claimed by philosophy under institutional influences. The previous chapter on *Ghosts* was written in the same spirit, with a view to contextualising certain Wittgensteinian and Thoreauvian themes — privacy, solitude, human commonality and separateness — in the story of Blue and Black, to breaking free from the chains of philosophical divisions and reshaping their significance in literature. In other words, it is a wish to 'give philosophy and literature into one another's keeping' that prompts my reading of Auster,⁶² whose voice at times seems to find its apt expression in a form or, rather, a quality I would call essayistic. Of course, this is only one way of conceiving their connections, but this perspective comes to the fore when we scrutinise Thoreau's and Emerson's writings, which cannot but be loosely defined as essay.⁶³ And their stylistic indefinability signifies not only the very breach of rigid categorisation but also the fundamental coalescence between thinking and writing, which tends towards a deeper and more genuine level of precision by dissolving technicality in knowledge. At the same time, I am cognisant of the difference — far from pedantic — between essayist and novelist, no matter how slight it sometimes becomes. (If Emerson and Thoreau can be understood as approaching literary writing from the side of thinking, then Auster can be said to approach philosophy from the side of literature.) When linking Emerson with Kant, Cavell interpolates, 'there is no pure or necessary philosophical preparation for the connections, none that

⁶² Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 117; hereafter *NYUA*.

⁶³ Cavell sometimes sets this issue against the backdrop of a split between English-speaking and German-speaking philosophies: 'Against this rough background, the figure of Emerson represents for me (along with Thoreau) a mode of thinking and writing I feel I am in a position to avail myself of, a mode which at the same time can be seen to underlie the thinking of both Wittgenstein and of Heidegger — so that Emerson may become a site from which to measure the difficulties within each and between both.' See Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 13.

would show Emerson's allusions, granted that they are at work, to be philosophical rather than literary, or serious rather than parodic, or polemical rather than ironic' (*CHU*, xxix). I take this to be a call for careful, patient and non-totalising interpretation, which is easier said than done, and which can never arrive at its last word, as Blanchot would put it. It possibly explains Cavell's disappointment at those hasty conclusions drawn by both Emerson's admirers like Harold Bloom and his detractors like John Updike from the face value of his words.⁶⁴ This is, I cannot but feel, perhaps even more so in the case of Auster the novelist. Considering another voice he is fond of, that is, the voice of a fabulist, I need to point out that his text remains as a mere source of implications, a vague gesture that cannot be severed from all those contradictions and fissures already embedded within literary narration. Although in *Leviathan* there is a foregrounded, first-person narrator, Peter Aaron, he nevertheless does not serve to tone down the polyphonic texture of the story. He reflects, writes, but more often than not finds himself an incompetent judge.⁶⁵ This further complicates an overlapping of the essayistic and the literary in Auster's/Aaron's account, where ideas and 'facts' are by no means separable and every word is likely to sound ironic and serious at the same time. It is certainly risky. Yet it seems to me superfluous to attempt to draw a sharp line between seriousness and playfulness in a literary work, be it realist or (post)modern. It further means that playfulness does not necessarily characterise postmodern fiction. As long as we reflect upon the meaning of postmodern sensibility and its distance from the so-called modern and pre-modern ones, we can discern that many distinctions do not lend themselves to some prescribed, extrinsic yardsticks. If there is anything truly fundamental to writing, it is a degree of its autonomy; that is why testing a writer's authenticity according to his/her seriousness or playfulness sounds at best useless and at worst erroneous.⁶⁶ Hence, the following reading of *Leviathan* should be regarded as a partial, derivative gesture, an invitation to glean philosophical fragments from a novel without compromising its literary ambiguity.

In saying it is partial I mean not only that this is my reading in a Cavellian light, but also, as I have indicated at the beginning of the chapter, that *Leviathan* may be better understood as a thematic

⁶⁴ For instance, see 'Hope against Hope', in *CHU*, pp. 129-38 (p. 133).

⁶⁵ Needless to say, the very idea of a competent judge endowed with an omniscient point of view is built upon a reader's wishful thinking and occasionally a writer's hubris. As Aaron confesses, 'I can only speak about the things I know, the things I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears.' Or, on another occasion: 'In other words, there was no universal truth. Nor for them [Ben and Fanny], nor for anyone else.' See Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 22, p. 98; hereafter *L*. This is not to say that narration then becomes worthless because it no longer presents truth; rather it all the more points to the ethical necessity of writing, which is evident in *Leviathan*: Aaron, not simply writing through memory and in memory of Sachs, hopes to 'defend' him 'since he's no longer in a position to defend himself' (*L*, 2).

⁶⁶ Similar points can be found in Blanchot ('Literature and the Right to Death'), Bataille ('Letter to René Char on the Incompatibilities of the Writer'), and Adorno ('Commitment') in their responses to the notion of '*littérature engagée*' endorsed by Sartre.

continuation of and departure from *Ghosts* in that light. Moreover — I hope this is not overstated — the trajectory from *Ghosts* to *Leviathan* parallels a general move frequently found in a philosopher's project, namely, from the subjective plane to the intersubjective one, from the ontological (and phenomenological) register to the moral (and political) one. But this alone does not fully justify my philosophical approach, which may appear to be too broad a thrust. In order to render the embodiments of these transitions more specific and to the point, I shall mainly focus on the Thoreauvian representation and its resonance with Cavell's Emersonian picture of experience (of America). In this regard, we need first to take a look at some other comments on the issue of subjectivity in *Leviathan*, where a Jamesonian picture of late capitalism looms large. Sachs's case illustrates a political struggle that 'is reduced to nothing or, more precisely, to mere exchange value'; or its 'symptoms' 'parallel Fredric Jameson's descriptive model of cultural and linguistic schizophrenia'.⁶⁷ The bleakness of postmodern existence, its unrelenting destruction of coherence and authenticity, seals the fate of an impotent subject who is unable to conjoin his writing and action. Accordingly, Sachs's novel *The New Colossus* might fit into a long list of postmodern pastiches replete with simulacra. His silence in hospital after falling from a fire escape points to total isolation and retreat from others. On top of that, his life after encountering Dimaggio is 'consumed in an effort to make amends, to right the balance upset in this tragedy' (Fleck, 219), which merely leads to an 'abandonment of social contracts' (Brown, 90). Granted, these interpretations hold true up to a point, but in a Foucauldian light *Leviathan* can be read as a different story. It presents an alternative to reconceive subjectivity and agency, to explore the senses of self-determination and self-discipline in *Leviathan*, and to put into perspective one's capacity for transgression.⁶⁸

I, to some extent, lean towards the latter direction; yet my theoretical resources and, as a result, point of departure, horizons as well as detailed arguments keep me from concurring with it unreservedly. Of course, my reservation does not simply arise from the fact that I am more influenced by other thinkers (namely, Cavell, and by way of him, Thoreau, Emerson, Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Nietzsche); none of them have to be circumscribed within the postmodern/poststructuralist context.⁶⁹ Rather, my deflection hints at some deeper issues about how

⁶⁷ For example, see Linda L. Fleck's essay 'From Metonymy to Metaphor: Paul Auster's *Leviathan*', in *Paul Auster*, pp. 207-22 (p. 214). Offering two kinds of reading (as indicated by the title), she admits that the Jamesonian picture is rather reductive and in the latter part switches to a Lacanian interpretation of recovery and recognition, which is inspired by some images and ideas in Auster's *Invention of Solitude*, say, the belly of the leviathan. The second quotation comes from Mark Brown's discussion of how Sachs regresses toward social disconnection and ultimate destruction. See Mark Brown, *Paul Auster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 91.

⁶⁸ For instance, see Joseph S. Walker's 'Criminality and (Self-) Discipline: The Case of Paul Auster', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 48 (2002), 389-421.

⁶⁹ That said, it is interesting that Cavell briefly refers to Foucault's notion of 'the care of the self' in his memoir *Little Did I Know*, noting its pertinence to his own idea of Emersonian Perfectionism (*LDIK*, 479).

to understand Sachs, especially his Thoreauvian character, which essentially requires us to reevaluate its Transcendentalist or even Romantic strain. At first glance this is apparently a retrograde step, because philosophically (and politically) it draws back from simply following either the deconstructive or the Hegelian critique of Romanticism. From a deconstructive point of view, the Transcendentalist/Romantic gesture would be regarded as too ‘positive’ in holding that individuals can possibly attain truths or overcome instrumental reason through genuine experience, whereas for Hegel this gesture would risk being too ‘negative’ since one can never achieve (political) freedom by retreating into the inner world, not to mention that this retreat suggests to him an irrevocable step towards dissolution or ‘bad infinity’.⁷⁰ With these contentious issues in mind, we can see why Auster’s Thoreauvian representation needs to be assessed more carefully; and its complexity will gradually unfold in the following discussion.

The Thoreauvian Figure and the Emersonian Text

Before we look into the connection between Cavell’s Emersonian Perfectionism and Auster’s Thoreauvian figure, let us start from the place where writing becomes aware of itself — its questionability — as the writer begins to inquire into his/her strangely solitary condition. Doubtless what makes a philosophical reading of Auster apposite is his primary concern about writing as a mode of existence, which exposes an individual to a singular, interior space *seemingly* inaccessible to others, as is the case with Black. Without this reflexive concern the ontological thread would be substantially undermined in his novels. Yet it is also worth noting that an island, so to speak, with simplicity and transparency of its own kind (which is another way of saying obscurity) in *Ghosts* has been intertwined in *Leviathan* with the discursive landscape composed by multifarious pieces of reflection and dialogue. Furthermore, this shift of emphasis is, at first blush, manifested in Sachs’s character and his relation to writing, which are quite uncharacteristic of an Austerian writer-protagonist, who, with a mind chronically brooding over the past and itself, is accordingly mired in a difficult relationship with words and thoughts:

Work was like an athletic contest for him [Sachs], an endurance race between his body and his mind, but since he was able to bear down on his thoughts with such concentration, to think with such unanimity of purpose, the words always seemed to be there for him, as if he had found a secret passageway that ran straight from his head to the tips of his fingers.

(L, 49)

⁷⁰ For a succinct account of the deconstructive critique and its limitations, see Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. by Neil Solomon (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998). For an account of Hegel’s and Schmitt’s ‘privacy-objection’, see Espen Hammer, ‘Cavell and Political Romanticism’, in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 164-85. A similar discussion appears in Simon Critchley’s Lecture 2, in *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

It tallies with other impressions Sachs leaves on Aaron: ‘he was so utterly lacking in self-consciousness’; ‘He was too out there, too fascinated by other people, too happy mixing with crowds for such a lonely occupation, I thought’ (*L*, 16, 17). Hence, the receding of a solitary state of life (and mind) from the centre of the story seems to correspond to Sachs’s inclination for interpersonal ties and intimate his eventual turning away from writing to action, from the insubstantial to the pragmatic, from the private to the public. As he declares to Aaron, ‘The days of being a shadow are over. I’ve got to step into the real world now and do something’ (*L*, 122). It is as though Sachs, standing in stark contrast to Black, intertextually rebuked him for inaction and exemplified another side of the Thoreauvian figure — leaving the woods and returning to the city, literally and metaphorically.

This picture brings us back to the question raised in the last chapter, which has been implied in Black’s understanding of writing and that of Cavell’s Thoreau. And their divergence is partly defined by writing’s relation to action. Now the same point emerges when we compare Sachs with Black, which likewise precipitates an impression of hostility between thinking/writing and living/practice. But does writing really mean nothing to Sachs, which, on the contrary, means everything to Black? How do we make sense of the contradictory pulls, which simultaneously inhere within the Thoreauvian character, and which concern not only Thoreau (writing as ‘labor’ [*SW*, 62]) and Emerson (writing as ‘vocation’) but, as ‘doubtfully’ referred to by Cavell, Heidegger (thinking as ‘handicraft’)?⁷¹ To answer these questions we have to consider the following possibility: This antagonism may first and foremost bear on our early overconfidence in and, thereafter, growing mistrust of thinking and writing in modern times (namely, their dubious practicality and effectiveness in the empirical and political realms), both of which betray a fear of confronting our distance from language and, moreover, our alienation from the self, the world and other minds. This fear consequently induces our repeated attempts to recover something, anything from this distance, this loss *überhaupt*. The paradox or double bind is that we try to seek solace in the source of insecurity. In other words, we want to use language (can we escape it?) to dispel doubt, to secure our place in the world, our grasp of things, our understanding of others, which apparently works but potentially backfires on us; put otherwise, increasing our sense of loss.

⁷¹ ‘[T]his is his [Emerson’s] vocation, what he does and what he suffers’; ‘Thinking is a handicraft.’ See Stanley Cavell, ‘What Is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb’s Emerson’, in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. by David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 183-91 (p. 188, p. 187); hereafter, *ETE*. By saying ‘doubtful’ Cavell indicates, according to my understanding of what he articulates in other essays on Emerson (‘Finding as Founding’ and ‘Aversive Thinking’), that Heidegger’s formulation ‘Thinking is a handicraft’ — in association with ‘hand’ and ‘grasping’, thus ‘a mode of necessary, everyday violence’ (similar to the ‘unhandsome part of our condition’ in Emerson) — should be differentiated from his thoughts on ‘being *drawn* to things’ and ‘getting in the draw, or the draft, of thinking’ (similar to what Emerson calls ‘attraction’). See *NYUA*, pp. 86-87; *CHU*, p. 39, p. 41. Apart from Cavell’s discussion, also refer to Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Humanism’ for a useful elaboration of his ideas concerning thinking and action.

In *Leviathan* this sense of doubt and loss is harboured and handled by Sachs and Aaron in different ways. For Aaron, it mainly derives from memories and actualities, whose consistency and unity always appear tantalising. Admittedly, he can by no means restore this unity, if there is one. Nor is he in a position to analyse Sachs's innermost feelings even though, as he puts it, 'Sachs confided a great deal to me over the years of our friendship'. While looking back on their first meeting by chance, he finds it hard to absorb Sachs's death without feeling strange: 'it's difficult for me to imagine that the person who sat with me in the bar that day was the same person who wound up destroying himself last week' (*L*, 13). Memory and experience — comprehended by our empiricists 'as made up of impressions and the ideas derived from impressions' (*NYUA*, 92) — sometimes fail one, which is but an essential fact of everyday life. It is a kind of strangeness less about unpredictable twists and turns — though they count, especially in Auster's stories — than about one's chance of being deluded or else shocked by the familiar, ineluctable separation from his/her closest friend, and distance from the self. One of the most definitive expressions of the passing of the world as a whole can be found in Aaron's reflection on his failure of knowledge concerning Sachs's disappearance:

[H]is absence felt less and less like a personal matter. Every time I tried to think about him, my imagination failed me. It was as if Sachs had become a hole in the universe. He was no longer just my missing friend, he was a symptom of my ignorance about all things, an emblem of the unknowable itself.

(*L*, 146)

However, in the midst of those mind-boggling and irresolvable uncertainties, one thing is certain and human, that is, Aaron's striving to do justice to Sachs. This can be fulfilled only through writing, which proves that words are, at least in this case, nothing less than deeds.⁷² They are reborn and last regardless of one's death. That is why Aaron's book is named after Sachs's unfinished one, *Leviathan*: 'I owed it to him to write this book. He was brave enough to entrust me with his story, and I don't think I could have lived with myself if I had let him down' (*L*, 243).

Like Aaron, Sachs is also sensitive to the partialness of knowledge, the basic condition of being human. Yet unlike Aaron, for whom writing proceeds as private recollection in a disturbing yet recuperative way, he cannot wait for this process to slowly take effect. For him the ontological and epistemological limitations are not neutral; he feels emphatically that they intersect with one's

⁷² The claim that words are, in some cases, tantamount to deeds recalls the point made in the first chapter, which concerns Miller's formulation of speech acts in literature. What particularly complicates the issue in *Leviathan*, I think, is the difficulty of upholding accountability within literary ambiguity. This touches upon a Derridean theme concisely summarised by Miller: 'Since the gift, the secret, and witnessing are kinds of performatives, they are not the objects of a possible certain cognition. They must remain a matter of "if."' See J. Hillis Miller, 'The Disputed Ground: Deconstruction and Literary Studies', in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. by Anselm Haverkamp (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 79-86 (p. 84).

conscience, from which it follows that one shares responsibility (For what? For a lack of absolute knowledge and freedom, or one's disappointment at this lack, or both?): 'I always wanted something else, but I never knew what it was' (*L*, 236). Does this moral character (or even stricture) have anything to do with his unease about the tie between writing and inwardness, and further about a writer's ethics under the pressure of the prevailing political, social circumstances? Struggling with the weakness of the former and the crisis of the latter, does he wind up losing conviction in writing altogether, as expressed in his last letter to Aaron, 'I admire you for your innocence, for the way you've stuck to this one thing for your whole life. My problem was that I could never believe in it'? In one sense he does and, in another, does not. But this ambivalence is, strictly speaking, not his; instead it should be attributed to writing *per se*. A private business, it isolates one from the outside and seems to deprive him/her of the power to act in the real world. That said, a book is a piece of work relating to this world; more precisely, it is in this world and not. The same is true of the one who writes it. I do not think that anyone who has written such books as *The New Colossus* can miss the point unless he wants to. (It is very likely that a sense of urgency impels him to dismiss it.) What Sachs experienced — inner and outer — in prison has become all but concealed beneath the facade of his self-deprecation, which, remaining his own secret, connects with the birth of *The New Colossus*. Meanwhile, their connection has to be conceived as an absence of connection:

The New Colossus had nothing to do with the sixties, nothing to do with Vietnam or the antiwar movement, nothing to do with the seventeen months he had served in prison. [...] The idea of prison was so terrible to me [Aaron], I couldn't imagine how anyone who had been there could not write about it.

(*L*, 37)

Given the title of his book, it is hard not to call up Emma Lazarus's namesake sonnet dedicated to the Statue of Liberty, and it goes without saying that, like Thoreau, the young Sachs faced incarceration remorselessly with his thinking and writing. Their similar resistance to the authorities imposed on them calls to mind what Thoreau claims in 'Civil Disobedience': 'I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and *they* were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body' (*WCD*, 29).

To 'unjust laws' and 'a corrupt State', what is truly 'dangerous' is the *thought* of a nonconformist individual who does not yield to 'the machinery of society' and seeks to claim his rights out of his own conscience ('I [Sachs] didn't want to run away. I felt I had a *responsibility* to stand up and tell them what I *thought*. And I couldn't do that unless I was *willing* to put myself on the line' [*L*, 19-20; my italics]); needless to say, the more 'dangerous' to the former, the more precious to the latter.

Notably ‘a corrupt State’ called by Thoreau harks back to the epigraph to *Leviathan* (‘Every actual State is corrupt.’) mentioned at the outset of this chapter, a line extracted from Emerson’s essay ‘Politics’. Here my interest primarily lies in the juxtaposition of individual thought (and conscience) and the ‘actual State’, not least that which the word ‘actual’, alongside its obverse ‘ideal’, connotes in philosophical terms. More specifically, one of the implications of this Transcendentalist resistance or disobedience on the part of the individual subject, apart from its potential use for political guidance, consists in a dialectical structure of the inner and the outer at play in thinking and writing: A writer lives in two concurring and colliding worlds, one suffered and the other envisioned; one denies the other yet beckons. It recalls Emerson’s observation stressed by Cavell in several places: ‘I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*’ (*NYUA*, 111; *ETE*, 190; *CHU*, xxxiv). Moreover, Cavell interprets this Emersonian picture as a modification of Kant’s ‘two standpoints’ in human existence, which should not only be ontologically construed but also have a moral dimension:

The intelligible world would be the scene of human activeness, the sensuous world that of human passiveness. Then Kant’s moral imperative, his “ought,” which the doubleness of human inhabitation is meant to explain, or picture, is also an explanation, or shows the place for one, of the self’s identity, that it is the *same* self that is active and passive.

(*CHU*, xxxvi)

Yet it should be noted that this ‘ought’ as a matter of fact does not reveal itself *a priori* (that is to say, ‘there is no ought about it’ [*CHU*, 59], which crucially distinguishes Emerson from Kant), and that the noumenal shadow of the self is (always) lost (‘The idea of the self as always to be furthered is not expressed by familiar fantasies of a noumenal self’ [*CHU*, 59-60]). It furthermore suggests that the self’s unfulfilment is accompanied by its dissatisfaction with the actual world/society it is inevitably flung into. Needless to say, whether for the ‘unattained self’ or the world compatible with that self, the process of (re)finding has significance in its own right and the ideal cannot at any rate be subject to some specific criterion, ultimate end, or be closed off from countless changes and possibilities.⁷³

The reason why I particularly ascribe this ‘law of two worlds’ (*NYUA*, 112) to the writer as, to borrow Kant’s phrase, his/her ‘conditions of possibility of experience’ — despite the likely objection that this kind of ‘difference’, ‘discrepance’ (words used in Emerson’s ‘Experience’), or ‘non-identity’ (*CHU*, xxxv) *should* happen to any human being — is that writing amplifies the Kantian doubleness to such an extent that one can no longer remain utterly passive or indifferent to another

⁷³ As Cavell emphasises in his prefatory remarks, ‘The idea of a knowledge that brings about, or constitutes, the change of turning invites a further word cautioning against, in what follows, attaching any fixed, metaphysical interpretation of the idea of a self in my understanding of Emersonian Perfectionism — the idea of it as always attained and always unattained’ (*CHU*, xxxi).

world even though he/she knows that it cannot be practically attained here and now. ('There is a point at which a book begins to take over your life, when the world you have imagined becomes more important to you than the real world' [L, 218].) Contrariwise, for those neighbours not yet 'awakened', it does not occur to them that genuine imagination (which promises the genuine experience that may lead to a certain stage of the ideal) works in a way distinct from both wild fantasy and an absence of dreams, and that the former encourages and even requires them to change, always already, themselves.⁷⁴ (Differently put, one does not begin to change after this experience; one has already begun to change in or even before it. Otherwise, one could not be drawn to this imagination in the first place.) This is the importance of *experiencing* or, shall we say, *pre-sensing* the ideal or the ideas of new selves and new worlds, which are bound to be together at various stages. When citing *Walden* as a 'perfectionist work', Cavell remarks, 'As Thoreau sees the matter in the fifth chapter ("Solitude") of *Walden*, a grand world of laws is working itself out *next* to ours, as if ours is flush with it' (CHU, 8). It is the same with reading Emerson: 'To recognize the unattained self is, I gather, a step in attaining it' (CHU, 12). In this regard, a book, as a step, a site, or a locus for this event to take place, would be wrongly excluded from the empirical realm and, in the case of *Leviathan*, the (quasi-)political realm, insofar as a part of the self is embedded in these realms and this fact affects one's vision of another part that is not. This leads us to reexamine the role of writing in the field of action, which is accordingly to be reframed. Bearing this in mind, we arrive at 'a different field of action' for writing, which operates on the premise, as well as the imperative, that 'the writer must establish or create his mode of presence to the word, he must admit or create the reader's mode of presence to it' (SW, 62).

Over and above *Walden* and the Emersonian text, this is, I think, precisely what Sachs's *The New Colossus* has achieved, albeit in its own fashion. If 'Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of *Walden*' (SW, 119), if 'this new America' is 'yet unapproachable' (NYUA, 91), then *The New Colossus* carries some messages comparable to them, ironic and poignant, romantic and gloomy. Lazarus's visit to Emerson's house and Walden Pond, Channing's handing of Thoreau's compass to her as a *gift* (to my ear, a curious ring of Cavell's Heidegger and Emerson), a cluster of images has been conjured up in this 'historical novel', which counts more to it than 'the major events'; 'these [small events] are finally what give the book its texture, what turn it into something more than a jigsaw puzzle of historical facts' (L, 38). These personal moments are as much the turning points as the events recorded in American history, in the sense that they are 'recorded' in

⁷⁴ For Thoreau one cannot imagine (change) the individual without imagining (changing) the State at the same time; meanwhile, the motivation for change definitely pivots on the individual. We just need to refer to his closing remarks in 'Civil Disobedience', wherein he shows us the State in his mind.

Sachs's novel and emblemise the very *idea* of America in a conflictual combination of hope and its loss. They constitute a world, which is there and *presented* to us through words, as Cavell observes in *The Senses of Walden*, 'A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, *the wording of the world*' (*SW*, 44; my italics). ('All of them are true, each is grounded in the real, and yet Sachs fits them together in such a way that they become steadily more fantastic, almost as if he were delineating a nightmare or a hallucination' [*L*, 39].) Then comes the question: Is this world fact or fiction? Before that we may consider an alternative question raised by Cavell in his reading of Emerson's 'Experience': 'Has America happened?' (*NYUA*, 114). No doubt, here America is meant to be an event (in thinking and writing) (though in another sense we may also say it is a metaphor), whose happening hinges on the individual awakening and involvement of its 'invisible' (*ETE*, 189) readers/members. Thus if the happening of America is perchance momentary and cannot be fixed on any specific time in any common or empirical sense, to clearly tell the factual from the fictitious becomes well-nigh impossible. Besides, the distinction is far from consequential to the philosophical/literary work as and of this happening. The fact of the death of Waldo, the writer's son, as mentioned in 'Experience', can be transferred to the awareness of our fallen state (here 'state' carries a double meaning, namely, in both senses of the individual and the social, as Cavell points out [*CHU*, xxx]), our loss of ourselves and of the promise of America. The opening question in Emerson's piece ('Where do we find ourselves?'), which figures prominently throughout Cavell's interpretation, coincides with Aaron's reading of *The New Colossus*: 'Thoreau was the one man who could read the compass for us, and now that he is gone, we have no hope of finding ourselves again' (*L*, 38-39). Yet we vaguely feel that the tone of the novel is relatively darker and, according to Aaron's comments, 'strident' and 'polemical' (*L*, 40). This mood is evinced not only in Thoreau's death well preceding the beginning of the story but more strikingly in the subsequent death of Lazarus, who inherits Thoreau's compass (again the topic of inheritance is also what Cavell discovers in 'Experience'), and who dedicates her work to the Statue of Liberty as a gift in the same way Thoreau does his to Walden.⁷⁵ Their death, along with Waldo's death, represents what Cavell calls 'the testator's death': 'If "Experience," like *Walden*, is a testament, it is the promise of a gift in view of the testator's death. Then the gift is the young Waldo's promise, as kept or founded in the old Waldo' (*NYUA*, 100). How can one transfigure the death of founder(s) into a promise of finding oneself in 'this new yet

⁷⁵ 'For the past hundred years, it [the Statue of Liberty] has transcended politics and ideology [...]. It represents *hope rather than reality, faith rather than facts*, and one would be hard-pressed to find a single person willing to denounce the things it stands for: democracy, freedom, equality under the law' (*L*, 215; my italics); 'The hero departs from his hut and goes into an unknown wood from whose mysteries he wins a boon that he brings back to his neighbors. The boon of Walden is *Walden*' (*SW*, 119).

unapproachable America'? If it appears somewhat possible for Emerson to approach — to 'be born again into' (*NYUA*, 90) — this place through his writing (or his writing amounts to nothing less than the place), where is this promise placed for Sachs? Can *The New Colossus* at the same time register the withdrawal of the promise of realising America even though it has already witnessed death, that is, the removal of foundation?⁷⁶ And if Emerson's prophecy cannot find its voice without 'aversion' (*NYUA*, 92), which means at once turning away and toward America, what can Sachs do in order to find his own voice? Given the moral imagination (often indissociable from the historical) which permeates his writing and, according to Aaron's account, his frequent reference to the bomb as 'a central fact of the world', 'an ultimate demarcation of the spirit' that 'separated us from all other generations in history' (*L*, 24), it strikes one as almost ironic and portentous that in the end he, as the Phantom of Liberty (or, suggestively, the fantasy of foundation), resorts to the bomb instead of the pen to break silence, to demonstrate his aversion, his civil obedience.⁷⁷ It is as if his turn of mind finally reached the sort of desperation Cavell attaches to the precipitation of philosophical/utopian dreams: 'America has deprived us of reasons. The very promise of it drives you mad, as with the death of a child' (*NYUA*, 95).

At the same time, it is not all about madness and desperation. Actually they are more palpably associated with Dimaggio than with Sachs. If these ingredients do encroach upon the latter's disposition, they are mixed with other contrary qualities (such as self-examination) in a way reminiscent of the Emersonian aversion and self-reliance. It follows that Sachs's *raison d'être* in effect involves more complexities that are concerned not only with politically aggressive action — which may be easily pigeonholed as a form of counteraction within the whole social system — but also with self-knowledge and constantly renewed demands for individual perfection. It is worth noting that this potential is often downplayed within postmodern political discourse. Even a constructive reading centring on agency, creativity, and expressivity might lend Sachs's action negative qualities. For instance, Emma Hegarty claims that 'Auster illustrates the consequences for Benjamin Sachs, a postmodern novelist, of losing the ability to question naturalising discourse from *within the structure* itself, as his increasingly radical means of expressing anger at political hypocrisy and decline in values, as he defines them, result in a loss of agency, a fractured identity

⁷⁶ Let us recall the question posed by Cavell in its philosophical history from Plato to Kant: 'Why not realize your world?' (*NYUA*, 95).

⁷⁷ A pun can also be detected in the following description: 'He [Sachs] was great one for turning facts into metaphors, and since he always had an abundance of facts at his disposal, he could *bomb* you with a never-ending supply of strange historical connections, yoking together the most far-flung people and events' (*L*, 23; my italics). Interestingly, Cavell too touches upon the meanings of the Bomb in his essay 'Hope against Hope'. This will come back at the end of the chapter.

and ultimately self-destruction'.⁷⁸ According to this view, his problem consists in cleaving to an 'absolutist' mode of being, which rejects his 'implicated position' in society (Hegarty, 865, 856). Again my view is that Sachs does not pursue freedom *from without*; nor is he in a position to possess full self-consciousness or realise a transparent, complete totality that brings sufferings and struggles to an end. His Thoreauvian character is consistently grounded in the necessity of human imperfection and insufficiency. It is precisely the limits, not least the conditioned, lived experience, that necessitate the unattainable, not as the prescriptive or the absolute, but as an unsettled, constantly changing incentive that interacts with the will of *each* finite being and thus his/her agency. Nonidentity as a blank refusal or a dead end can hardly be taken as an incentive. A true understanding of it instead opens us to endlessness within human finitude. This is a defining feature of the Thoreauvian/Emersonian subjectivity formulated by Cavell, which is more rooted in everyday life than provoked by an overpowering vision of revolution and utopia, and which conveys simultaneously one's desire and responsibility for change (first of all, of oneself) and the difficulty of remaining true to them. Hence an ethical emphasis should also be placed on the ways in which one can still respond to the Thoreauvian/Emersonian call for self-transformation, the ways that distinguish Sachs from both Aaron and Dimaggio.

Precipitation and Change

The key to Sachs's life is buried in the word 'precipitation', which now takes on a new significance. A salient resonance between two traumatic moments in regard of falling from a height is undoubtedly writ large: 'I [Aaron] don't want to make too much of it, but just moments before Ben fell, we drifted onto the story that he and his mother had told about their visit to the Statue of Liberty in 1951. [...] no sooner did we both laugh at the idea of falling through the Statue of Liberty than Ben fell from the fire escape' (*L*, 108). Meanwhile, it is difficult not to look into this meaning by bringing forward another one, namely, bringing about something quickly or suddenly. For one thing, this pair brings into play two general states of the human subject, as unfolded in Cavell's discussion of Kant and Emerson: the sensuous and the intelligible, passiveness and activeness (of course Kant's architectonic and fixed categorisation of experience need be and already have been contested [*CHU*, xxxvi]). In our context, they throw into relief the structure of Sachs's precipitation. More often than not he finds himself caught up in a situation he has not expected, owing to either a roll of dice, so to speak, or an unconscious act. But he will not leave it at that. Every time a 'fall' happens to him — whether figuratively or literally, and however uncontrollable — he brings himself to account for it

⁷⁸ Emma Hegarty, 'The Practice of Solitude: Agency and the Postmodern Novelist in Paul Auster's *Leviathan*', *Textual Practice*, 23 (2009), 849-68 (p. 853).

(‘it happened for a reason’ [L, 121]), as though what happens to him and what he makes happen were one and the same thing. His fall on 4 July 1986, ‘the one hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty’ (L, 107), is regarded by him as the ‘accident’ he helps to precipitate. ‘[T]he fact was that my accident wasn’t caused by bad luck.’ He tries to explain to Aaron, ‘I wasn’t just a victim, I was an accomplice, an active partner in everything that happened to me, and I can’t ignore that, I have to take some responsibility for the role I played’ (L, 120). What’s more, mere lust and unfaithfulness cannot explain away his problem: ‘I don’t think sex had much to do with what happened that night’ (L, 120); ‘It wasn’t a question of being unfaithful to Fanny, it was a question of self-knowledge’ (L, 114). Doubtless there is something more upsetting and inscrutable deep within him, something so decisive and fundamental that he cannot continue his life without coming to grips with, rather than coming to terms with, it; the latter choice bespeaks nothing other than one’s moral weakness, which includes ignorance of frailties and ‘self-deception’ (L, 115): ‘it must mean there’s something fundamentally wrong with me. It must mean that I don’t believe in my life anymore’ (L, 121-22). In short, the nature of his problem is somewhat close to that of the question ‘to be or not to be’; yet, in Sachs’s case, meditation does not prove a hindrance but rather makes Sachs all the more resolute to get to the bottom of it (which means he has to first ‘hit bottom’) and, unquestionably, to end or change his life with no delay.⁷⁹

One may say that the fall enacts a moment of sudden revelation, crystallising a taste of death in a ‘feeling of absolute certainty’ (L, 116), which can but be grasped by a dead man.⁸⁰ As with other accidents befalling him, the implications of encountering death do not dawn upon him immediately. That expression always lags behind experience does not defeat him but rather provides him with sufficient time for reflection with meticulous care. His silence in hospital is a case in point, which, to a certain extent, is not caused by shock as such: ‘Looking back on that scene from my hospital bed, I finally understood that everything was different from how I had imagined it. I had gotten it backwards, I had been looking at it upsidedown’ (L, 120). Therefore, not only does an occurrence amalgamate both active and passive factors for him, but coexistence of the sensuous and the intelligible also works itself out in the process of ‘reliv[ing] the moments of his fall again and again’ (L, 119). ‘Every fact is related on one side to sensation, and on the other to morals. The game of thought is, on the appearance of one of these two sides, to find the other: given the upper, to find

⁷⁹ Obviously Aaron assumes that Sachs will revert to normal life after this crisis, but, as we can see, Sachs’s conclusion is a far cry from his: ‘I want to end the life I’ve been living up to now. *I want everything to change*’ (L, 122; my italics).

⁸⁰ ‘I don’t mean that I sensed I was going to die, I mean that I was already dead. I was a dead man falling through the air, and even though I was technically still alive, I was dead, as dead as a man who’s been buried in his grave’ (L, 117). In a way this touches upon the Blanchotian theme as famously developed in *The Instant of My Death*.

the under side', says Emerson (*NSE*, 313). Sachs's reason for retrieving that dreadful sensation, it seems to me, is to find out what after all is projected in them, something not 'apparent' but 'real'. ('A quick, ludicrous embrace had become the moral equivalent of death' [*L*, 117].) Although in one sense this reconstruction can be identified with a kind of compulsion, in another it registers his infinite responsibility to respond to the ineffable, as Cavell speaks of *Walden*: 'True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go' (*SW*, 44), or of 'The American Scholar': 'The absolute responsibility may be perfectly discharged, in a given case, by a willingness to stammer, as prophets, for example, will' (*CHU*, xxviii). We perceive a family resemblance in Sachs's silence as interpreted by Aaron: 'Something extraordinary had taken place, and before it lost its force within him, he needed to devote his unstinting attention to it. Hence his silence. It was not a refusal so much as a method, a way of holding onto the horror of that night long enough to make sense of it.' From this 'absolute responsibility of the self to itself' or 'the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible' (*CHU*, xxvii), Sachs seeks (moral) power to keep himself from being silenced and broken by another power that tends to overcome human speech. The more he is overwhelmed by the excessiveness of that experience, the more necessary he feels to unrelentingly search for and articulate its origin, however inadequately. Thus, if Sachs is a moral perfectionist, it is because, as a human being, he is morally imperfect. What perfectionism signifies is not an acquired state of perfection and self-complacency but perfectability and one's shame at maintaining the status quo.⁸¹

He accepted everyone else's frailties, but when it came to himself he demanded perfection, an almost superhuman rigor in even the smallest acts. The result was disappointment, a dumbfounding awareness of his own flawed humanity, which drove him to place ever more stringent demands on his conduct, which in turn led to ever more suffocating disappointment.
(*L*, 131-32)

This is Aaron's comment on Sachs's 'overly refined conscience' that seems to continuously aggravate hopelessness and futility. But he thinks so only because he is not a moral perfectionist. Let us recall Nietzsche's words in Cavell's explication: 'one is ashamed of oneself without any accompanying feeling of distress' (*CHU*, 52).⁸² Sachs's disappointment is not a sign of surrender. Nor is his will to power a manifestation of frenzy. On the contrary, if '[p]erfectionism has its foundation in rethinking' (*CHU*, xxix), in *Leviathan* it is reinforced by and performed with self-

⁸¹ Additionally, to mark one's shame in the flesh is evident in Sachs's transformation of his appearance after the fall: 'He wanted to display his wounds, to announce to the world that these scars were what defined him now, to be able to look at himself in the mirror every morning and remember what had happened to him. The scars were an amulet against forgetting, a sign that none of it would ever be lost' (*L*, 125).

⁸² When Cavell expounds his idea of Emersonian Perfectionism, he pays particular attention to Emerson's influence on Nietzsche and situates their affinity in the region of perfectionism. Also noteworthy are his attempts to defend Nietzsche against John Rawls's criticism and to value moral perfectionism (say, its aesthetic dimension) in the context of democracy and justice.

discipline and method. Only through an interminable process of scrutinising and responding to the self as other can one learn to face others and reexamine one's society and culture. From this standpoint we begin to understand the way in which Sachs turns to silence to enable him to speak again. Also revealing is his strenuous effort to make himself understood in the lengthy conversation with Aaron, which shows not so much a sufferer's agitation as a thinker's composure. '[I]nfinately subtle, infinitely labored and complex', his 'absolutely precise account' (*L*, 117) somehow runs parallel to the 'endless specification' (*CHU*, xxvii) characterising a Wittgensteinian endeavour. But just as Cavell cautions against taking the '[a]bsolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible' 'metaphysically' to mean 'responsibility of the self to make itself absolutely intelligible' (*CHU*, xxviii), Sachs cannot penetrate the mystery of his fall through and through; nor has he succeeded in convincing Aaron of his complicity in the matter. That said, this does not prevent him from changing his life, for better or worse.

The last phrase lays bare one of the truths about change: One can never get ahead of oneself and no end can be seen. Though vision works, it works no more than a guide. Hence it does not seem fair for us to judge Sachs's action with hindsight, as if we could be any wiser than he is. It is important to move backward, to reflect, and to rethink; but it is equally important to think about how to move forward. This is precisely Sachs's strategy, after he is lost in the woods (to be sure, a reminder of *Walden*), gets help from Dwight, sees him being killed, kills the man killing him, and finally learns that that man, Dimaggio, is the husband of Maria's friend Lillian: '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' (*L*, 167). Once again, Sachs manages to integrate the passive and the contingent into part of his decision and action by acknowledging and receiving, instead of denying and rejecting, them. This is an oblique way of maximising his freedom — to be as resilient as he can, as though his will were at one with that of the world. (Aaron's and Fanny's 'conundrum': 'On the one hand, Sachs's departure had been unexpected. On the other hand, he had left of his own free will' [*L*, 144-45].) Thus even though we cannot see any necessary connection between these events transpiring after he loses his way (in the woods) — all of them come out of the blue — they still strike one as indispensable in finding himself or, more precisely, finding in others his next selves.

This is not to imply that Sachs has simply found in Dimaggio his 'unattained but attainable self' (*CHU*, 12), because the pair of Sachs and Dimaggio is, I think, one of the most ambiguous relations in *Leviathan*, much more so than that between Sachs and Aaron. On the one hand, it is not likely that Dimaggio *himself* represents the kind of unattained self according to Cavell's formulation

of Emersonian/Moral Perfectionism, not least on account of his atrocious killing of Dwight. On the other hand, this deranged Thoreauvian character does function as an incentive for Sachs to transform himself.⁸³ Suppose Dimaggio stands for what is unattained in Sachs; then the fact that the latter should kill the former with his own hands would sound eerie. This wild supposition is not without its profundity. In any event Sachs does recognise the unattained part of his self, but not in Dimaggio sinking in his actual state but in him as a would-be existence in ideas, given his study of the anarchist Alexander Berkman. It is precisely after witnessing and ending Dimaggio's deterioration in fantasy and violence that Sachs begins to (re)discover, (re)affirm and strive for his own ideal on behalf of not only this man but also himself. An inadvertent usurpation becomes a faithful exchange and alignment: 'As long as I was devoting myself to Dimaggio, I would be keeping him alive. I would give him my life, so to speak, and in exchange he would give my life back to me' (*L*, 225). This is as much a new journey as a return to what he has once believed in; or, in Cavell's words, 'a series of remembering, say disfragmenting, reconstitutions of the members of, and of membership in, one's stranded state' (*CHU*, xxx). Additionally, it hints at what Emerson calls 'the infinitude of the private man' or what Cavell calls 'the process of individuation' (*CHU*, 10-11), which does not aim at any *existing* individual but at the *infinite possibility* of continuously recovering from one's partiality.

Again, this Emersonian Perfectionist project, far from 'teleological' (*CHU*, 48), rests on 'the relation between the instance and the individual other — for example, myself — for whom it does the standing, for whom it is a sign, upon whom I delegate something' (*CHU*, 50-51). As a result, the emphasis is placed on the partial, attained self and its *relation* to an unattained self, not on the 'specimen' independent of 'its effect on you'. It reinforces the Emersonian/Nietzschean/Cavellian sense that the unattained self cannot once and for all be grasped and settled: "a higher self as yet still concealed from it." It is my own, *unsettlingly* unattained' (*CHU*, 51; my italics). The term 'exemplar' adopted in Cavell's text recalls what Sachs has in mind when he flies to San Francisco:

It wasn't that he was afraid of what might happen if he did the wrong thing (although he never doubted that the situation could turn on him, that she could back up her threat and call the police), but rather that he wanted his conduct to be *exemplary*. That was the reason he had come to California in the first place: to reinvent his life, to embody *an ideal of goodness that would put him in an altogether different relation with himself*. But Lillian was the instrument he had chosen, and it was only through her that this transformation could be achieved. He had thought of it as a journey, as a long voyage into the darkness of his soul, but now that he was on his way, he couldn't be sure if he was traveling in the right direction or not.

(*L*, 197-98; my italics)

⁸³ A deranged Thoreauvian character in this story gives an impression of pertinent exaggeration insofar as we 'keep in mind the question of insanity to which the writer of *Walden* recurs — or at any rate, the extremity and precariousness of mood in which he writes' (*SW*, 87).

It turns out that Sachs's plan is no less than reinventing Dimaggio with his own moral aspirations, taking on the roles of father and husband, which the latter might not virtually live up to in his lifetime. Apparently this is done wholly out of personal repentance; yet it is more than that. Repentance alone, a purely passive force, cannot sustain and suffice for self-transformation. '[A]n altogether different relation with himself' cannot be entered without Sachs's willingness and hope to become a better self, much better than he has ever been before. Given his broken marriage and the fact that Fanny is not able to get pregnant, those roles are fulfilled by him less as a duty than as an opportunity. In this sense, he does this mainly for his own sake, namely, to shorten the distance between the self he *is* and the one he *thinks*.⁸⁴ Having this in view, one will not be surprised at his later decision of leaving Lillian and her daughter after his dream of an ordinary, happy family turns sour with a slap given by the mother to the daughter. Consequently, the ideal self he has been holding on to in this family is at stake as well.

But this is not the end of his transformation. Repentance has long since faded. A sign of moral decline in Lillian's family does not so much frustrate him for good as stimulate his old disobedience and arouse his yearning for social justice and democracy.⁸⁵ Hence a transition from a family man to an anarchist. This is astounding not because it contains a juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary, but because for Sachs being a family man should be more difficult than being an anarchist. This irony corresponds to an individual's everyday 'self-dissatisfaction': 'the state of perceiving oneself as failing to follow oneself in one's higher and happier aspirations, failing perhaps to have found the right to one's own aspirations — not to the deliverances of rare revelations but to *the significance of one's everyday impressions*, to the right to make them one's ideas' (*CHU*, 51; my italics). One way of looking at this irony: an anarchist moulded in Sachs's fashion more or less resembles a writer in that he works alone — almost self-sufficiently — and constantly resists any unjust order or hegemonic principle imposed on his will. In addition, his moral conviction, self-determination and discipline to a large extent reinforce his performance of the task set by himself. In this regard, as long as he maintains the responsibilities of examining and critiquing the self, and of searching for the unattained part of that self, at least he will not lose his way; whereas family life involves other components outside one's relationship with the self and thus becomes even more complicated and unstable than the process of individuation. However, what Cavell insists on, and

⁸⁴ '[...] the conditions for my recognizing my difference from others as a function of my recognizing my difference from myself' (*CHU*, 53). In *Leviathan* this means how Sachs conceives his relationship with Dimaggio depends on how he conceives his relationship with himself.

⁸⁵ It is likely that Lillian's slap reminds Sachs of the 'turning point' of his childhood, namely, the 'absolute dictatorship' he experienced when visiting the Statue of Liberty with his mother: 'There we were, about to pay homage to the concept of freedom, and I myself was in chains' (*L*, 33).

what is reiterated in this chapter, is that individuation cannot be postponed for it is the point of departure: ‘the process of individuation (an interpretation of perfectionism) before which there are no individuals, hence no humanity, hence no society’ (*CHU*, 11). This is not to say that individuation is the first principle and only after its fulfilment can one begin to handle one’s relationship with others. Individuation is not to be fulfilled but to be continued. The point (at least highlighted in this chapter) is that awakening, if it happens, happens to an individual. Let us recall Thoreau’s temporary retreat to Walden and *Walden* and adduce Emerson’s confession: ‘I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me’ (*CHU*, 135). Therefore, it would be less than just to say the role of a family man played by Sachs is a total failure. If anything sets in, it is the fact that merely improving the self does not necessarily ensure interpersonal understanding. When he says to Aaron, ‘Looking back on it now, I see how pointless it was to have pinned my hopes on Lillian’ (*L*, 228), he may have had an inkling of the problem within his communication with her, who is, after all, too volatile (and occasionally too wayward) to be an ‘instrument’ for his consistent and demanding moral perfection. As we shall see, in the next chapter the themes of conversation and education will be given more weight with an ongoing exploration of moral perfectionism in Auster’s *Moon Palace*. But for now we need to think: what can a moral perfectionist do when a mother stakes a claim to her kid and thinks she can do whatever she wants, as though parental authority were nothing but a microcosm of political authority?

Very little. He can tirelessly exercise moral vigilance against his own lapses, but is not entitled to (directly) force others to measure up to his expectations. Or, it will be nothing but another form of tyranny. What he can do is persuade, call for attention, remind citizens of what they have ‘forgotten’, including ‘the nature of institutional power’ (*L*, 224);⁸⁶ and one’s awakening still largely depends on whether one hears the call or not, that is to say, on one’s (potential) willingness to change oneself. To my understanding, because his concern lies in the ethical life of each citizen rather than some ‘impossible’, ‘belligerent demands’, it is only natural that Sachs ‘sound[s] less like a political revolutionary than some anguished, soft-spoken prophet’, and that ‘At bottom, he was merely articulating what many people already felt’ (*L*, 217). It can hardly be imagined that, without his (private) conscience and determination, Sachs could get as far as approaching the (universal) exemplar in an Emersonian/Nietzschean sense. He turns each turning point in his life ‘creative’ rather than ‘crushing’ (*CHU*, 51), which directs him toward a new self, a new identity. At the same

⁸⁶ What has been forgotten is part of Thoreau’s teachings, as formulated by Cavell: ‘The essential message of the idea of a social contract is that political institutions require justification, that they are absolutely without sanctity, that power over us is held on trust from us, that institutions have no authority other than the authority we lend them, that we are their architects, that they are therefore artifacts, that there are laws or ends, of nature or justice, in terms of which they are to be tested. They are experiments’ (*SW*, 82).

time, it is also a way back to his original belief and vision, which he enhances with the unattained/attainable, and which makes his lifetime project at once a repetition and an alteration. What he might not be aware of is that performing his work as the *Phantom* of Liberty harks back to writing in *shadow*, namely, writing *The New Colossus* and *Leviathan*, the latter of which is ‘no more than the promise of a book’ (*L*, 142). This last identity indicates that, whether a writer or an anarchist, he has no fixed identity but always something beside it; in other words, he is nobody and any one and, precisely in this regard, a citizen to come.⁸⁷ ‘Like the *Leviathan*, and the *Second Treatise of Government*, and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*’, Cavell asserts, ‘*Walden* is, among other things, a tract of political education, education for membership in the polis. It locates authority in the citizens and it identifies citizens — those with whom one is in membership — as “neighbors”’ (*SW*, 85). Here we should say Auster’s (also Aaron’s and Sachs’s) *Leviathan* in a way aligns itself with these works. And if, as also observed by Cavell, Thoreau’s essay ‘Civil Disobedience’ constitutes a key step in perfecting his act of civil disobedience and making ‘the appeal to the people from themselves’, then *Leviathan* pays its tribute by doing the same job.⁸⁸

I do not mean to dampen this spirit at the close of the chapter; nonetheless it is the bomb that adds a far more ironic sense to the story, especially when perceived through the lens of Cavell’s interpretation of the object in question.⁸⁹ The Bomb with initial capital conveys ‘the will to nothingness’ (Nietzsche’s warning) and ‘the end of time’ (Kant’s warning) that resonate with Sachs’s opinion, say, ‘the power to destroy ourselves’ (*L*, 24). Given his knowledge of what the bomb means to the latter half of the twentieth century, mere (self-)destructiveness cannot account for Sachs’s ‘creative’ use of it. What he tries to destroy is not humanity as such; nor does he hanker after the End (of his life and world): ‘I’m going to keep on giving them hell for as long as I can’ (*L*, 236). His words might sound bitter, but we need to read between the lines and reconsider their effects upon us. If moral struggle, as Cavell claims, ‘cannot end within time, in which change is called for’ (*CHU*, 132), then what Sachs asks for is change, which should come from the heart of every citizen. With nothing more, and nothing less, than this, his hope can rest only on a paradoxical combination of

⁸⁷ The beginning of *Leviathan* leaves the issue of identity open to interpretation. State power can neither recognise nor ignore the Phantom, who challenges its legitimacy and refuses to stay in its discourse. It is also worth noting that transgressing a fixed identity does not entail that Sachs has no identity at all or what Cavell calls ‘the fantasy of selflessness’, that is, ‘the end of all attainable selves is the absence of self, of partiality’ (*CHU*, xxxiv).

⁸⁸ To say nothing of the memorable date, the Fourth of July, for both *Walden* and *Leviathan*.

⁸⁹ See ‘Hope against Hope’, in *CHU*, pp. 129-38 (p. 131). Besides, in his essay ‘Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s *Endgame*’, Cavell expands on the image of the Bomb (or what he calls ‘the phenomenology of the Bomb’) as he perceives a possible link between it and *Endgame*: ‘one dimension of our plight can only be discovered in a phenomenology of the Bomb. [...] it [the Bomb] has finally provided our dreams of vengeance, our despair of happiness, our hatreds of self and world, with an instrument adequate to convey their destructiveness, and satisfaction’. See *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp 136-37.

patience and impatience. And I take it to be a translation of Emerson's suggestion: 'Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. [...] up again, old heart! — it seems to say, — there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power' (*NSE*, 310-11).

CHAPTER THREE

An Education of Sincerity: Visiting *Moon Palace*

In *Leviathan* Sachs's novel, *The New Colossus*, helps to set the tone for the whole story. His idea of America is to a great extent encoded in this first and last work he completes. As previously stated, the content of this idea, as well as that of Emersonian Perfectionism, is neither predetermined by nor reducible to certain political agendas. We have expatiated on the Thoreauvian figure in *Leviathan*; we have also developed a way of connecting it with the Emersonian text. These examinations provide a renewed Transcendentalist perspective on the nexus between Sachs's writing and his life. Moreover, as we proceed further, it should be noted that the nexus between life and work in Auster's *oeuvre* is more complicated than thought. Different framings of its variations, as shown in previous chapters, suggest the value of engaging with Cavell's thought, whose elasticity is conducive to the workings of particulars. Indeed, it is those particular embodiments of life and work that enable us to better understand why the questions of reading and understanding, of writing and action, are no less important than (and are certainly related to) the questions of living in the world, of being with others. The trajectory from *Ghosts* to *Leviathan*, as I said, signifies a twofold move from the subjective plane to the intersubjective one, from the phenomenological register to the moral one. But this statement should not give a false impression that the move is final. Accordingly, in some cases involvement with others presents the conditions necessary for selfhood; and moral responsibility can turn out to be the driving force behind every (seemingly) descriptive task, hence behind every word one delivers to the world and shares with others. It strikes me that *Moon Palace* contains precisely this picture, suggesting different themes related to Emersonian Perfectionism. These themes — education and confession — provide new perspectives on the relations between life and work, between the individual and the community. To fully illustrate the point, I divide my reading of the novel into two chapters, with the present one on education and the next one on confession.

Let me clarify in advance what I mean by education. It is less than obvious how the notion can be connected with *Moon Palace*. Education is not merely about teaching and learning; it is the experience of their limits and possibilities, hence, in the truest sense, the limits and possibilities of communication. Something I discover in Marco Stanley Fogg's contacts with others, especially

those with Thomas Effing, conveys the senses of education I wish to investigate.⁹⁰ It is helpful to draw on certain elemental features that Cavell inherits from Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin and incorporates in his discussion of sincerity, as I believe the issue of sincerity — in Cavellian terms, ‘the unfathomability of sincerity’ (*PP*, 102) — to be at the heart of Fogg’s initial difficulties in catching on to Effing’s intent. Thus, instead of tagging Effing as an obscurantist, or accusing him of camouflage, I want to parse his gesture and consider how it influences Fogg’s moral and aesthetic sensibilities, which are based on the ability to apply oneself to everyday life. What is depicted in the early part of the novel — daily conversations and tasks, challenges and tests — provides certain clues to the later events and contains a deeper, philosophical resonance. This is particularly the case with those outdoor sessions where speaking is nothing less than a way of making the world happen, being bound to it, and inhabiting it with others.

In brief, my main arguments are as follows: (1) learning to interpret and react to another’s speech and gesture is an educational experience; (2) it can become a crucial step towards what Cavell calls ‘a perfectionist relation to a text’. The second point expands beyond the present chapter, as the confessional aspect of this ‘perfectionist relation’ will not be revealed until Blakelock’s *Moonlight* and Effing’s memoir come on the scene. Fogg’s relations with them are an indispensable part of his own confession. From this perspective, *Moon Palace* is not merely an account of individual experiences; it is a personal, intimate account of collective memories. It also demonstrates a feature I want to highlight in the following section, namely family resemblances. And an important way of understanding this feature is through the relations of life and work. As I mentioned in the introduction, for Auster one’s life and work are not just one’s own; they are open to multiple associations and juxtapositions (to recall the idea of ‘everything as a gloss on everything else’). It is this openness that enriches or even creates a moral existence.

Moon Palace after Leviathan

Moon Palace and *Leviathan* join together in Auster’s *oeuvre* as a pre-9/11 pair that contains at its very core the question of questing for America. This, of course, does not imply that the two novels can scarcely be seen as a kind of literary premonition of the disaster or, shall we say, *yet another* disastrous loss in and of the idea of America. Let us return for a moment to the image of bomb in *Leviathan*, which also appears in Thomas Effing’s mordant satire on how the atom bomb ruins one’s sanity (namely, Rita Hume’s brother, Charlie Bacon): ‘There’s progress for you. A bigger and better

⁹⁰ In a broad sense education concerns what Cavell means by philosophy: ‘philosophy becomes the education of grownups. [...] The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*’ (*CR*, 125).

mousetrap every month. Pretty soon, we'll be able to kill all the mice at the same time.⁹¹ Mrs. Hume is Effing's nurse and housekeeper. Once a bomber pilot in the Second World War, her brother, Bacon, later went mad (or, in Bacon's own words, pretended to be crazy) after learning that he was trained for the atomic bombings of Japan. That they have the same names as two great Empiricists is likely to serve as a wry allusion to the impacts of Empiricism, Enlightenment, and instrumental reason at large. The implication that certain types of reason can be so much in line with irrationality, as if one were the other's twin-brother, somehow invokes the 'dialectic of Enlightenment' formulated by Adorno and Horkheimer.⁹² That said, the message transposed to *Moon Palace* is much more tortuous and ambiguous, especially when we consider the mixed effect produced by Bacon's half-eccentric dialogue with Fogg, which in fact hints at something not only sensible but perhaps even profound. The same is true of Peter Stillman Junior's dialogue (or monologue) with Quinn in *City of Glass*, though it concerns another fundamental issue. It seems that madness or, better still, mania, takes various forms in Auster's work. Anarchism, nationalism, racism, totalitarianism, fundamentalism, we encounter their manifestations in *Leviathan*, *Moon Palace*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *The Music of Chance*, *The Brooklyn Follies*, and *Invisible*. Needless to say, there is an original form that foreshadows all of them, namely, an obsession with the prelapsarian tongue in *City of Glass*. Moreover, whether siding with or struggling against these ideologies, one is bound to live out the consequences, sometimes in the slight hope that he/she might be able to resort to madness against mania. Therefore, when hearing Bacon, after a cranky, hysterically funny theory about the connection between H-bombs and baseball games, speak with a real insight into the matter of atomic bombing — 'Destruction on that scale is God's business. Men don't have the right to meddle in it. [...] I wasn't going to let them turn me into an agent of destruction. [...] I'd rather be crazy than have that on my conscience' (*MP*, 218-19) — we somehow cannot say for sure who is crazy, as though the mad pilot is as rational as the rational politicians are mad.

Madness is not the opposite of reason; when reason disengages itself from ethics, its relentless advancement can often result in the very perfection of madness, which is more insidious than other palpable forms of madness because it always exercises power in the name of reason. It leads us to wonder whether we have lost our bearings in making sense of the two notions. Or they should indeed no longer be regarded as notions with clear definitions, because everything around them —

⁹¹ Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 143; hereafter, *MP*.

⁹² The dialectic of Enlightenment comes to my mind partly because Adorno and Horkheimer's discussion of it begins with Bacon. Granted, the subject may look tangential to the main issues I am going to discuss, but what is traced in their formulation — such as the disenchantment of the world, the dominance of technology, and the dialectic of rationality and irrationality — is not totally irrelevant to the subtext of *Moon Palace*.

the causes and effects — makes (ir)rationality essentially valuative and dependent on something other than themselves. Let us go back to Bacon's words 'I'd rather be crazy than have that on my conscience': There is nothing *absolutely* superior or inferior, nothing *absolutely* right or wrong, in the properties of madness and of reason; humanity (or being human) is grounded in one's conscience and moral standing instead of some invariable nature of faculties. Even though it is widely assumed that a rational being is at the same time a moral being (to be sure, since the failure of the Enlightenment project a caveat should always be entered), one's conscience can never be exhausted by ratiocination and calculation. Ethical responsibility can go on even when an end or limit of moral reason is announced, and affliction may last without consolation. (Admittedly, here lies the risk of deep frustration, so unbearable as to be tantamount to madness.) In my view, this way of understanding ethics belongs to the field of Moral Perfectionism. As stated at the close of the preceding chapter, an important side to the ethics of *Leviathan* is that there is no end to moral struggle and to change. Again the key is not to confuse perfectionism with perfection: in our context what perfection bespeaks is precisely what perfectionism is not, namely, the completion of struggle. The fact is, this completion or end is forced, just as destruction (such as the atomic one) is forced, for our purpose to conceive and confirm that we can reach a state of totality in our autonomy. It instantly brings to mind a version of Hegelian metaphysics, as Blanchot understands it, in which death — a metaphysical figure; yet we should never take for granted any absolute divide between the literal and the figurative — makes possible the culmination of human agency, its actualisation in a determinate negativity. Death as such is hardly far from freedom, as both Sachs and Effing learn from their own experiences. With the former, the taste of death is triggered by his first visit to the Statue of Liberty ('I learned that freedom can be dangerous. If you don't watch out, it can kill you' [*L*, 35]) and, with the latter, meeting Nikola Tesla's eyes ('I'm talking about freedom, Fogg. A sense of despair that becomes so great, so crushing, so catastrophic, that you have no choice but to be liberated by it' [*MP*, 142]).

At first sight, what Effing tells Fogg can barely be the same thing as Sachs tells Aaron. But in a sense it is mainly a matter of showing different ways of examining the same thing, that is, how to live one's life in a (non-)place called America, which, unlike most of the nations, did not exist until the idea of America came into being. To what extent is this idea a blessing, and to what extent a burden? The former aspect is frequently associated with a grand vision of liberation and exceptionalism (beginning from the Mayflower and Manifest Destiny), which lends itself so easily to proclamation that it sometimes can become misleading and even dangerous (for example, ending

up in Vietnam War, nuclear armament, and ‘end-time theology’⁹³). In contrast, what really demands a lifelong task is the other side of the idea, where each individual is, as it were, the victim of freedom, continuing to discover, lose, and rediscover America. Therefore, when we discern the differences in their life experiences and manners of taking stock of them, we also need to acknowledge that they bear family resemblances. It is the resemblances, not identities, that allow the idea — as if America were a sort of noumenon — to unfold in the ways that resonate with different characters and various critical points in personal life as well as in history; otherwise we would not be able to plumb the depths of the question of America since, except some grand narrative (which is precisely what we wish to jettison), there is never a definite, unchanging answer to the question. From the standpoint of resonance, Effing, albeit drifting from the Thoreauvian character embodied in Sachs, tends to be maverick and self-disciplined in equal measure. Meanwhile, since Effing’s disposition evolves in tandem with his profession as a landscape painter, it indicates a particular fusion of his moral character with his aesthetics. This comes to the fore especially when we begin to note how an idiosyncratic depiction of solitude is grafted onto the surface of frontier exploration, which does not deepen or strengthen the meaning of the American West so much as entirely transform it into a free thematic variation thriving on polymorphism. If the West in *Moon Place* evokes Thoreau’s Walden in the sense that both are off the beaten track of American modernisation, it too, ironically, connects up with the bomber training base and, to recall Charlie Bacon’s madness, the appalling history of atomic warfare. If it represents Blakelock’s lost idyll in *Moonlight*, whose visceral serenity captivates Effing and Fogg, it also looms large as a nonhuman locus, raw and awe-inspiring. If a close association with the key metaphor in the novel — the moon — makes it all the more foreign and otherworldly, this association is at the same time meant to remind us that both the West and the moon fall into the category of ‘frontier’ and hence are subject to human ‘exploration’. To be sure, all these implications endow *Moon Palace* with inexhaustible richness, but the charm of this assemblage radiates only through the singular shape of Effing’s story. That is to say, they are brought together by *this* man, configured by his sensibility and his relationship with others, in particular, with Fogg. This is a plain fact, but it tends to fall into oblivion, giving way to our further attention to the symbols that transcend an individual life. When referring to Montaigne as ‘the greatest inspiration’, Fogg remarks,

Like him, I tried to use my own experiences as the scaffolding for what I wrote, and even when the material pushed me into rather far-flung and abstract territory, I did not feel that I was saying

⁹³ The last one, as indicated at the end of the chapter on *Leviathan*, is that which Cavell levels his Emersonian criticism at in the piece ‘Hope against Hope’.

anything definitive on these subjects so much as writing a subterranean version of my own life story.

(MP, 226)

One can of course take this as a modest assessment, which implies that Fogg is not fully confident in his skill of sublimation. But this is not my point. To be more precise, I am not addressing the question of subjectivity as opposed to objective spirit, culture (say, of the American West), and the like. What I have in mind is what Cavell calls ‘autobiographizing’, which in his view marks a difference between writing and speaking: ‘writing differs from speaking [...] by a “memorable interval,” which is to say, in Thoreau’s lingo, by a discontinuous reconstitution of what has been said, a recounting of the past, autobiographizing, deriving words from yourself’.⁹⁴ Autobiographising, as I understand it along with *Moon Palace*, is not *chiefly* concerned with the cognitive divides between concrete and abstract, between subjective and objective. The issue at stake here is one’s expression, that is, how to recount (not restore) the things done, the words said, the feelings harboured. Writing in this manner — not evading the limitedness and occasional awkwardness of one’s posture — gives rise to a kind of singularity that blocks generalisation but is likely to hint at resemblances or resonances. Thus, in both *Moon Palace* and *Leviathan*, symbolic interpretation does not outweigh storytelling and description; moreover, the resonances between characters, in their accidental way of multiplying and associating singularities, do not consolidate themselves into some widely circulated connotations and conceptions. This is surely the case when we consider the connections between Sachs and the Statue of Liberty, between Effing and the West. Even more pertinent is the doubling of caves in the desert of Utah and Central Park in New York, which is a clue we will pick up in the second chapter on *Moon Palace*.

What does it mean to approach *Moon Palace* (1989) after *Leviathan* (1992)? This is a question that crops up in my reading. It leads me to ask: In what sense does this specific route unveil a self-changing process that is complementary to Sachs’s self-examination and accompanying dissatisfaction with contemporary culture, in which he is implicated not only at a societal level but first of all at a domestic one? Though not serious enough to detract from his exemplification of Moral Perfectionism, his recalcitrance, which aligns him with certain features of Emerson, Thoreau, and Nietzsche, still cuts both ways. Differently put, recalcitrance may have a negative effect, yet not in the sense that it will inevitably lead to violence, not to my mind in the case of Sachs. (In a similar vein, let us recall the moot point brought up in the previous chapter, namely, my reservations about a deconstructive/poststructuralist-Hegelian dichotomy implied in various readings of *Leviathan*.) The

⁹⁴ Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 41; hereafter, *PP*.

truth is rather that, because violence and coercion are out of the question in Moral Perfectionism, and because one may find his/her voice muffled by misunderstandings and indifference, the change of an individual sometimes *seems* to cut no ice with the present world as if this change came too early or too late. Then we cannot help but seek other possibilities. That is why we need stories, which show us other conditions in which things would be otherwise. They are not necessarily better, but neither are they necessarily worse. If Sachs's self-reliance enables him to rethink the meaning of community in solitude and disobedience, which substantially involves his grappling with the question of America, it is this same quality that faces alternatives in *Moon Palace*, where one is meshed in the warp and weft of community (historical and futural, genealogical and accidental) without even knowing it, thus with little chance of retreating for rethinking. It is as though moral exigency could only be matched up to by a passionate abandonment to existence (which precisely rests upon the coming of death), not so much to one's own as to others'. As I hope to show in the next chapter, this in one way constitutes a Blanchotian supplement to Cavell's Moral Perfectionism.

The Question of Sincerity: A Perspective

As mentioned in the beginning, the present chapter turns on the theme of education. Having said that, in this section I would like to sketch out the case of confessional discourse in Auster's novel. The shift of focus may not sound abrupt if we notice that the formative stage of Fogg's education begins after he meets Effing, whose confession doubtless plays a huge part in his maturation. Besides, what I call the education of sincerity has much to do with the lessons Fogg learns from his dealings with Effing's speech and gesture, which hinge on the question of sincerity, and which then have much to do with his reception of Effing's confession. That is why the subject of confession needs to be broached early, even though it does not figure in the present chapter.

I think — not, however, assuming that every reader would agree with me — that the confessional power (first and foremost, its sincerity) in Effing's memoir (or, in his words, obituary) should be acknowledged. This view of course does not prevent his story-telling (Effing's, Fogg's, Auster's) from being tested.⁹⁵ As a matter of fact, it has already been tested or, more precisely, slated. As referenced by both Bernd Herzogenrath and James Peacock, *Moon Palace* is regarded by some critics like Gary Indiana as 'fake, overly contrived, etiloated, and borrowed'.⁹⁶ It subsequently falls

⁹⁵ At the beginning of the previous chapter, prompted by Cavell's comments on Emerson's writing, I mentioned in passing the issue concerning playfulness and seriousness: blurring the line between them would render writing both powerful and vulnerable; yet being dogmatic about this line in reading could *only* be wrongheaded. No doubt, this is relevant to the question of sincerity discussed here.

⁹⁶ See Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 117. See also James Peacock, *Understanding Paul Auster*, p. 120.

to both to defend or at least excuse this issue, which for Auster's detractors is evidenced by the stock characters and far-fetched plot. Herzogenrath attempts to justify 'the lack of depth of the characters' and 'the episodic structure' (Herzogenrath, 9) by looking into "the picaresque mode" as a narrative structure that deliberately uses elements of the "picaresque", which may well explain 'the incongruity of the "depth" of the confessional mode and the actually "superficial" scanning of mere life-episodes' (117). According to him, the picaresque narrative, despite courting 'the shallowness promising depth' (123), holds to a principle divergent from the realistic novel. More importantly, it is the '*jouissance* of signifiers', as well as 'the tradition of desire and fantasy' (156), that allows the picaresque to sustain himself/herself in the hiatus between the Lacanian *objet petit a* and the subject that has always already been displaced. Needless to say, the moon figures as a major object of desire for Fogg, most prominently in Blakelock's painting. While Herzogenrath accentuates 'the ambiguity of the real' (155), which is manifested in both the rupture from within (verbal and visual) representations and the unfettered (though possibly illusory) play of signifiers, Peacock suggests that Auster's reflexive experiment with 'making fiction' (Peacock, 120) accounts for *Moon Palace's* artifice and intricate design. In this sense, the metafictional process makes the reader aware of the problematic of myth-making, without flatly debunking the frontier thesis and the like. He further points out that *Moon Palace*, as a sort of postmodern frontier novel, harks back to the American tradition of tall tales that culminated in Mark Twain.

It seems to me that both Herzogenrath and Peacock want to highlight a *deliberate* revamp of certain traditions and topoi in the writing of *Moon Palace*, even though they part company in that the former is largely preoccupied with the narrative mode or structure and the latter the thematic issue. That is why it does not sound very strange to evoke Don Quixote (the picaresque *jouissance*) and Mark Twain (the tall-tale satirism) at one and the same time. Meanwhile, viewed from a widely-held critique of postmodern literature, this revamp or pastiche still cannot be fully justified *precisely due to its deliberateness*. Whether one feels uneasy about 'the actually "superficial" scanning of mere life-episodes', 'the lack of depth of character', or the inexhaustible and improbable coincidences, all

of them belie as well as point to a deep-seated problem of sincerity, which I gather is the rub.⁹⁷ Moreover, when sincerity becomes a problem, turns out to be at stake, it cannot be a problem independent of reading/the reader. In other words, the problem of sincerity is inextricably intertwined with the crisis of trust, which may further be attributed to (post)modern scepticism. Thus, the efforts to account for Auster's self-conscious use of genre material and narrative tricks do not go far enough to ask how this sense of deliberateness arises, where it comes from. No wonder they can hardly dispel the doubt that *Moon Palace* is nothing more than a simulacrum. It is as though the doubt were no longer a doubt but a foregone conclusion.

Admittedly, some postmodern texts face the prospect of sliding into depthlessness and disingenuousness. Still, the case of *Moon Palace* is much more slippery to pin down. Firstly, if it revisits both the frontier and the picaresque novels through intertextual references and parodic reinventions, it in the first place calls into question our approach to genre material. That is to say, do we need to retain a typological framework, no matter how cautiously, so as to develop our criticism in contrast to or based on it? It seems to me that we can start from a place where literature as such — not just our notions of literary genres and characters — turns out to be questionable, rather than take a derivative path through (de-/re-)classification, which is still liable to generalisation. It then requires *us* to view and dissect familiar material from a new angle. In short, we do not start from scratch; nor do we rely on genre analysis. For example, when the Thoreauvian character was discussed in the last chapter, it was not intended to be abstracted from Sachs's character. Strictly speaking, the Thoreauvian character should not be looked upon as a formalisable model, for it merely stems from a provisional perspective that captures a sort of gesture shared by Auster and Cavell. This may help explain why the trace of character, as if embodied in Sachs's Thoreauvian appearance, looks indefinable. Notably, this case-by-case argument does not run counter to my interest in family resemblances because the latter does not exclude singularities. Precisely because Effing's autobiographising is unique, his life can resonate with Sachs's without schematising the ethical content of 'America'. Sachs's Emersonian 'discrepance' — which constitutes the conditions of

⁹⁷ A younger generation of American writers are perhaps more acutely aware of the problem. David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity writing come to mind. In this regard, Adam Kelly's extensive research is particularly helpful, which examines the complicated (dialectical or even paradoxical) way in which Wallace attends to the matter of sincerity. Wallace's concern with sincerity is a direct reflection of his concern with what he calls 'old untrendy human troubles and emotions'. See his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993), 151-94. Furthermore, this arguably has something to do with his philosophical education; notable influences include Wittgenstein and Cavell. Apart from Kelly's discussion of Emerson, Cavell and Wallace, see, for example, Jon Baskin's reading of Wallace in light of Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophy and Cavell's Moral Perfectionism, 'Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King's* Philosophical Inspirations', in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 141-56.

possibility of experience/writing — does not cease to exist in *Moon Palace* but rather waits to be discovered in Effing's *own* way, that is, in his confession.

We may have noted that the pastiche thesis is hard to thoroughly counter once genre analysis is reemployed and heavily relied upon, and that any generalisable pattern (even one in the wake of this thesis) tends to compromise the singularity of one's narrative, which carries the weight of the character's life. This goes back to the issue of sincerity. My impression is that in the pastiche thesis sincerity is tacitly equated with a sense of reality and the sense of reality is tacitly reduced to a conventional understanding of realism. Hence if *Moon Palace* lacks sincerity, that means it *feels* contrived and unreal. But this claim plays down the fact that this feeling comes from *someone*, namely, a singular, anonymous reader. It is as though the thing were too obvious to mention; yet the obvious can turn out to be elusive as well as cryptic. As I more or less expressed, the crisis of sincerity implies the crisis of trust, which resides in the grey area between the writer/narrator and the reader/audience, and which entails that there is no categorical assurance that one's narrative is 'actually "superficial"' instead of seemingly so. Put otherwise, the sense of sincerity is indivisible, not only in the sense that it cannot be clearly divided between the writer/narrator and the reader/audience, but also in the sense that one cannot recognise the depth of confessional narrative in *Moon Palace* while disputing its trustworthiness. From this standpoint, we can, on the one hand, agree with Peacock that Auster's incorporation of tall tales intends to direct our attention to their fictitiousness. Yet on the other hand, Auster's point cannot simply consist in a postmodern, self-referential trick, not even with a view to ideological criticism. The real ambition of *Moon Palace* is, I think, to test the reader's empathy, his/her capacity for compassion. What's more, the very condition of this test is that the credibility of one's words cannot be guaranteed. No doubt this means that writing and reading cannot and should not retreat into a kind of premodern innocence and faith (which signifies little more than our nostalgia), but have to take place in the teeth of (post)modern scepticism. What is the point of a test if it is not demanding? Perhaps just as Blanchot puts it, 'the only thing worthwhile is the transmission of the untransmittable'.⁹⁸ All in all, it is not exactly a mismatch of Effing's confessional voice and the story he relates that makes us unsure of his sincerity; it is more likely to be our reservations about his sincerity, as well as our misinterpretation of truthfulness, that create this mismatch. It goes without saying that Fogg's narrative has to get involved in this train of thought, both because *Moon Palace* stands as his own confession (after Effing's fashion) and because Effing's memoir is a mix of first-person and third-person voices. (Here I am reluctant to use

⁹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. by Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), p. 18; hereafter, *UC*.

the term ‘point of view’. One reason is that the part of third-person narrative is supposedly a substitute for that of Effing’s first-person narrative, which still depends on *nothing but* the latter’s first-person point of view. In other words, present in Effing’s story is not a mix of points of view. More importantly, a difference between the voice and point of view should be taken into account. Although I certainly do not think of the two as mutually exclusive, the former nevertheless contains a possibility of empathy, at least in *Moon Palace*, that is dispensable in the latter; this can hopefully shed new light on the question of sincerity and confession. Needless to say, the mere fact that Effing is blind and has to connect with the world through voices, others’ as well as his own, has already spoken volumes.)

Sincerity and Spontaneity: Effing’s Gesture

It seems that Effing is a man who would rather give sincerity a wide berth, not so much because he revels in mendacity — he is fully aware of the price of lying (‘If you’re going to lie, you might as well make it dangerous for yourself’ [*MP*, 126]) — as because he knows that sincerity, like promise and love, can be both priceless and worthless and thus be open to abuse from both the storyteller and the audience (‘As long as I was convincing, who cared what had really happened?’). It is important to remind ourselves of the context of these remarks, which are addressed to Fogg when Effing reveals his ‘real’ identity, an American painter named Julian Barber. To be more specific, we need to note that the context (of these words) and the circumstances (under which they were said) are different and yet wedded by Effing’s intention. The former refers to his Paris years (from 1920 to 1939) when he was no longer Julian Barber. Since this expatriation should be interpreted not as moving to Paris (‘There was no particular reason for going to France’ [*MP*, 185]) but as leaving America (namely, forsaking his home), and since he considered himself as already dead in the desert of Utah (namely, forsaking his identity), there was no need to bother those Parisians with the ‘true’ story of a ‘dead’ man. Sincerity, if it means nothing but describing one’s own harrowing experiences at a wrong time to an unsuitable audience, is the last thing Effing wanted then. Meanwhile, if pandering to their taste would be a distraction or diversion from the haunting past, he did not hesitate to entertain them with some gripping wartime sagas, so to speak, which were gradually fleshed out and polished during his practice of relating them, and could be slightly altered to fit various situations and atmospheres. As if inadvertently anticipating a sort of French intellectual penchant for signs and text, he joked that the French ‘ate it [the story he made up] up’ and ‘couldn’t get enough’ (*MP*, 126). Or it may be more appropriate to deem it an inheritance of American oral

tradition. Either way Effing's (apparently) lighthearted performances at most evince a craftsman's sincerity, namely, an enthusiasm for honing his fabulation skills. And this craftsmanship is possible only because those invented stories, albeit told in the first person, have nothing to do with his life; he cannot really be affected by them. Granted, this enthusiasm fostered by his detachment from what he said may be esteemed in the sense of artistic creation, but it, together with a note of levity, can neither counterbalance the weight of his past nor be identified with the kind of sincerity in question, which is tied up with autobiographising. That is why on the whole he does not take heart from this twenty-year masquerade: 'The whole business was a sham anyway' (*MP*, 185). It is in view of his unreadiness to face himself, as well as others' indifference to his innermost feelings, that sincerity appears worthless, namely, absent from his relationship with others. That said, Effing's brief account of his Paris years still serves to set off 'a turning point' (*MP*, 124) when he is finally prepared to write his own obituary with Fogg ('our project', as he calls it). The latter constitutes the circumstances under which sincerity becomes absolutely necessary; without it no writing of the obituary or memoir, no confession, can start off.

However, before positively granting this prerequisite to confession, we need to first of all understand the complexity of sincerity so as to avoid (or at least be aware of) the situation in which a prerequisite is undermined as soon as it is established. That is to say, sincerity cannot simply be established through declaration, which will undermine its very presence. When we put our mind to showing it, we ironically end up in pretension. Though I keep this idea within the autobiographical bounds, it is *at the same time* an effect cut loose from volition and even self-awareness, in other words, not to be achieved by *a single person*. From this perspective, a direct route to it is very likely to be doomed in the first place. If sincerity is unassertible or, even if asserted, unverifiable (hence indicating that it can *by no means* be ascertained), then one may well be gripped by an urge to jump to conclusions that it is little more than a figment (for example, nothing can *prove* that this time Effing tells his story in good faith), that he/she is left with the only choice of adopting a sceptical attitude once and for all, which comes down either to a serious underestimation of his/her ability (however unstable) to read and discern the unassertible or to an equally serious overestimation of his/her ability to seek refuge in scepticism, whose doctrine turns out to be the least sceptical. (Its final stage would be nihilism, for which, as Blanchot rightly points out, 'once and for all, nothing is *valid*. That would be rest and security once again.'⁹⁹) This recalls 'the unfathomability of sincerity' explicated by Cavell in relation to Austin's comments on the *Hippoclytus*:

⁹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953-1993*, trans. by Zakir Paul (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 145.

That there are no marks or tokens — to use the terms of Theseus’s wish — by which to distinguish the genuine or real from the false or fake is a way of putting Wittgenstein’s discovery (according to me) [...] that there are not what he calls criteria for distinguishing reality and dream, or, I add, animate and inanimate, or sincerity or seriousness and hollowness or treachery, hence no way of *blocking* the threat of skepticism.

(*PP*, 102)

Cavell gathers that the moral (‘our word is our bond’) extracted by Austin from the Greek play may as well betray anxiety over the ‘curse’ (*PP*, 101) behind Hippoclytus’s tragedy. The unfathomability of sincerity, bound up with the endless threat of skepticism, spells the curse, not least our recurrent fantasy about the ‘marks’ or ‘tokens’ that can save us from confusion about others’ sincerity and, no less alarmingly, about whether our sincerity can be *felt*. At the same time, this threat will but escalate if we shift our attention solely to one’s (the speaker’s or the writer’s) intention, as though it were independent of context or circumstances. It goes without saying that exaggerating the self-sufficiency of intention (and will), or otherwise overplaying its importance, signifies yet another split between the inner and the outer. What Cavell suggests is, following Wittgenstein and Austin, that ‘intention is anything but something inner making up for the absence of something outer; it lines the outer’ (*PP*, 110). And I wish to throw this point into relief, so as to first gloss a marked aspect of Effing’s character, namely, the ‘Effing gesture’, which is perceived by Fogg as ‘devious, obscure, apparently without motive’ (*MP*, 188).

To begin with, the gesture in question may be seen as secret or even treacherous, but to insist upon this view is to risk excluding other *seemingly* external factors from the workings of Effing’s intention. Though not straightforward, he in effect does not keep hidden anything that may or may not — it depends on how Fogg made sense of this *anything* — connect with his intention: ‘As with so much of Effing’s behavior during the time I [Fogg] stayed with him, I was torn between reading a dark purpose into his actions and dismissing them as the products of random impulse’ (*MP*, 105). Granted, at first the uninitiated Fogg is truly puzzled at such ‘intentionally ambiguous signals’ (*MP*, 106) as changing costumes, because he wants to know the ‘facts’ behind those appearances. Yet, just as Effing’s blind eyes can neither reveal nor conceal things, what these ‘antics’ bespeak is not so much chicanery as warning: ‘Just remember, Fogg,’ as Effing once told him, ‘never take anything for granted. Especially when you’re dealing with a person like me’ (*MP*, 108). Does it mean that Effing tries to instil scepticism in Fogg? Is this the sort of education the latter receives? But does the sceptical attitude towards everything really need to be instilled, given that it is already there and has never been blocked? That is to say, it, more a fact (in Cavell’s words, ‘the truth of scepticism’) than a

construct, is deeply ingrained in human nature and lurking to seize upon us time and again; or, as Cavell puts it, ‘the restlessness of the finite creature burdened by the desire of the infinite (or say, by infinite desires)’.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, suppose it is not scepticism that Effing intends to impart to Fogg, then what is the ‘mysterious and arcane knowledge’ that the latter ‘at times’ ‘felt’ Effing ‘was trying to pass on’ (*MP*, 105)? That it is something *felt at times* indicates Fogg’s uncertainty about whether Effing is teaching him on purpose; or whether he is learning on purpose. In their relationship intention has become a minor and all but unpredictable element. Sometimes it is hard to tell it apart from spontaneity, as when Effing segues between a choleric autocrat and a tender-hearted old fellow:

Entire days would go by when nothing but bitterness and sarcasm poured from his mouth, but just when I was persuaded there was not a particle of kindness or human sympathy left in him, he would come out with a remark of such devastating compassion, a phrase that revealed such a deep understanding and knowledge of others, that I would be forced to admit that I had misjudged him, that he was finally not as bad as I had thought. [...] At first, I wanted to dismiss it as a charade, as a trick to keep me off balance, but that would have implied that Effing had calculated these softenings of heart in advance, whereas in fact they always seemed to occur spontaneously, emerging from some haphazard detail of a particular event or conversation.

(*MP*, 113-14)

What is noteworthy in this passage is Fogg’s reference to the ‘haphazard detail of a particular event or conversation’, which, I think, hints at an interpenetration between context and intention. Of course Fogg himself does not go so far as to make the point explicit but rather shifts to a hovering between intellectual bafflement and certain intuitive understanding of irreconcilable truths. On the one hand, he cannot make sense of the contradiction in Effing’s temperament; on the other, he nonetheless does not want to dismiss either side for the sake of cognitive consistency. As such, it can only lead to an inconclusive ‘conclusion’ that ‘Effing was both things at once’ (*MP*, 114). Obviously there is a sense of clash between what Fogg calls ‘aberration’ and ‘essence’, so striking that no reasoning seems to be able to resolve or dissolve it. But even more striking is his subsequent acceptance of their coexistence without ever achieving agreement; both are true *for him*, not because some hidden logics will someday dawn on him but because what preoccupies him is not some natural phenomenon but ‘a tortured soul’. Where can more inexplicable contradictions reside than in the human soul?

Moreover, what I take him to express and show — namely, not in an argumentative manner — is that this acceptance does not hinge on a general picture of Effing but some seemingly *inessential* and *aberrant* (to improvise Fogg’s wording) scenes lingering in memory. This in a way sheds light on the

¹⁰⁰ Stanley Cavell, ‘The Wittgensteinian Event’, in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), pp. 192-212 (p. 207).

nature of the conversation during his second dinner at Effing's house, which is brought up immediately after the thoughts mentioned above.

Mrs. Hume was asking me questions about my childhood, and I *happened to* mention how my mother had been run over by a bus in Boston. Effing, who until then had not been paying any attention to the conversation, *suddenly* laid down his fork and turned his face in my direction. In a *voice* I had not heard from him before — all tinged with tenderness and warmth — he said, 'That's a terrible thing, boy. A truly terrible thing.' *There was not the slightest suggestion that he did not mean it.*

(*MP*, 114; my italics)

Given Effing's imperious air, Fogg will not to any extent expect his commiseration, not even a condescending one. Since the old man is not inclined to please anyone, it in turn suggests that there is no need for him to *pretend* to be moved by Fogg's bereavement or else to move him with his own (namely, Pavel Shum's death in a car accident). That said, can we, only by this inference, hold unreservedly that Effing means what he says ('That's a terrible thing, boy. A truly terrible thing')? Can every shadow of doubt be dispelled by a modest degree of (ungrounded) confidence in his well-meaning, which might be merely circumstantial? If we continue along this line, it is almost certain that we are driving ourselves into a cul-de-sac. When caught in a nebulous web of intentions and general impressions, one tends to overlook what a context can signal. As Cavell reminds us, 'a context *is* what allows such a thing as an intention to do so much and to be so little. It is why some things you can do intentionally you can do inadvertently' (*PP*, 111). Do we need to judge whether Effing makes these remarks intentionally or inadvertently? Is an association of deaths, which cannot be triggered without Fogg's accidental reference to his mother's death and Effing's actual grief for his dead friend, not enough to render his sympathy genuine? It seems to me that, as long as this association sinks in, efforts at hair-splitting becomes trivial. Therefore, below an abstract search for Effing's intention and yet beyond a logical analysis of factual findings, what Fogg counts on is perceiving and feeling out something that can help contextualise the gist of their conversation: not only Effing's noticeably unusual voice, his trembling lips, but also his heartfelt evocation of how he met Pavel in Pairs, what kind of person his Russian friend was (for example, his reading habit accounts for the books in the room now occupied by Fogg), as well as the similar cause of death that engaged Effing's attention in the first place. Most importantly, Fogg was indeed touched by Effing's words and 'could not help feeling sorry for him' (*MP*, 115), mainly because he shared the feeling of suddenly losing loved ones. This acknowledgement issuing from Fogg eases Effing's burden of getting across his meaning. (One might object that Fogg's understanding *would have been* exploited if Effing *had feigned* his kindness. Of course one's understanding does not entail the other's sincerity. Shall we call this one's misunderstanding or understanding misplaced? 'The capacity for

understanding', Cavell writes, 'is the same as the capacity for misunderstanding' [*PP*, 111]. What is curious is why we may find it so hard to shake off the doubt.) All these manifestations of accord emerge so unexpectedly and fade so quickly that the whole process is like a glimpse, as it were, of a person he has never known before. To be sure, this kind of transient perception recurs in different forms and under various circumstances; otherwise it would not be called and recalled as an 'aberration' at all. That which is aberrant can only hang on repetition as its condition of possibility. Yet this repetition is at the same time *spontaneous*. This suggests an answer to Fogg's question: 'If this good side of Effing is genuine, however, then why didn't he allow it to come out more often?' (*MP*, 114).

If spontaneity makes Effing's uncharacteristic side genuine, it simultaneously prevents this genuine side from being freely deployed and displayed; opportune moments do not come as frequently as we think. In this light, it is perhaps not *entirely* up to Effing to reveal his considerateness for the feelings of others, especially not affectedly. What bulks large then is the difficulty *on Fogg's part* in understanding him, by which I mean resisting generalisation of his character or reliance upon certain prediction of behaviour and expression. 'If he was difficult,' let us recall Fogg's observation, 'it was largely because he was not difficult all the time' (*MP*, 113). Unpredictability means that nothing more than readiness is required, and it also means that anything less than readiness can be fairly misleading. A wise choice is to turn this demand into an opportunity of learning to capture subtle signs, to be more aware of the context in which things, both as tangible as facial expressions and as intangible as intentions, develop. This amounts to a process of learning precisely because no instructions or rules are given by Effing to follow but a caveat — 'never take anything for granted' — that urges Fogg to learn by trial and error. And if the 'rules' (*MP*, 105) of the game cannot be known in advance, it is only because the rules (let us keep in mind a Wittgensteinian undertone) themselves belong to 'the secrets of the world'. In other words, one does not first attain rules (here, a Kantian undertone, for example, a priori principles) and stick to them in his/her exploration of the world; instead, one has to discover the rules and the world simultaneously. We do not lack rules (found or to be found, changed or to be changed); what we lack is close observation. Hence what is most difficult is to see the things right before our eyes without being deluded by preconceptions and suppositions, and then to aptly describe them. This descriptive approach has already been intimated in the job interview, when Effing asks Fogg what he thinks about the black patches over his eyes. Fogg's replies, 'I can state that they are there, but I don't know why they are there' (*MP*, 100). And Effing's immediate response is this: 'In other words, you

won't take anything for granted.' It is not clear whether Fogg's answer appeals to Effing, but surely the latter would not object to the former's idea that 'you can get yourself into trouble by jumping to conclusions'.

The descriptive approach pertains to the issue of sincere gesture precisely because it does not *seem* applicable to that which is called 'the inner' and thus helps uncover its complexity or 'unfathomability' (for instance, there is no readymade way of telling a sincere gesture apart from a feigned one). But this at the same time means that description itself is the first, vital step in our response to and reception of a gesture (including a narrative voice), namely, not to grasp it but to be gripped by it. It is worth looking still further into this descriptive manner, whose full effects can be felt in a specific kind of interaction that bestrides the line between tuition and intuition. A key component of Fogg's education, learning how to describe the world(s) to an audience makes of him not so much a disinterested observer and recorder as a compassionate listener and writer, whose later faith in Effing's words does not arise from credulity but from the self's answerability to otherness (the experience of which can be at once singular and common, strange and familiar).

Seeing and Describing the World: Fogg's Education

Fairly speaking, Fogg was observant of his surroundings well before working as a carer accompanying Effing. As the episode of his abode in Central Park shows, 'I spent a good deal of time just watching people: studying their gestures and gaits, thinking up life stories for them, trying to abandon myself totally to what I was seeing' (*MP*, 61). But not until the third day, when he and Effing had their first walk, did he begin to realise that he 'had never acquired the habit of looking closely at things', that he 'had always had a penchant for generalizing, for seeing the similarities between things rather than their differences' (*MP*, 117). (Again, it is worth noting that the present episode follows the dialogue discussed a moment ago. In my view, the whole sequence runs this way not simply because all the events are arranged in a chronological order. More importantly, as we know, *Moon Palace* is Fogg's own memoir; it is indicative of a learning process he went through, that is, how he looks back upon his apprenticeship, so to speak, and invests it with import and interests. Arguably this lays the groundwork for the central task awaiting him, namely, completing Effing's memoir. That said, it should be taken neither as a means to an end nor as an index of linear progression, especially when we consider the meaning of personhood.) Fogg's obstacle apparently connects up with Effing's loss of sight, but the core of the problem lies in his own lack of a keen eye for the niceties between similar things, the minutiae of every particular, and the dynamic qualities brought out by changing conditions. Effing's pressing demand — 'I want you to make things stand

out for me!’ — in a way exposes Fogg’s (and our) tendency to draw them back into the background of daily life, misperceive them, or simply let them pass into oblivion. Having to bear the brunt of Effing’s criticisms, Fogg nevertheless concedes that the old man is right, that his early attempts at making things ‘stand out’ for him are less than satisfactory. There is no such things as an ‘average lamppost’ or the ‘perfectly ordinary manhole covers’. Nor are things insulated from ‘what was happening around them: a person walking by, a sudden gust of wind, an odd reflection’ (*MP*, 118). This again delineates the challenge of the commonplace, the kind (with regard to inanimate objects) to some degree divergent from that encountered in the ambiguity of Effing’s sincerity (with regard to other minds); yet in a sense both show that the caveat ‘taking nothing for granted’ (which reappears here; *MP*, 119) is not meant to inculcate in Fogg a *thorough* disbelief in knowing the world and others, but to call attention to the ordinary that has been belittled, and to cut knowledge loose from the moorings of certainty. The obsession with certainty is indissociable from an obsession with immutability (sometimes eternity, sometimes purity) and, specifically, from a tendency to strip the other of its conditions of (im)possibility (a tendency no different from announcing its death), which we *cannot* simply grasp epistemologically but, if we do not want to succumb to despair or even take this failure as our pretext for nihilism, *ought to* approach with ‘humility, patience, rigor’ (*MP*, 118).

‘If regarded in the proper way, the effort to describe things accurately was precisely the kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn: humility, patience, rigor.’ Fogg’s words signal another perfectionist moment, as distinct from those in *Leviathan* in its pedagogic (and autodidactic) implications. No sooner has frustration begun to surface than it gives way to a burst of energy and self-motivation. And an ‘obligation’ becomes ‘a spiritual exercise’, which is no longer merely ‘aesthetic’, but ‘moral’ (*MP*, 120). Two strands of meaning are woven into this activity. The first one is concerned with Fogg’s efforts to reach out to the world, to make it stand out, to approach it in the midst of its withdrawal. A key method is, as we have seen, to *degeneralise*. (Indeed this method looks remarkable especially after and alongside generalisation. It is why he deems it a new way of looking at the world as if he ‘were discovering it for the first time’.) When Fogg asks himself (and us) ‘What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words?’ and answers ‘The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths’, something dawns on him, namely, the necessity of distance, as well as the ‘accidents and losses [that] could occur along the way’ (*MP*, 118). Hence it seems to me that Fogg is talking less about things in themselves than about the ‘facts’ in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (‘The

world is the totality of facts, not of things' [1.1]). As Cavell dwells upon the 'world-boundness of language' (*PP*, 117),

Do we ask: What was there before the world? Heidegger's question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" which Wittgenstein is said to have found meaningful (*Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 68), seems to assume the world is things. As the *Tractatus* is drawing to a close, Wittgenstein remarks: "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists." I would like to say that if the world is the totality not of things but of facts, what there is before the world (what the world is instead of) is not nothing but is the something of chaos. The perfectionist dimension of morality, in its search for that other before whom one may make oneself intelligible, expresses the sense of moral relationship as the alternative not to immorality but to moral chaos [...].

(*PP*, 117-18)

Does Fogg *appreciate* the distance or interval between what things are and what they are presented to him? Very likely. This gives him chances not only of marvelling at the world but of 'recounting' it (to borrow Cavell's word; *PP*, 120). It contrasts with a conception of language as 'hooked onto or emitted into the world' in that 'the world calls for words, an intuition that words are,' Cavell continues, 'world-bound, that the world, to be experienced, is to be answered, that this is what words are for' (*PP*, 116). At the same time, Fogg seems to have a vague sense of this 'something of chaos', which is accompanied by a vertiginous feeling of 'explosions', 'collisions', and 'chaos' (*MP*, 119). In a rapid switching from 'casual indifference' to 'intense alarm', it does not occur to him that words can run out of control if he simply lets them match his newly acquired hypersensitivity. As it turns out, he is overwhelmed by the things reborn through his eyes and, accordingly, Effing is inundated with the words pouring out of his mouth. If it were not for Effing's complaint that he cannot catch up, his efforts would overshoot the mark. This comes to another meaning of the spiritual exercise, which does not surface until Fogg realises that he is after all not alone in this activity of recounting the world, a world, again as Cavell puts it, 'shared' (*PP*, 120).

The important thing to remember was that Effing was blind. My job was not to exhaust him with lengthy catalogues, but to help him see things for himself. In the end, the words didn't matter. Their task was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them disappear the moment they were pronounced.

(*MP*, 119)

Fogg's initial attempt to develop a passion for this obligation leads to the thought that he had better keep himself 'separate' (*MP*, 118) from Effing, who looks like a source of imposition. To be sure, this makes perfect sense. When an individual opens his/her eyes as if for the first time, the world fills him/her with immense amazement, which amounts to a mind-boggling and dizzy travel from nothingness to being. Fogg's heightened awareness of things and their inexhaustible states has

renewed his relationship with the world. However limited human perception and language are, these forms of mediation contain within themselves the possibilities of being free for mortals. Yet *this* language is not only bound to the world, as unconcealed to Fogg, but also connected to Effing, who needs his voice to ‘go the distance’ (*MP*, 100) to reach him. From a Cavellian perspective, this requirement could imply that Fogg’s voice should make himself intelligible, namely, striving to reach out despite (and due to) his distance from Effing and, moreover, to merge with the latter’s vision and help sustain his relation to the world. It goes without saying that this sustaining power of another’s voice plays a huge part in the last days of Effing’s life.

Therefore, given that Fogg’s description *of* things is intended to be heard *by* another human being, words themselves should not be obtrusive in the sense either of breaking away from the world (not necessarily an empirical world) or of overdoing their job, namely, aiming at precision but ending in abstraction (‘an avalanche of subtleties and geometric abstractions’). If words *embody* the self’s responsiveness to things and even responsibility for another’s responsiveness to things, then they cannot just serve as signs independent of human voices. If something contained in things cannot be represented by words, and, further, something contained in words cannot be fully articulated by (other) words, then the idea forming in Fogg’s mind is not so much of the unrepresentable (or unrepresentable) as of letting words answer the world, including leaving the unsaid unsaid. It does not follow that the unsaid is necessarily unknown. This echoes Fogg’s belief: ‘the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him’ (*MP*, 119). Blind and using a wheelchair, Effing nonetheless does not like to live in seclusion. According to Fogg, the old man ‘welcomed contact with air’ and would sit for hours in Riverside Park, listening to all sorts of sounds attentively (*MP*, 122). This might partly explain why Fogg gives credit to Effing’s self-reliance, which does not mean that the latter can wholly depend on himself, but rather that, without this *spirit* of self-reliance (which bizarrely goes hand in hand with infirmity), Fogg’s assistance would be of no avail.

From the question of sincerity to the descriptive method, we have traced a first and major thread of Fogg’s education. What is distinctive about this *Bildungsromanian* aspect of *Moon Palace* is that it unfolds in a milieu that can both evoke scepticism (particularly with respect to other minds) and bring that evocation into question. Put otherwise, the sceptical signals in countless conversations between Effing and Fogg can produce two divergent effects — seduction and warning. Both make us realise our cognitive limitations, but one tends to disorient us with increasing doubt and disappointment and the other cautions us against the dangerous indulgence in that disappointment

and reorients us toward an open and receptive attitude. Notably, I neither suggest that the former tendency is completely wrong (though not right either) nor claim that it is fully avoidable by adopting the latter attitude. Anyone, as long as he/she is not indifferent to the sceptical stimulation, would at one time or another find himself/herself asking: Are we too sensitive in our reaction to the outside or, quite the contrary, not sensitive enough? Are we afraid of the other or rather drawn to it? Have we, after all, penetrated the nature of the self? I think all these questions underlie a series of tests posed to Fogg. Yet it also seems to me that at this stage a more specific and urgent task is not dwelling on these questions — we may get lost in finding direct answers to these general questions — but enhancing alertness through daily practice. In this regard, Effing keeps Fogg busy. Even though his mentorship is no more than hypothetical, its effects on Fogg are no less than palpable.

Furthermore, this alertness is not *intended* to help us fend off things at odds with our usual perceptions. That will be self-contradictory, since enhanced alertness brings about new perceptions. Then perhaps what we resist are not so much those things as the new parts of ourselves that become aware of them, which in turn indicates the narrowness of existing constitution of the self. And narrowness relates to the conditionedness of human experience, that is, we are supposed to approach the unknown only in the light of what we know. (Of course, both expressions — ‘the unknown’ and ‘what we know’ — are subject to careful examination.) Once stranded in the desert, Effing is deeply affected by this human limitation, as he describes his feeling about the rocks there: ‘everything was *at once recognizable and alien*, you couldn’t help seeing familiar shapes when you looked at them, even though you knew it was all chance, the petrified sputum of glaciers and erosion, a million years of wind and weather’ (*MP*, 152; my italics). It is why seeing and describing the other is difficult; the activity does not leave you at rest. In the meantime, we are somehow driven by an urge to respond to the world (of chaos), which is not entirely regulated by cognition and knowledge, and which makes openness — crucially in the sense of being both *open* and *sincere* — possible. Throughout this chapter, the emphasis is not on the unpleasantness of one’s conditions but on the awareness of self-transformation under those conditions. In other words, conditions also enable one to achieve something, no matter how trivial it seems; for instance, something *potentially* communicable in an earnest conversation, or in a ‘spiritual exercise’ of describing what one sees to another person who cannot see. If narrowness, distance, and separateness are integral to the human condition, it is nonetheless punctuated by a kind of attunement that emerges when least expected. (Attunement, along with voices, features in Cavell’s language; it bears on the ideas to be explored in the next chapter.) Then, needless to say, unless the moment of attunement lasts forever, the question of

sincerity will not disappear. Shall we add that the case is simply a fantasy and, strictly speaking, should not be hoped for? What we can hope for is a capacity to recover ourselves — together with others — from distress in the aftermath of losing such a fantasy. One way of doing so, as highlighted in *Moon Palace*, is confession, which concerns visions that entwine past and future, as well as voices that reverberate through private and public spaces. With this in view, I shall proceed to the second part of my reading of *Moon Palace*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Confession as a Therapy: Revisiting *Moon Palace*

It is storytelling that fires Auster's imagination of America. Neither naively optimistic nor cynically dark, his narrative consists in a unique sense of confession. I have broached the subject in the previous chapter, suggesting that one route to the core of Effing's memoir is through the dynamic relationships between expression and comprehension, sincerity and sympathy, intention and context. If Fogg does not find it worthwhile to decipher Effing's speech and gesture, to accommodate the blind man's wish to picture things in words, there is little chance that Effing will ever open up and confide those personal stories. Nor will Fogg devote his energies to writing them out and discover for himself what is true and sincere in the act of recounting the past. It may explain why Effing's confession needs to be deferred until Fogg has received his education, so to speak, in this regard. Moreover, this education is at the same time a therapy he himself is in need of. As mentioned, the doubling of caves in Effing's and Fogg's experiences is a telltale sign of family resemblance. Effing's stories stir in Fogg deep memories that he has yet to absorb. In other words, it is in Effing's stories, as well as in Blakelock's painting *Moonlight*, that those memories come back to him, to borrow Emerson's words, 'with a certain alienated majesty'. I have indicated in the introduction that this Emersonian sense of 'recognis[ing] our own rejected thoughts' leads us to 'the genius of the text'. In the light of Cavellian ethics of interpretation, this is not so much an answer as a question with which we should concern ourselves: 'What does a text know?'

A text says more than its author intends; it knows more than its reader knows. A perfectionist relation to Blakelock's *Moonlight* opens the self to a quasi-mythological vision so that both the self and the vision can be overturned, that is, turned in a different direction. I shall look at the manifestation of that relation in Fogg's contemplation of the painting, including the Thoreauvian/Cavellian sense of mourning it evokes. This serves as the basis for my subsequent discussion of the functions of confessional narrative in constructing and recovering the self within a shared moral space. Meanwhile, considering the case in which one's own being can be profoundly affected by another's death, I find it useful to draw on Blanchot's thoughts on the economy of the imminence

and erasure of community.¹⁰¹ Together with Cavell's Moral Perfectionism, they help to delineate a seemingly self-defeating yet incessant gesture towards community in *Moon Palace*. A notable embodiment of that gesture is in the affective power of voices, which deepens the communicative and performative import of human speech, fosters a special sense of fellowship (or in other words, attunement and harmony), and enhances intersections of Effing's and Fogg's reminiscences. Overall, confessional narrative in *Moon Palace* — what I call 'America's memoirs' — shows that the self's journey begins in attempts to understand the truth of experience in America, and that its unending search is partly a negotiation for the hope of being present to the calls and visions of others.

A Glimpse of America: Blakelock's Therapy

It is worth noting that Effing's stress on capturing the singularity of each thing is associated with his painterly sensibility. During those outdoor sessions Fogg has discovered Effing's fondness for nature, but the latter's hesitant, oblique response to this discovery also suggests something deeper than a personal liking: 'All alone in the middle of nowhere, living in the wilderness for months, for months and months ... an entire lifetime. [...] I don't need to go anywhere. The moment I start to think about it, I'm back' (*MP*, 122). This ushers in an elaborate preamble to Effing's confession, first asking Fogg to read obituaries from *The New York Times* in their morning sessions for two weeks, then asking him to visit the Brooklyn Museum and see Ralph Albert Blakelock's *Moonlight*. We see here another dimension of Effing's gesture; it may have little to do with spontaneity, but it is not manipulation either. As said, his behaviour does not keep *anything* hidden; whether it reveals *something* is not his business but depends on the calibre of Fogg's insight. No longer uninitiated, Fogg is too alert to miss the signal. Of course he does not know exactly what lies ahead, but this is not the point. The point is that, in any case, he is mustering readiness by following Effing's move closely and engaging himself in their conversation. 'Effing was clearly up to something, but I was hard-pressed to imagine what it was,' he gathers, 'No doubt he was trying to confuse me, but at the same time these strategies were so transparent, it was as if he were telling me to be on my guard' (*MP*, 123). We may even venture the opinion that Effing wants Fogg to know the plan in his mind, except by announcing it to him — as though it were destined to be protected and destroyed by confusion in a single gesture. (Another question remains open: Is confession really his plan? Can't it simultaneously be subject to a whim?) In other words, Effing does not want to impose his important

¹⁰¹ Uchiyama's reading of *Moon Palace* is relevant here. Her Levinasian approach examines the issue of alterity, foregrounding its implications outside a dualism between the loss and the unity of identity. This helps to reevaluate certain ethical questions (for instance, one's responsibility before the death of the other) along with Auster's postmodernism. See Kanae Uchiyama, 'The Death of the Other: A Levinasian Reading of Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54.1 (2008), 115-39.

decision on Fogg's knowledge, turning him into a passive receiver of orders, let alone an indifferent co-writer of his memoir. Just as what we call things exist in their shifting environment, what we call intentions cannot be divorced from a continuous buildup of backgrounds, contexts and moods; Effing will not be ignorant of this, but his mentorship tends to pose challenges. Indeed, this buildup initially looks more discontinuous than continuous. After referring to his Paris years as a 'sham' (as discussed in the last chapter), the next day Effing switches abruptly to another topic related to a man named Ralph.

Rather than say anything about our previous conversation, he immediately rushed into a tangled and confusing discourse about a man he had apparently once known, rambling crazily from one thing to another, producing a whirlwind of fractured reminiscences that made no sense to me. I did my best to follow him, but it was as though he had already started without me, and by the time I walked in on him, it was too late to catch up.

(*MP*, 127)

Apparently it is due to this discontinuity that Fogg fails to catch Effing's drift. But the rub is that he does not know who Ralph is. This can be critical because Ralph Albert Blakelock and his painting *Moonlight*, as we shall see, count as the invisible core within Effing's confession, a key to its truth and earnestness. Hence, when Fogg admits that he knows nothing about Blakelock, when Effing replies that he cannot then go on talking to him, when Fogg feels powerless to retort, minutes of silence passes like 'an eternity' (*MP*, 129). The significance of this scene can be easily overlooked since we more or less have similar experiences in daily conversation, that is, 'when you are waiting for someone to speak'. However, the (ordinary) moment under discussion spells a serious crisis in their relationship. Fogg is aware of it and prepared to be fired. Reading Effing's drooping of his head as a sign that 'he couldn't stand it anymore', he might have projected his own emotion on to his employer. The thing at stake, that is, the worst thing that could have transpired is essentially not the end of employment but of conversation, as indicated by Effing's repeated word 'talk': 'It won't do. I can't go on talking to you if you don't know anything'. Fortunately, the stifling silence turns out to be a pregnant pause, which betokens a *turn* of conversion, not the end of it. Effing does not dismiss Fogg; instead he asks him to go to the Brooklyn Museum and finishes his instructions with this: 'Nothing else. But just remember: if you don't do exactly what I say, I'll never talk to you again' (*MP*, 132). What should further be noted is the way he delivers instructions (in the sense not only of order but of teaching), which demonstrates a painstaking attention to details, but which at the same time steers clear of comments. This is, I think, less because Effing is a soul of discretion and neutrality — his speech at times sounds rather polemical and fiery — than because the knowledge to be imparted is more than discursive. In other words, he does not teach Fogg what he knows or thinks about the painting; he provides him with the conditions under which to experience what he has

experienced. The potentially shareable experience does not exclude the possibility of thinking for oneself; on the contrary, the former necessitates the latter. In this regard, it calls for imagination, too:

Imagine what would happen to you if you couldn't see it [the world]. Imagine yourself looking at something under the various lights that make the world visible to us: sunlight, moonlight, electric light, candlelight, neon light. Make it a very simple and ordinary something. A stone, for example, or a small block of wood. Think carefully about how the appearance of that object changes when placed under these different lights.

(MP, 130)

Effing's words reveal an imaginative side of the mind that may be paradoxically implied in the descriptive method. We seldom note this; instead we tend to separate them, as we tend to separate the inner and the outer. It certainly has to do with our lack of reflection on such notions as imagination and experience. This harks back to the chapter on *Ghosts*. At an early point I referred to Auster's colour analogy and argued that imagining a change of cognitive conditions would compel us to reexamine the meaning of experience; as Effing puts it, 'Imagine what would happen to you if you couldn't see it'. Later I pointed out the importance of imagination and empathy in capturing certain context/spirit/character, because Blue, as a detective, does not so much misread Black's mind as repress his identification with this man (as well as with Thoreau) in solitude. What these arguments try to bring to light is this: experience does not *necessarily* translate into empirical evidence and conceptual knowledge. There is something you cannot understand unless you experience it; that is also to say, once you have experienced and understood it, you no longer *need* to rationalise or conceptualise or justify this understanding (of course a temptation to find some explanations may linger). The sense of Effing's words cited above comes home to Fogg as he closes his eyes on the train to the museum: 'Forcing myself to keep my eyes closed, I began to hunger for a glimpse of the world, and *in that hunger*, I *understood* that I was thinking about what it meant to be blind, which was precisely what Effing had wanted me to do' (MP, 132; my italics).

Then what can be said about description (as a method) along this line of thought? It seems to me that two versions of this method ultimately set *Moon Palace* apart from *Ghosts*. I mean the difference between Blue and Effing in their attitudes toward this method, which perhaps suggests different philosophies underlying their professions. In Blue's case imagination is doubtless set against description, and interiority against outward appearance. This corresponds to his presumption that Black is his epistemological object, whose behaviour can be brought under his empirical observation but whose mind cannot be so. Description, as the concluding part of this observation, helps to widen the gaps between mind and body, between his mind and Black's. As such, empathy seems beside the point, not least in the early stage of his investigation. Besides, Black submits to this process of objectifying himself; more precisely, he *needs* this objectification of his bodily existence

to counterbalance a sort of ghostly disembodiment induced by inner life, which boils down to Blue's factual description in the reports. In this light, both men (especially Black) confuse the *fact* of human separateness with an *obsession* with this separateness, which indeed discloses a 'fear' of 'inexpressiveness', one in which, as Cavell notes, 'I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known' (CR, 351).¹⁰² It is as though my powerlessness to make myself known could in turn justify my power to make the facts about myself known. Yet this does not bring me relief but suffocation. As it turns out, Black's fate is sealed in a fantasy of the impersonal testimony to plain facts, which, as he demands, must not come from Blue (namely, a person) but from the fatally transparent words.

Contrariwise, Effing's approach, in response to the responses of his interlocutor, to a situation in which this interlocutor should not be deserted, resembles the one acquired by Fogg in those outdoor sessions. This is particularly true in the sense that in both cases the self is urged to answer the world and others at one and the same time, in an imaginative yet precise way. That Effing wants Fogg to go over what is learned from him (say, how to look closely at ordinary things), to feel what he feels in darkness, can be viewed as a unique introduction to Blakelock's painting. In other words, Fogg needs to experience the loss of *sight* in order to understand one's *vision* of the world; after he gets off the train and reopens his eyes, the first important thing he will see is *Moonlight*. When Effing's descriptive instructions help to substantiate the conditions of experience (not, however, experience itself), they gesture Fogg towards a vision that *can* be his and/or Blakelock's. But this gesture, like a deeply embedded intention, will not effect anything without Fogg's wish to answer in the first place. This is certainly not the case with *Ghosts*, where answerability is generally precluded, albeit unstoppable in its distorted form of silent parallelism. It may not even be the case with *Leviathan*, from which we begin to perceive another facet of Auster's preoccupation with writing and solitude, that is, a transcendentalist individuation and nonconformism. To be more specific, in that novel the call of the world, which is synonymous with 'America', with Sachs's writing about it, sets in motion a series of changes of this individual and, to repeat what I said, how he conceives his relationship with others (say, Dimaggio and Lillian) is more or less a function of how he conceives his relationship with himself. Granted, this attests to a potential of radical self-transformation that, tethered to the individual, nevertheless reaches beyond the individual, but it cannot guarantee his voice heard and appreciated; whereas in *Moon Palace* hearing the other's voice is, from the very outset, an essential part of this call (of the world). Or, echoing Cavell, we can associate this

¹⁰² According to Cavell, this fear can also be 'one in which what I express is beyond my control' (CR, 351). The second possibility pertains less to *Ghosts* than to *Moon Palace*, namely, Effing's confession; yet I shall argue that with both Effing and Fogg the sentiment is not exactly fear but a Cavellian sense of 'abandonment to my words' (PP, 126), which is associated with Moral Perfectionism.

difference with a fine line between ‘an unspoken attunement of moral perception’ and the sense of its absence.¹⁰³ In want of attunement, Sachs’s world is fragile. While this does not mean that Fogg’s and Effing’s world is any less so, it still reveals more about involvement than about confrontation. From this perspective, a *belated* knowledge of kinship (not only Fogg’s knowledge but also his father’s and grandfather’s) only amplifies and allegorises the truth of one’s latent involvement in a shareable moral space, whose seemingly incredible drama should not be dismissed as out of place in the so-called ‘real life’ (a point the detractors of Auster always return to). To be sure, this involvement does not imply that endeavours cease to make a difference; nor is this moral space set in a complete and stable state. An involvement is latent not only in the sense that one’s experience of it precedes one’s knowledge of it but, further, that it *needs to be* brought into consciousness, to be shaped and reshaped through changes, including both efforts and accidents. And a moral space is shareable in the sense that it *can possibly be* unshared; for instance, suppose Effing refuses to resume his talk with Fogg. As expressed in the previous chapter, the descriptive method in *Moon Palace* marks the first step in one’s reception of a gesture from the other; it does not function as the basis undergirding an epistemic subject but essentially exposes that subject to that which slips through his/her fingers, dissolving, time and again, the boundary between inner and outer. Let us recall the image of the hand in Cavell’s linking Kant, Emerson, and Heidegger, a point briefly mentioned in the second chapter. ‘The reverse of the unhandsome in our condition, of Emerson’s clutching, and Heidegger’s grasping’ (*CHU*, 41) points to ‘reception’, which emerges against the backdrop of ‘the Kantian idea that knowledge is active, and sensuous intuition alone passive or receptive’ (*CHU*, 39).

To further understand how reception (or intuition) develops in Fogg’s education (or tuition), most importantly, as regards his encounter with *Moonlight*, I would like to incorporate the Cavellian ethics of interpretation. At some point Cavell hopes to stress the therapeutic effect of reading, as contained in ‘Thoreau’s picture of reading by exposure to being read’; this strikes one as psychoanalytic.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, he does not neglect the autonomy of the text, which seems to counterbalance a psychoanalytic model (say, projection) that tends to be lopsided. We come across a tricky issue here. Cavell observes that ‘psychoanalytic interpretations of texts have seemed typically to tell us something we more or less already knew, to leave us pretty much where we were before we

¹⁰³ See *Cities of Words*, p. 381. While the phrase is excerpted from his discussion of Leo McCarey’s film *The Awful Truth*, ‘attunement’, as a Cavellian expression, also appears elsewhere (for instance, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, p. 119). In the original context Cavell speaks of attunement (and its loss) in terms of the couple, Jerry and Lucy, in the film, but I think his formulation can somehow apply to the cases in *Moon Palace*. Additionally, Lucy’s ‘sisterly intimacy’ (p. 382) with Jerry, played out in the family party held by his fiancée, points interestingly to a figurative sense of kinship, which is explored in *Moon Palace*. The grandfather-father-son relationship is, of course, the focal point, but this implication also arises from the moment when Fogg is dubbed Kitty’s ‘twin brother’ (*MP*, 34).

¹⁰⁴ See Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 52; hereafter, *TOS*.

read'. His observation, I think, reveals at once the values and pitfalls in developing a psychoanalytic perspective on reading, the latter of which lie in (1) a total subjection of a text to its reader, as if the textual merely served to decode or reflect an *original* psychic state, and (2) a fuzzy idea about that 'before'. When touching upon what he terms 'the paradox of reading', Cavell suggests two directions in clearing up the matter.

I was just saying in effect that you cannot understand a text before you know what the text says about itself; but obviously you cannot understand what the text says about it before you understand the text. One way of investigating this is to ask whether "before" bears meaning in this formulation, and if not, whether there is a paradox here. Another is to say that what you really want to know is what a text knows about itself, because you cannot know more than it does about this; and then to ask what the fantasy is of the text's knowledge of itself.

(TOS, 53)

The two points, considered together, insinuate an inexplicable interaction between the reader and the text. That is, when encountering a text as an event, the reader's psyche is not, strictly speaking, exposed in its original state, because any (latent) knowledge preceding one's reading is *something one can never grasp in entirety*. As such, does reading evoke something old or generate something new, awaken something that already resides in one's mind or import 'what a text knows about itself'? It seems to me that if 'the text's knowledge of itself' is a fantasy it nonetheless speaks the truth about our dim, intuitive awareness of the self's insufficiency (of knowledge); and the autonomy of the text, in a Cavellian light, bespeaks not so much its self-knowledge as one's anxiety about the individual capacity for knowing what the text says to him/her, as well as knowing what it says to others (other minds). It is unlikely that the self is able to overcome this anxiety at a stroke; perhaps still impossible after numerous attempts. If that is the case, then the anxiety about insufficiency is not able to weaken the self at a stroke either. Cavell would say that neither side can win. In a therapeutic vein, the message will be that our anxiety is not to be overcome — it is invincible — but to be alleviated.

The Cavellian message comes to the fore here mainly because it reminds me of *Moonlight* — apropos of its therapeutic potential and how it enables empathy to ripple through interpersonal relationships. By saying 'potential' I mean that there is nothing intrinsically therapeutic about this work (or, for some, this text), that the potential is an *effect* of the encounter between substantial (real) and insubstantial (imaginary). Only when the viewer, as a patient, finds him/her 'in the gaze or hearing of the text' (TOS, 52), that is, when this process evokes something that has been long forgotten (perhaps repressed) without ever being reflected upon, does that potential emerge. It is why for Cavell the mechanism of transference is a way of approaching the text. Most notably, in many cases, to discover the therapeutic secret of a work one has first to subject oneself to the secret of its

autonomy, that is, to let oneself be seized by it. From this perspective, Effing's instructions — 'Look at the painting for no less than an hour, ignoring everything else in the room. Concentrate. Look at it from various distances [...] Study it for its overall composition, study it for its details' (*MP*, 131) — can be read this way: the work demands absolute alertness, which *should* be sustained so that it *may* convey something you *would* miss with readymade presumptions. At first blush the requirement is almost the same as that for studying things, but it continues: 'See if you can't begin to enter the landscape before you. See if you can't begin to enter the mind of the artist who painted the landscape before you. Imagine that you are Blakelock, painting the picture yourself'. Is Effing telling Fogg to turn the work into something he can simply derive knowledge from, or otherwise to read what he knows into Blakelock's mind? Certainly not. If reading is simultaneously being read, then it is Fogg's mind that is exposed to Blakelock's vision, not the other way round. The possibility of 'enter[ing] the landscape' and 'the mind of the artist who painted the landscape' hinges on the extent of this exposure. And Fogg redoubles it by translating the world of *Moonlight* into words, as a way of responding to that world, now created between Blakelock and him. This is, however, not to embrace it with nostalgia but to test himself: How much can he remember and render? How far can he repeat and release a dreamscape, understanding that it has never existed, that in its place stands the appalling reality of divisions, conflicts, and massacres? It seems that disillusion — not to mention that the painter of this 'American idyll' went mad — is bound to be the only alternative to nostalgia. But can this, and this only, be the paramount implication worthy of attention? Does *Moonlight*, in the name of art, only buttress a discourse of disillusion? Antecedent to the modernist, avant-garde line, which Effing deems as 'intellectual art', 'a dead end' (*MP*, 145), the aura of the work depends on its very appearance characteristic of figurative art. Meanwhile, deviating from mainstream romanticism, Blakelock's vision does not look exuberantly assertive but comes through slowly, modest in scale and, 'at first glance', 'almost devoid of color' (*MP*, 133). In other words, *Moonlight*'s singularity emanates from an appearance that neither lavishes its charm to airbrush the real nor overtly ironises its own illusory quality. A 'deeply contemplative work', it has a well-wrought appearance because that is, paradoxically, the only gateway to an overwrought mind. Consequently, the mood produced by Fogg's viewing, as conveyed to us by his meticulous, tentative delineation, is immensely complex — sober, calm, but also intense. Like Thoreau's morning star ('The sun is but a morning star.'), Blakelock's moon is on a par with the sun. Different from the sun, the moon glows in the dark, illuminating its surrounds. Averting his eyes from the obscure foreground, Fogg is struck by the bright sky, the shimmering lake, and the far horizon. The longer he stays with the landscape, the more peculiar its luminosity becomes, which almost blurs the boundary

between earth and heaven. This cannot be ‘actual’ (*MP*, 135); as Fogg suggests, the work is a ‘memorial’, a ‘death song’ for a world that has not even been born. He is measured and cautious in handling his suggestions so as not to make them sound like verdicts on the work, the man behind the work, and the idea of a world behind the man. It may be because he knows he is not in a superior position. That is, he is not a judge but an accomplice. The word seems strong, but, considering his Central Park episode ‘from a political perspective’ (*MP*, 60), it does not come from nowhere. ‘I was an instrument of sabotage, I told myself, a loose part in the national machine, a misfit whose job was to gum up the works’ (*MP*, 60). His claim echoes Thoreau’s: ‘A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight’ (*WCD*, 26). Then Thoreau’s rhetorical question — ‘Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded?’ — is addressed to those who, like him, ‘see this blood flowing now’ (*WCD*, 27). Sachs and Fogg are, as it were, among those addressees. The former goes to prison, the latter strays into Central Park. This is not simply a confrontation with a political constitution that goes awry. A deep wound is found, as Cavell understands Thoreau to mean, in ‘what permits this constitution in our souls’ (*TOS*, 54). Because the wound is deep within conscience, one cannot easily detect it in such works as *Walden* and *Moonlight*. To see it requires an entrance as well as a turn. Put differently, one should inquire into one’s relation with the landscape, not yet clear about what specific implications it carries but certain that there must be some. That is why Fogg is stirred by something profound, something he at the moment is not quite able to fathom: ‘I wasn’t sure if I had discovered what Effing thought I would, but [...] I felt that I had discovered something, even if I didn’t know what it was’ (*MP*, 135). Disillusion cannot answer the question why we are drawn to that which we will lose — hence why we are bound to suffer loss. Nor can it bring us face to face with that question without extinguishing our hope for changing realities (most importantly, ourselves). To expose ourselves to the illusory, to make ourselves present to that work of dream, is part of the therapy the work can provide. And therapy is, according to Cavell, part of change (*TOS*, 53). Therefore, instead of dwelling on disillusion, he holds that ‘mourning is the only alternative to our nostalgia, in which we will otherwise despair and die’ (*TOS*, 54). If ‘morning (as dawning)’ in *Walden* bears on ‘mourning (as grieving)’ (*TOS*, 53), then, when associating the moon with a memorial for ‘a vanished world’ (*MP*, 135), we should not forget that this memorial is built to remind *each of us*, at present and in the future. (It is also one way of reading the oracular message Fogg receives: ‘The sun is the past, the earth is the present, the moon is the future’ [*MP*, 94]).

Is this what *Moonlight* says to Effing, what evokes his experience in the desert whenever that landscape appears in his mind’s eye? And is this what he wishes Fogg would discover by himself?

We do not know if that is the case, because, though offering his instructions with great care, he never again even mentions the painting. Effing's behaviour seems odd enough but, once again, tallies with his (un)usual gesture. Cavell speaks of something similar in *The Claim of Reason*: 'I may not want to deprive you of the knowledge — not just deprive you of the pleasures of discovery, but of the pure knowledge itself, for if I tell you then my act itself gets mixed up in your knowledge' (*CR*, 359). One would do so when attunement becomes extremely crucial and vulnerable, say, in friendship and marriage. As we have seen, such critical moments recur in intersubjectivity as long as an ethical prospect of sympathy and communion does not die away (not to mention that the idea of communion, given Fogg's interpretation of *Moonlight*, includes one between man and nature). Hence, rather than averring that Effing's gesture signals the limits of knowledge, we should consider whether it *also* inspires a feeling of approaching some vague idea that cannot be established on reasoning but on one's dormant reserve of experience. As an Emersonian 'passing from Intuition to Tuition' (*CHU*, 36) suggests, that which 'remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life' is likely to be transfigured. From this perspective, a purely intellectual discussion of *Moonlight* cannot provide enough sustenance for this transfiguration; it may seem lukewarm or even superfluous to Effing, for whom no proper forms other than confession can explore the interweaving of self, world and creation as his own works can no longer be retrieved from that remote desert in memory. On the whole, the writing of *Moon Palace* shows that a further understanding of what *Moonlight* expresses, as well as the unspoken fellowship engendered by this understanding, largely depends on a co-working of confession and conversation.

Confession in Straits: America's Memoirs (I)

Regarding the issue of confession and memoir, two focal points deserve our attention, which have already been broached in the preceding chapter. One concerns sincerity, the other autobiographising. Indeed, reading *Moon Palace* invokes, to my mind, a Cavellian picture of recounting. That is, the recounting of one's experiences has his/her words bound — not fixed; not once and for all — to a succession of worlds he/she and others inherit, inhabit, envisage, and sometimes feel depressed or even haunted by. This pertains to a confessional process of telling *one's* story. Yet one's story or confessional narrative is not necessarily *private* (if the word 'private' connotes 'exclusive'). More to the point, confession, as I understand it in Auster and in Cavell, suggests a personal expression of existence that is more philosophical than religious in nature. As Cavell observes, 'those capable of the deepest personal confession [...] were most convinced they were speaking from the most hidden knowledge of others' (*CR*, 109). It seems that this 'conviction' has more implications: If one's inner

life is not absolutely exclusive to oneself, it by no means entails that privacy does not exist. It rather means that one may express more — quite often not something plainly informational — than he/she thinks his/her confession achieves; this undoubtedly requires an attentive and receptive listener. Or it means that one wants to try different ways of expressing something that is not yet fully clear to oneself; then confession amounts to a creative process of translation that engages with the listener.

Still, we have to take into account the problem that has already occurred: What if one finds oneself incapable of keeping that ‘conviction’, which is after all constantly in peril? ‘What happens if this conviction slackens?’ as Cavell continues to ask, ‘What happens if all you want to do is talk, and words fail you?’ (*CR*, 110). No one can provide a definitive answer. In Auster’s work we encounter various situations that explore the problem and generate either parallels or contrasts. Let us recall the scene in *Leviathan* when Sachs attempts to make sense of the fall and to render his thoughts as intelligible as possible. Try as he may, it is obvious that his interlocutor, Aaron, does not fully understand why he is so exacting in pursuing an exact self-revelation. As mentioned, Aaron in fact *perceives* a morally perfectionist side of his friend, but this is still a step away from *understanding* it. Go back to *Moon Palace*. There is an early scene reminiscent of this disproportion between efforts and effects in human communication, only this time it is completely ‘a horrible botch’ (*MP*, 78). When talking to the psychiatrist on the day of his physical, Fogg ‘felt an overpowering urge’ to ‘pour out’ his story to this ‘stranger’, which was so irresistible that words no longer seemed to be controlled by him, that he felt as if he ‘was listening to someone else’ (*MP*, 77). More strikingly, the psychiatrist’s growing bafflement and unease did not discourage him but rather provoked him into further explanation. The rationale behind this desperate effort, if that could be called rationale at all, is a visceral fear that ‘my *humanity* was *somehow* at stake’ (my italics). As Fogg thought to himself, ‘It didn’t matter he was an army doctor; he was also a human being, and nothing was more important than getting through to him’ (*MP*, 77-78). The irony is that Fogg’s ‘increasingly awkward and abstract’ language only proved to his listener that he was ‘an authentically hopeless case’ (*MP*, 78), say, a neurotic. And we know that the irony could have been kept at bay by refraining from exerting himself, that is, from talking, from being earnest. Then we further realise how acute the aforementioned disproportion can be: a sincere and strenuous effort to secure his humanity becomes, from the doctor’s point of view, an unmistakable sign of malady in that humanity. Indeed it is a malady, but not in Fogg’s humanity. In other words, the malady resides in one’s failure to acknowledging another’s humanity, not in the humanity that calls for acknowledgement. Notably, I do not mean to single out the doctor for censure; nor do I think Fogg’s narrative does so. What its moral sentiment accentuates is anxiety instead of reprehension. If there is

any trace of chagrin in Fogg's anxiety, it is caused more by failing to 'get through to him' than by being clinically labelled 'a hopeless case'.

In the above examples one's conviction is, strictly speaking, merely a passive as well as active movement toward that conviction. It is important to note that anxiety is constitutive of this movement because one's conviction has not yet been answered by another, has not yet aroused compassion. Hence what one initially holds is not yet conviction as such but, at its best, a hope that can only live on exertion (and abandonment) instead of reward (and calculation). Here we need to take a look at how Fogg accounts for his humanity as well as take on life, namely, his self-exile as well as soul-searching in the midst of inner turmoil, personal adversity, and social unrest.

It wasn't because I wanted to kill myself — you mustn't think that — but because I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself. The point was to accept things as they were, to drift along with the flow of the universe. I'm not saying that I managed to do this very well. I failed miserably, in fact. But failure doesn't vitiate the sincerity of the attempt. If I came close to dying, I nevertheless believe that I'm a better person for it.

(MP, 78)

Is this difficult to understand? I mean not only hearing every word he says but also knowing that these words are uttered by a human being who struggles to convey meaning through a recounting of the expressible and the inexpressible, and who risks being dismissed as talking nonsense. Even Zimmer, Fogg's friend, believes that what he has done to himself 'grotesque', 'asinine', and 'unhinged' (MP, 71). Of course Fogg never once, at least to our knowledge, talks to him the way he talks to the doctor. Maybe risking friendship would be too high a price to pay. Maybe, as he sometimes expresses, he feels repentant for his 'excesses of self-involvement'. This guilty feeling dominated his mind particularly in the early days after he was saved by Zimmer and Kitty. But, just as maintained in his words cited above, consigning himself to whatever comes his way is not deliberately suicidal. Then what can we make of Fogg's ambivalent attitude towards this experience? Is it possible to pass judgement on it? This is worth a moment of reflection because a true listener — who knows what has happened to Fogg (of course through his confessional narrative) and who has the feeling that he is on the verge of expressing something deep and heartfelt — would not be satisfied with either the doctor's or Zimmer's assessment. And we may wonder whether a part of the job of discovering this something has already been shifted to the listener. Thus, as a listener, I would like to advance a further argument: the question is not only whether we can pass judgement but whether we should at the moment. The truth is that Fogg's solitary search for the meaning of existence was then outweighed by his concern for the feelings of others (Zimmer and Kitty), mainly their solicitude for him. To be sure, the latter does not necessarily stand in the way of his soul-

searching, but it seems to me problematic that he in turn became ‘desperate for a certainty’ and ‘tired’ of the self and thoughts that had exploded in vagrancy (*MP*, 71). This let him not so much straighten out that mishmash of humiliations, ecstasies and agonies as leave it untended in the dark recesses of his mind. Granted, Fogg needs time to heal, to recuperate from physical and mental exhaustion, but the therapy is not to suddenly veer away from his previous course as though it were nothing but an error. There is more to be reckoned with and acknowledged, which emerges only when he feels uninhibited in talking or, more exactly, stammering: ‘failure doesn’t vitiate the sincerity of the attempt’. What is essential, what counts, is not ‘some secret harmony’ *per se* but one’s striving for it. Even if this striving does not let one see an idea in the round, it nonetheless lets him/her form a self that has been approaching that idea. Does it imply that, whatever the idea, it waits to be shaped through the act of pursuit? In this light, failure by no means negates previous efforts; it is a step toward the truth of them as well as a testament to existence. And new efforts to review and recount past experiences are the continuation as well as renewal of those efforts, where the true therapy lies. It is worth noting that this continuation does not materialise until Fogg meets Effing, who too has to recount the past in the present, to test the meaning of his expression with another’s understanding, to expose the awesome to the awful, and to risk epistemic authority in the whirlpool of affect.

Therefore, the end of Fogg’s experience in Central Park does not mean the end of its senses; one might even say that is the beginning of them. If we read his encounters with Blakelock and Effing in this spirit, we can see why Blakelock’s work has a therapeutic effect on him. Its portrayal of shacks, woods and the moon brings back every memory of his half impulsive, half determined act of pushing the envelope of existence in a New York park that seems disjoined from the New York he has been familiar with (*MP*, 136). Moreover, he is offered a chance to rediscover the secret of harmony that once preoccupied him, which now intersects with another man’s quasi-mythological vision of what might be called, in a Cavellian sense, ‘the experience of America’ (*PP*, 122). As long as America is ‘new yet unapproachable’, both this experience and its sublime rendering can but epitomise ‘the incessant mismatch of concept and appearance’ (*PP*, 122). This is precisely the point of Fogg’s rediscovery: one’s relation to harmony — as crucial to the ‘America’ in *Moon Palace* as freedom to the ‘America’ in *Leviathan* — ought to be built in discovery and revisited in mourning. Beyond that no one, in face of the impossibility of identifying ideals with *this* world, is likely to recover from despair and madness.

Death and Voice: America's Memoirs (II)

Let us look at how the (re)discovery of America is played out in Effing's memoir; it can pave the way for our later understanding of why confession would act upon the psyches of both the speaker and the listener. First of all, an attraction to balance, harmony and communion (between man and nature, between inner and outer) is intimated in its early part. The night before Effing, together with his friend Byrne and the guide Scoresby, set out for the desert, Byrne, showing his surveying equipment, told him that 'you can't fix your exact position on the earth without referring to some point in the sky' (*MP*, 149). This idea appealed to him, for it suggested that 'A man can't know where he is on the earth except in relation to the moon or a star. [...] We find ourselves only by looking to what we're not. You can't put your feet on the ground until you've touched the sky' (*MP*, 149-50). Given the context of sweeping modernisation in the early twentieth century, Effing's statement is, arguably, tinged with technological utopianism. In fact he was once greatly fascinated by technological inventions, especially those of Nikola Tesla's. This is one part of the story he does not downplay, no matter how critical he is in his later life of its repercussions. Indeed, it perhaps even seems hypocritical to downplay it because few can totally cut ties with the ethos of his/her own age. What is of greater import is the chance of reassessing and even questioning them; so comes another part of the story that began when the seventeen-year-old Effing met Tesla's eyes. The 'taste of mortality' — 'I understood that I was not going to live forever' — set him thinking what he wanted to do with his own life (*MP*, 142). It led to a premonition of becoming a painter: 'Tesla gave me my death, and at that moment I knew that I was going to become a painter.' Does art have something to do with death or, rather, with life? One thing is for sure: a dawning sense of death opened his eyes to life and science directed him towards art. Another thing is that that premonition, or question, would not come home to him until death literally befell Byrne and brushed past him. The tragic incident stands in sharp contrast to the balanced, almost lofty picture painted before the journey — a drastic turn that recalls Dwight's death in *Leviathan*. Both incidents unfurl next to the representation of ideals that are, in one way (the cosmic vision cited above) or another (the ordinary exchange between Dwight and Sachs), embedded in American life and landscape. Still, the details of each help reveal more than that, particularly in terms of the parts played by Effing and Sachs. The abrupt shooting of Dwight by Dimaggio does not allow Sachs much leeway, forcing him to react violently. Put otherwise, what he confronts *at that moment* is a life-or-death situation in which an instinct to stop the killing *instantaneously* leads to the death of the killer. No doubt, this horrendous nature of the event is bound to compromise any man of integrity. Compared with that, what Effing does following Byrne's injury is more about saving (though, with the ensuing death of his young

friend, the upshot is almost the same). One may object that the situation Effing faces is not as urgent as the crisis described above. Or one may add that Byrne's injury is an accident, namely, not a result of malice or mania. However, an accident occurring in the desert is no less harrowing than a murder; and it does escalate into an ethical crisis, as well as a matter of life or death, when Scoresby points his pistol at Effing. The former takes it for granted that 'the only cure' in such cases as Byrne's is to end his life at once, while the 'immediate attention' in latter's mind is medical treatment (*MP*, 154). For most of us it might not be very difficult to form the opinion that Effing's medical box *should* be chosen over Scoresby's pistol. But, on second thoughts, do we really know what that means? What I am suggesting, most importantly, is the awareness that this moral choice is unconditional. That is to say, Effing does not save Byrne because he is savable. If that needs to be weighed *before* action is taken, then Scoresby's option will sound justifiable since his is right in concluding that Byrne is far from savable. We can get the point from the following dialogue between the two men: 'You could be stuck down here for a week before he finally croaks, and what's the point of that? He's my responsibility, I said. *That's all there is to it.* He's my responsibility, and I'm not going to leave him' (*MP*, 155; my italics).

Thus the kind of saving in question, as exemplified by Effing, is risking one's own life in order to save the other that is almost bound to die. It does not concern one's power to do so, any more than it concerns rewards for doing so. Effing knows 'it was hopeless' (*MP*, 157); at the same time, as long as Byrne remains alive, he will not give up hope. How can that be logical? How can a hopeless situation not extinguish one's hope? Let us rephrase the question: How can the adverse condition elicit an unconditional demand for responsibility? It may be said that this demand is excessive, also pointless in Scoresby's eyes, but the excess precisely comes with a finite being who, when deeply affected by another's suffering, feels at once insufficient and open to a certain relation to that separate being. That is why, when it comes to the responsibility for the other, the demand is not based on reasoning (for instance, weighing benefits against risks, will against ability) or at least remains a paradox — 'the excess of lack'. That is, in Blanchot's expression, 'Man: an insufficient being with excess as his horizon' (*UC*, 8); or, to recall Cavell's words, 'the finite creature burdened by the desire of the infinite' (quoted in the previous chapter).

'What, then, calls me into question most radically?' asks Blanchot. 'Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying' (*UC*, 9). This is more or less the situation Effing faces, for almost three or four days. On the one hand, as he tells Fogg, tending Byrne keeps himself busy; 'even guilt was a comfort', 'a human feeling' that had him 'attached to the same world that other men lived in' (*MP*,

157). On the other hand, there is something more fundamental about the connection of Byrne, him and this world, which grows to the utmost exactly when the connection is being slowly erased in the desert, where time fades and silence prevails ('That's what the silence does to you, Fogg, it obliterates everything' [MP, 156]). Byrne is dying alone, Effing is saving him alone, and the world seems to be nothing but an empty space. It looks as if they all fell apart. Yet a dying man's babble — 'a delirium of incomprehensible words, sounds that never quite became words' (MP, 157) — is that which one should respond to, because, if that man can neither move nor open his eyes, babble might be the most noticeable sign of his lingering in this world. And answering it, even without making much sense, might be the only means of sharing his solitude.

He seemed to be separated from me by a thin veil, an invisible membrane that kept him on the other side of this world. I tried to encourage him with the sound of my voice, I talked to him constantly, I sang song to him, praying that something would finally get through to him and wake him up.

(MP, 157)

The human voice best represents Effing's responsibility, because it issues from a body while remaining disembodied, relates to a self while not completely belonging to it. As I said, the responsibility for the other is supposed to open oneself in the midst of human separateness; or, it could only be self-serving. In this respect, Effing's voice both presents and effaces his self, subjecting it to the event of approaching the dying other, of passing through the 'thin veil' between them. It is true that this voice does not eventually wake up Byrne, but, just as sounds are momentary, so is the openness of an ethico-ontological relation. No one can hold on to it in the event of dying. The ultimate separation waiting ahead always looks more devastating than the separation of living beings. It means the end of a young life, the end of hope, the end of any possibility; it means even *this* separation will not repeat itself. 'A man alive, who sees a fellow-man die, can survive only *beside himself*' (UC, 9). When Blanchot quotes the sentence from Bataille, he discerns how the event can affect the living person, with an immediate effect of putting that person beside himself. After burying Byrne, Effing, in his own words, just let himself be crazy (MP, 158). Fogg wonders how literally he should take that word (MP, 161). That said, he is not totally unfamiliar with that state of mind. It brings him back to the stormy night in Central Park, during which he snapped and made 'bombastic exhortations against God and country' (MP, 65). More pertinent are two deathbed scenes — Effing's and Barber's — in the later part of *Moon Palace*, which will deepen his own understanding of facing others' deaths. As he says to Rabbi Green after Barber's death, 'every death is unique' (MP, 292); accordingly, the expression of one's relation to every death is unique, too. In the case of Effing's death, Fogg's company rehearses the themes of description and voice, locating

them in the ‘realm of ordinary miracles’ (*MP*, 214). To put things into words for another man, to help him experience them again — it is not the first time Fogg has done so. Nonetheless, it will be the last time, since that man is on the verge of death, in which case it seems that ‘merely to take one’s place in the world of things was a good beyond all others’. Fogg hopes that this supreme good he strives to embody in sounds and words will keep Effing alive, even though it occurs to him that he ‘was probably talking into a void’. *Perhaps*, illusions at this point are not without merit, as long as they serve a purpose other than vanity. The same is true of Effing’s wishes to control his date of death, to show Fogg he is capable of achieving ‘harmony’ between them (*MP*, 212). *Perhaps*, in a sense all these wishes are more than illusions or not illusions through and through: Effing might not have been able to make it to the twelfth but for Fogg’s company. Nor is it necessary to *achieve* harmony during the last few weeks, to, as it were, make reconciliation, because harmony (or attunement) has *already happened* in those episodes of taking walks, working on Effing’s memoir, handing out money to strangers, and so on.

The Experience of the Cave: America’s Memoirs (III)

It is fortunate that Fogg is ‘the first person’ to hear Effing’s confession (*MP*, 158). What happens to him in his conversation with the doctor will not happen during Effing’s recountings of Byrne’s death as well as of his experience in the hermit’s cave. In turn, if Fogg told his own ‘preposterous’ story to Effing, the latter, as the former knew it in his bones, ‘would have believed every word’ he said (*MP*, 179). Does it signify a restoration of Fogg’s conviction in the potential shareability of human understanding? Instead of resting upon an affirmative or a negative, I suggest we consider the *conditions* of that restoration. Generally speaking, the listener’s genuine response to the speaker cannot be forced but only, as a gift, be received. In one sense, this means, as I said earlier, that the speaker’s conviction is now constantly in peril, because the formerly valid grounds, religious or metaphysical, have been undercut. In another sense, it leaves room for the play of chance, so the coming of solidarity becomes less predictable, sometimes even like a stroke of luck or fortune. (Here the word ‘fortune’ definitely conveys a double meaning if we recall the episode of giving out money to anonymous New Yorkers, from which the possibility of ecstasy emerges.) Of course this does not entail that one should just remain apathetic and passive in waiting. Care alone does not bring about the gift of understanding, but without care one will not even be aware of chance(s) or realise that it has been missed. In other words, if a bond of sympathy *between* individuals comes like a gift, it nevertheless demands something of *each* individual, which can be the speaker’s movement towards conviction or the listener’s movement towards acknowledgement. Both underlie a process of

comporting oneself in relation to a moral space that is latent, hence at once inexhaustible and fragile. From this standpoint, the core of confession is neither an exhibition of outward facts about oneself nor a possession of some inner knowledge exclusive to oneself — a moral space is not determined by outward facts; nor can it be discovered in total isolation. Accordingly, hearing another's confession is an act that responds not only to what he/she says but also to the way in which he/she expresses it. And if the speaker's words appeal to the listener, it is not (mainly) because they are supported by factual evidence but because the listener gets tuned in to their meaning and tone. This is not to say that factual evidence should be discarded; the point is that evidence alone cannot fully embody the truth of confession, which from the very beginning pivots on genuine expression rather than verification. We have already looked into the question of sincerity, its unfathomability. What seems to me most slippery is that sincerity resides neither wholly in the empirical/descriptive realm nor in the rational/prescriptive realm. That is, it can neither simply be deduced from empirical evidence nor be ascertained through pure reason. As such, an overemphasis on verification may act as a treacherous distraction or, worse, conceal the fact that the listener cannot and will not understand what the speaker means, that one cannot and will not hear another's voice. If this is the crux, then it becomes all the more important to see how a shared moral space is gradually opened up in the communication between Effing and Fogg, where the truth of confession helps to suspend the source of doubt about someone's sincerity:

[H]e burrowed through his story with inexhaustible care, leaving nothing out, backtracking to fill in minor details, dwelling on the smallest nuances in an effort to recapture his past. After a while, I stopped wondering whether he was telling me the truth or not. [...] there were times when he did not seem to be remembering the outward facts of his life so much as inventing a parable to explain its inner meanings. The hermit's cave, the saddlebags of money, the Wild West shootout — it was all so farfetched, and yet the very outrageousness of the story was probably its most convincing element. It did not seem possible that anyone could have made it up, and Effing told it so well, with such palpable *sincerity*, that I simply let myself go along with it, *refusing to question whether these things had happened or not*. [...] I could not help thinking of him as a kindred spirit. Perhaps it started when we got to the episode about the cave. I had my own memories of living in a cave, after all, and when he described the loneliness he had felt then, it struck me that *he was somehow describing the same thing I had felt*.

(MP, 178-79; my italics)

Most people would ask: Is Effing telling the truth? However, as Fogg becomes engrossed in Effing's story the possibility of asking that question seems *to him* suspended, not because truth is no longer of any concern, but because a new light is cast upon the very idea of truth. Of course some, like the editor of *Art World Monthly*, may still wonder whether Effing's account is accurate and provable, and find evidence inadequate or *never* adequate. This betrays their lack of interest in his confession, and/or their strong interest in a rigid picture of reality. Put otherwise, the truth of confession does not consist in a seamless correspondence to an external reality, as if this alone could be transmitted and

agreed upon. A wrong question usually blinds us to the real issue: Reality is shareable not because it can be fixed by hard evidence but essentially because it has to be tethered to a self and derived from it. Then sincerity can be found nowhere but in a fluid reality, over which a logic of response, instead of correspondence, presides. What is factual is subject to verification; what is genuine calls for understanding. It is why Effing is keen to evoke a fleeting world of phenomena and thoughts; it is also why, even if Fogg cannot verify Effing's story, he finds himself responding to the latter's vivid account, whose emotional as well as ethical appeal emanates from a painstaking reconstitution of past experiences. They are not only Effing's experiences; Fogg's own recollections are at the same time triggered and brought into play in a universe where the alternating possibilities of balance and unbalance, peace and restlessness, self-discipline and derangement converge. One either enters that universe or denies its existence; consequently either everything or nothing in the world changes.

Therefore, Effing's sincerity would not be able to get over without Fogg's attentiveness and compassion. Further, only by being attentive and compassionate can Fogg discern that, when they move on to the Europe episode, 'the manner of his [Effing's] telling began to change, to lose the *precision* and *earnestness* of the earlier episodes' (*MP*, 186; my italics). An experience of America is the one and only thing Effing wants to confess and autobiographise, so his memoir in a sense ends on the day of leaving America. After that nothing, as it were, happened. A bare chronology of events, some obvious contradictions and digressions, a cursory suggestion about condensing the last thirty years into one or two sentences, these indicate that life without true existence has lost meaning for him. That existence is bound up with the hermit's cave, where genuine experience leads to genuine art. Yet art as conventionally understood is not the aim of Effing's experience. It is simply impossible to commit oneself to artistic creation after a profound exposure to a fellow-man's death. This is not to say that creation becomes impossible. The landscape of the West remains an enigmatic source of inspiration, but the man inspired by it is no longer the same landscape painter. Before the tragedy he was an artist and auteur; after it he is simultaneously his work or, at least, part of it.

The true purpose of art was not to create beautiful objects, he discovered. It was a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an incidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things. He untaught himself the rules he had learned, trusting in the landscape as an equal partner, voluntarily abandoning his intentions to the assaults of chance, of spontaneity, the onrush of brute particulars.

(*MP*, 166)

Effing's work is nothing but his struggle. If he can 'enter into the thick of things', he will find his place in the world. Additionally, if he can 'keep him[self] alert', he will not slip into 'despondency' (*MP*, 165). 'It was a way of testing himself against his own weakness', a discipline

that enables ‘the actual’ and ‘the ideal’ to merge. This harks back to the Kantian doubleness (or the Emersonian ‘discrepance’) constitutive of Moral Perfectionism. For now it is worth noting that the significance of Effing’s ‘disciplined life’ consists not only in narrowing the gap between the actual and the ideal but in saving him from hopelessness in the aftermath of Byrne’s death. It is the second sense that marks a preparation for creation (‘After two or three weeks of this new, disciplined life, he began to feel the urge to paint again’). And creation, more than a ‘personal triumph’, ushers him into a state that truly approaches freedom. Later, when canvases, furniture, and walls are all covered with his paintings, when paints finally run out, he turns to writing. It is as if he were ‘reborn’ (*MP*, 167) through the act of creation, for which material shortage (paints, notebooks, and so on) is hardly a serious problem. In other words, an exertion of creativity gives birth to a new self.

This new self rediscovers inwardness and wilderness by undoing ‘the rules he had learned’. Shouldn’t these rules be understood at a deeper level, as concepts and formulas that no longer open up but block the experience of America? If so, this rediscovery of freedom is possible only because, after the nullification of existing rules, the self begins to experience things with no matching concepts. As such, it does not settle into any predetermined role but remains sensitive to its environment that constantly changes, prodigal with dangers and miracles. Fogg will not be unfamiliar with this sense of experience. No wonder he feels that ‘the very outrageousness of the story was probably its most convincing element’ (*MP*, 178). He detects its ‘inner meanings’; they bear on what he, when talking to the doctor, calls ‘the sincerity of the attempt’ to find out the truth by plunging into a world beyond one’s control. This level of meaning should be redeemed from a thorough deconstruction of myths about the American West. What I am suggesting is this: If we intend to map Effing’s experiences on to frontier narratives, we need to bear in mind that through a reinscription of confessional truth they reveal an existential quest that does not solely derive its power from subverting discursive traditions. That is to say, it does not simply contest grand narratives by, for instance, unmasking the institutional forces or other social-psychological drivers. This can become the main purpose of counter-narratives, but Effing’s reminiscences, as they stand, centre on the perception that one’s construction of selfhood differs from a claim to identity. It even necessitates a renunciation of identity. In short, one can criticise American myths as false and propagandist, but one cannot refute the idea of America for it is, at least in our context, irreducible to some specific discourse in conjunction with some specific movement. That is why Effing’s attitude towards Thomas Moran looks ambivalent. Implicated in the discourse of westward expansion, Moran’s paintings and illustrations have fuelled what Effing calls ‘the great American profit machine’ (*MP*, 145). But this is not the whole picture. Effing also feels an affinity with this man, as

manifested in his new name Thomas.¹⁰⁵ At that moment, he did not just remember Moran as a cog in that machine; of course Fogg guesses that his full name Thomas Effing probably means ‘*doubting Thomas*’ (*MP*, 180). Does this contradict his empathy with Blakelock? One is well-known in the history of American art; the other no less obscure than Thomas the hermit, whose name remains unknown to Effing until his Indian friend visits the cave. George Ugly Mouth recognises Effing as Tom and he is, in a certain sense, not mistaken. Effing *becomes* Tom when he *discovers* this (non-)place of rebirth. Not only is George’s re-cognition ontologically significant, but it in addition hints at the necessity of involvement — ‘now that someone had been with him in the cave, he understood how artificial his situation was’ (*MP*, 172) — as well as the possibility of forming new realities when attunement emerges. Hence what is at issue is neither mis-cognition nor deception, but epistemic plasticity that operates *between* subjects. One can suspect that this blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, as long as he/she knows where the boundary is and when the boundary itself becomes artificial. The man living in the cave is no longer Julian Barber. There is no identity to conceal. He is the unknown hermit, or only known to George who calls him Tom and spots his works.

The works, which epitomise Effing’s genuine experience, are not intended to be shown to others. To be more precise, exactly because they are not for exhibition, they remain faithful to what he has experienced in the cave, in the West, and in America as a whole. Yet the fact is that they are seen by George — the only person at the time knowing his existence and his works. What are we to make of it? At first sight it seems to illustrate an ideal case of knowledge: since those works are so integral to Effing’s original experience, exposing them to another’s eyes emblematises an externalisation or even alienation of this experience. But it seems that even Effing himself is not fully capable of unravelling the mystery of creation; he just did it, without formulating new rules. So what is exposed? Is it really a case of knowledge? In any event we should not forget that it is George who sees the works. Effing’s experience originates in *this* place that is *home* to his Indian friend. Thus the transcendentalist message, in line with what *Moonlight* depicts, can be put this way: the people living here are closer to the secret harmony between mankind and the world. At one with their environment, they do not need to unravel that secret. In turn, if Effing’s experience is authentic, it will not appear alien to George, which for him is not to be known/grasped from without but to be lived from within. In this sense, if George’s viewing of those paintings resembles an ideal case of knowledge, it is only because the case virtually casts away the notion of knowledge (along with the

¹⁰⁵ This is particularly true in terms of a Turnerian passion for space and colour (*MP*, 145). Here ‘Turnerian’ refers to English painter J. M. W. Turner. Meanwhile, an ironical flavour may be added to the word as it coincides with Frederick Jackson Turner, whose ‘Frontier Thesis’ has a huge impact on the conception of American identity.

notion of loss in the externalisation of inner experience). Otherwise, remaining unseen (in a modern world?) is a way of avoiding the fate of Moran's works.

At the same time, in place of knowledge another factor is at play, namely, acknowledgment. Not knowing who the visitor is, Effing waits with a rifle. Seeing Effing armed, the visitor looks 'more puzzled than afraid' (*MP*, 169) because he thinks Effing is his friend Tom. After a moment of hesitation, Effing answers to that name, putting down his rifle so that he can shake hands with his 'friend'. In this intriguing scene, cognition — hence the possibilities of mis-cognition and recognition — does not function independently of the will to acknowledgement. Perhaps, when looking closely, George realises that Effing is not Tom; still, enjoying each other's company may have little to do with that. As Effing surmises, 'it was probably a matter of complete indifference to him whether he had been with the real Tom or not' (*MP*, 170). As it turns out, their conversation goes smoothly. Effing 'did his best to listen carefully' (*MP*, 171), the way Fogg listens to Effing. And George's great admiration for Effing's paintings is a most telling gesture of acknowledgement. Indeed, Effing takes heart from his response.

They were the beautifullest things he'd ever seen, the beautifullest things in the world. If he behaved himself, he said, maybe one day Tom could teach him how to do it, and Effing looked him in the eyes and said yes, maybe one day he would. Effing was sorry that anyone had seen the paintings, but at the same time he was glad to get such an enthusiastic response, realizing that it was probably the only response these works would every get.

(*MP*, 171-72)

Who teaches and who learns? My question is not meant to bring up the subject of white supremacy. This is not to deny the legitimacy of potential criticism; rather, I wonder whether it is the legitimacy of praise that is at stake, or whether praise is legitimate only in confession and mourning.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps that is why Effing is destined to part with his works, which, both literally and metaphorically, can not stay intact outside the experience of the cave. Nothing then is left but his memory of them. However, that is also why his confession, as well as his conversations with Fogg, should be treated seriously and sympathetically. The truth in them, like the truth in *Moonlight*, does not explain itself but invites one to experience and imagine one's own relation with it.

In this light, Fogg is the second person who acknowledges Effing's works. Although he does not have the chance to see them — nor is he able to prove their existence — he does not sound frustrated: 'Julian Barber's paintings could never match the ones that Thomas Effing had already

¹⁰⁶ When discussing the 1953 musical film *The Band Wagon*, Cavell puts forward 'the question of finding the means of expressing praise, of acknowledging mutuality with another, gratitude for another's existence, as for one's own', as well as 'the question of the *right* to praise'. This question looms large in Fred Astaire's routine with an African American shoe-shiner. While some take Astaire's homage to black dancing as 'a gesture of domination', Cavell contends that we should take it '(at the same time) as *contesting* that gesture'. It seems to me that his stance, along with the pressure this stance has to bear, can in a way extend to my interpretation of George's visit. See Stanley Cavell, 'Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, pp. 61-82 (pp. 68-70).

given to me. I had dreamed them for myself from his words, and as such they were perfect, infinite, more exact in their representation of the real than reality itself' (*MP*, 226). It is as though his presentness to them could sufficiently compensate for their absence. Can this sense of presentness, prompted by Effing's confession, be kept alive? And in what forms? When the feeling of sufficiency suddenly evaporates and futility returns to reign over his life (not least the deaths of his future child and his father Solomon Barber), he cannot but go on searching for Effing's cave, now alone. It goes without saying that he has never been certain about its existence. The unfound cave, as well as a lost kinship with the unborn and the unrecognised, brings back Cavell's question: 'Has America happened?' (*NYUA*, 114). For Fogg, this would be a question not demanding an answer but his own confession, because confession, as a form of acknowledgement, retains and transforms the memories of what perhaps has indeed happened. The depth of reality, then, does not consist in a simple dichotomy between presence and absence. It rather depends on various ways in which we are connected with reality. By turning to *The Book of Illusions* in the next chapter, I will amplify and expand on an ethico-ontological understanding of the matter.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Image of Loss: Writing Cinema in *The Book of Illusions*

In *Moon Palace* there is a vignette of Fogg's encounter with David Zimmer, a friend he had not seen for thirteen years.¹⁰⁷ It was in the spring of 1982, long after the deaths of Effing and Barber. Inconsequential on the surface, this accident is nonetheless entwined by Fogg with the birth of his book: '[...] I suspect that the idea to write this book first came to me after that meeting four years ago, at the precise moment when Zimmer vanished down the street and I lost sight of him again' (*MP*, 103). His surmise sounds curious enough. This little episode cannot count as a prime mover in the story; rather, it stands outside of the main plot. Yet the image of Zimmer's vanishing out of sight somehow plants in Fogg's mind a subliminal idea to write, not mainly about the two of them, but about a world of things 'forgotten' (*MP*, 102) or lost or, as it were, repressed. We have looked at how confession strives to bring them back and make them both durable and enduring. And we should also bear in mind that this mode of expression cannot do away with the 'I', who finds in sudden ruptures the chance to re-enter into the world. Differently put, possibilities remain for the self to reestablish connection with the world — namely, its presentness, its reality — on condition that the self *acknowledges* its implication in the very rupture of that connection. In a sense, this feature of confession corresponds to the fact that Effing is a visionary painter and Fogg an imaginative viewer. As Cavell points out in *The World Viewed*, 'what painting wanted, in wanting connection with reality, was a sense of *presentness* — not exactly a conviction of the world's presence to us, but of our presence to it.'¹⁰⁸

However, the idea of *again* losing sight of someone suggests more when we switch to Zimmer's standpoint and consider what happened to him afterwards, in particular, what gave rise to another book called *The Book of Illusions*. Three years after that encounter at a road junction in lower Manhattan, his wife and two sons, who also appeared in Fogg's account, died in a plane crash. It is the true beginning of Zimmer's story: the vanishing of people who once partook in his representation of reality. Fogg knows nothing about this, but we know. Hence it may strike us that Fogg's relating

¹⁰⁷ It should be pointed out that I take Fogg's friend David Zimmer and the protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*, whose name also is David Zimmer, to be the same person.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979), p. 22; hereafter, *WV*.

vanishing to writing in one way foreshadows Zimmer's narrative and yet in another distances him, that is, screens his life from view. This intertextual supplement underscores an additional sense of conceiving reality: can something that happened in one's absence turn out to be an *immediate* reality for him/her? What if a past event — (as if) recorded — returns to engross, fascinate, distress, or terrorise one? It invokes the condition of film audiences, like a trope residing in Zimmer's encounter with Hector Mann's world. Cavell refers to this ontological condition as 'helplessness': 'I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory)' (*WV*, 26). From this perspective, what Zimmer stumbles upon, following the collapse of his family, differs from what such paintings as *Moonlight* bring about. And that difference is arguably intertwined with the difference between film and painting in their ontological implications.

To fully explicate the matter, I need to dwell upon some aesthetic and perhaps even technical issues. This will lead us temporarily away from an evolving train of thought that seems to bring us ever closer to the question of America ('Has America happened?'). Yet I do not consider the present chapter as a digression from the whole thesis, as it contains an additional link that will prove to be of great value. It is worth noting that Auster's creation of life and work oftentimes involves a tendency to transcend the boundaries between different mediums. This, as Evija Trofimova suggests, helps to explain why Auster's texts are so uncontainable and interconnected, and why repetitions and variations pervade his entire *oeuvre*. By developing the notion of the 'writing machine', Trofimova sheds new light on the rhizomatic nature of Auster's work.¹⁰⁹ My approach, however, aims to derive different implications from Auster's ekphrastic and cinematic experiments. Not only are they tied up with particular experiences of viewing and writing, but they reflect differences in one's relations to another's life and work. Fogg's delineation of *Moonlight* is a case in point; so is Zimmer's study of Hector Mann's films in *The Book of Illusions*. To explore their multimedial implications, I shall avail myself of Cavell's reflections on both mediums, as well as on cinematic elements like frame and screen. They enable us to better understand Zimmer's response to Hector's films. His fascination with the world projected on the screen discloses a deeper concern about reality, which moves beyond the notion of representation. What is then at stake in this concern is not whether reality can be represented, but how we react to that which is (mechanically) captured and presented to us. Cavell's postulate of the viewer's condition — the presence of an anterior world on condition of the viewer's

¹⁰⁹ See Evija Trofimova, *Paul Auster's Writing Machine: A Thing to Write With* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). Trofimova's research highlights the things (the prosthetic writing tools, cityscapes, and so on) and their functions in Auster's writer-character assemblage.

absence from it — helps to explain why the immediacy of Hector’s world is necessarily coupled with its insubstantiality; hence why, once drawn to the former, Zimmer is bound to face the latter.

It is important to note in this light the nature of what Cavell calls ‘the screen performer’. Its meaning will be unpacked when we look closely into certain scenes from Hector’s films that instantiate the idea of having a body, the problem of losing one’s presence to others, and the possibility of migrating from one identity to another. These issues help to shape Zimmer’s *view* of Hector’s life (or lives), in the sense that they are implicit in the complexities of cinematic presence. It goes without saying that scepticism and moral perfectionism, as two mainstays in a Cavellian reading of literary and cinematic texts, will continue to carry considerable weight. At the same time, it is worth noting and indeed recalling, at the beginning of this chapter, the philosophical validity of this weight. Like writing and painting, photography and film also pose fundamental questions about reality and presence. But these questions, based on different modes of being and different modes of perception, are irreducible to the question of representation (or sometimes simply signification). The point should be reiterated because many analyses of the novel do not delve deep into the nature of cinematic presence, its immediacy and poetry. Nor do they pay enough attention to the power of performance, its movement and embodiment. Without a serious consideration of these factors we cannot arrive at a deeper understanding of our connections with reality and, for that matter, illusions.

The Book of Illusions is nothing if not a book seeking to explore various senses of reality. Moreover, since the novel is after all *written*, it also points to a hidden issue, namely writing cinema. Is the viewer’s experience translatable through words? More to the point, why does Zimmer feel the need to put this experience into words? It may not be necessary to do so; yet I would argue that there are reasons why it is important in his case. If the reality of Hector’s existence (and world) surfaces in Zimmer’s experience of film, and if his initial attempt to write about it is more or less a distraction from his own life, then later the ephemerality and fragility of that reality turns the act of writing into an imperative. As with many of Auster’s books, this means a work of art has to remain conscious of its own conditions of possibility, aesthetically and ethically. Because the two dimensions are inseparable, any tension they generate will be total and climacteric. Here I am alluding to, in a Blanchotian light, a Kafkaesque obsession with the work and death, which arises from the economy of possibility and impossibility, and which underlies the supreme yet catastrophic moment in *The Book of Illusions*. What interests me most is not so much this obsession *per se* as its possible relation to a Cavellian film philosophy. Cavell’s closing remarks in *The World Viewed* provide an important clue:

A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is an importance of film — and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world, either because I left it unloved (the Flying Dutchman) or because I left unfinished business (Hamlet). So there is reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past: to deny that the world is complete without me. But there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgement upon me is not yet the last.

(*WV*, 160)

As the unfolding dramas in Auster's novel seem to suggest, 'a world complete without me' has the potential and danger of morphing into the kind of death Kafka wishes for but cannot obtain. This could be the message behind Hector's death and the destruction of his works. As a viewer, Zimmer can do very little to alter what has happened and what is supposed to happen in his absence. Meanwhile, his writing, as witness to the pastness of that world in which he plays no part, contains another message: the world may still return, for its secrecy, instead of being locked in an absolute death, is registered in the viewer's anxiety and helplessness.

Viewing and Writing

I want now to return to that initial comparison between Fogg's and Zimmer's experiences. It serves as a good starting point and helps us locate Zimmer's narrative within a *frame* subtly at variance with Fogg's confessional *landscape*. What do the frame and landscape suggest? They suggest that different implications of visualisation partly account for different forms of experience, which in turn account for different ways of recounting those experiences. Some may wonder why these suggestions should matter. Instead of answering it now, I would ask: Do we truly grasp the meanings of frame and landscape, and, moreover, of film (with its photographic basis) and painting? Perhaps we have assumed too much about their concepts to ponder their literal senses. I do not say we should simply take things literally; what concerns me is rather that we tend to underestimate the impacts of the physical medium of an art, especially given that both film and painting fall under the rubric of visual arts. The fact is that there are *varieties* of visualisation. Note that I do not use the more common term 'visual representation', which seems too general and, for the moment, even imprecise. If we carefully consider such material bases as the screen, let alone the camera, we may perceive the intricacies of the subject in question, for instance, the issues of recording, framing, projection, and screening. All these intrinsic to photographic art are almost irrelevant to, say, realist painting. Then how can we ensure that, when speaking of visual representation in different mediums, we have the same notion in mind? For Cavell it is somewhat problematic to apply the notion of representation to photographic art, because 'the relation between photograph and subject does not fit our concept of representation, one thing standing for another, disconnected thing, or one forming a likeness of

another'.¹¹⁰ Recommending another term 'visual transcription', he explains: 'A representation emphasizes the identity of its subject, hence it may be called a likeness; a photograph emphasizes the existence of its subject, recording it; hence it is that it may be called a transcription' (*CF*, 118). Photography is a form not so much of representation as of transcription. A clue this proposition furnishes is that a painting's subject does not exist the way a photograph's subject exists. Visually speaking, the photographic image evokes the original so strongly that we seem to be presented with 'the things themselves' (*WV*, 17).¹¹¹ It is this overpowering presence of existents that leads André Bazin to speak of photography's ultimate satisfaction of, as quoted by Cavell in his gloss on automatism, 'our obsession with realism' (*WV*, 20). What this heightened sense of realism suggests is an immediacy occasioned by the 'inescapable fact' of automatism in photography: the world is revealed automatically and mechanically, so nothing — language or even representation — seems to come between us and it.¹¹² Does this medium therefore offer an alternative solution to our (sceptical) problem with reality? If it does, or at least seemed so in its early days, it nonetheless operates on three restrictive terms: (1) the world photographed is one framed and screened; (2) it is also one that is past; (3) the viewer has to remain unseen.

Let us examine these terms and see how they can, literally and metaphorically, provide insight into *The Book of Illusions*. As said, different implications of visualisation find their ways into Fogg's and Zimmer's accounts of their experiences of the world. Then what, after all, is a world framed and screened? How does it differ from a world created by painting, say, a vision unto itself? When Cavell remarks, 'A painting *is* a world; a photograph is *of* the world', what comes to light is the distinction between 'limits' and 'end' (*WV*, 24). That is, the limits of the world of a painting indicate a fundamental discontinuity between it and the empirical world, and we seldom inquire into what exists outside of it for there is, in a certain sense, nothing outside. Everything within the painting transforms its limits into its sufficiency; hence it '*is*' a world. By contrast, what 'comes to an end' in a photograph refers to what is captured and transcribed within a frame and, accordingly, what is left out by it. Some may insist that a painting requires a frame too, but this has little to do with what Cavell calls 'a phenomenological frame that is indefinitely extendible and contractible' (*WV*, 25). In

¹¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, 'What Photography Calls Thinking', in *Cavell on Film*, ed. by William Rothman (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2005), pp. 115-33 (p. 117); hereafter, *CF*.

¹¹¹ Just imagine the early audience's reaction to a Lumière film. Or, as Cavell observes, primitive people's fear of photographs of themselves is not as ludicrous as we think (*WV*, 119). On the contrary, our revelling in this possession of technological power has blinded us to the essential ontological strangeness it causes.

¹¹² This strong sense of verisimilitude, which defies verbal description, also recalls Barthes's view on photography: 'in front of a photograph, the feeling of "denotation," or if you prefer, of analogical plenitude, is so powerful that the description of a photograph is literally impossible'. See Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 3-20 (pp. 6-7).

the case of film this notion further extends to the phenomenon of moving pictures produced simultaneously by ‘the successive film frames’ and ‘the fixed screen frame’ (*WV*, 25). With this in mind, we begin to rediscover the ontological import of the frame and how it crucially determines the nature of photographic transcription. Hector’s films rely on the lens to *present* his physical movements, his facial expressions, not least his ‘talking mustache’,¹¹³ whereas Blakelock’s painting *represents* a visionary world, which derives from the depth of feelings (as Fogg rightly concludes) and points to the depth of attunement. This is not to say that film frames are devoid of psychological interest, but a phenomenological interest is prior to (and sometimes even contrary to) that and more deeply ingrained in the ontology of film. Insofar as framing a subject requires a focus and a field, and insofar as both are finite yet adjustable, the photographic/cinematic image encompasses both the presence of a part of the world and the ‘implied presence of the rest of the world’ (*WV*, 24). In this regard, the act of framing characterises and amplifies our phenomenological horizons, the ‘end’ of which ultimately maps on to the idea of endlessness, that is, our endless exposure to the enigmatic being of the filmed subject.

In a way the issue boils down to the sheer existence of objects and events — in front of us precisely because they are things of the past and ‘screened’ from us. Perhaps it is why a clip from Hector’s film is able to, albeit momentarily, lift Zimmer out of deep desolation following the tragic deaths of his wife and sons in a plane crash. This ‘empirical discovery’ (*BI*, 10) of his remaining strength to laugh testifies to the powerful immediacy of Hector’s performance, its lightning raid on the sensorium of an abstracted viewer. Acting and camerawork and montage do not feed private fantasy so much as help Zimmer escape from it, since real life itself has already become an awful dream he cannot wake from. It echoes Cavell’s argument that ‘movies seem more natural than reality’:

Not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is *already* drawn by fantasy. And not because they are dreams, but because they permit the self to be wakened, so that we may stop withdrawing our longings further inside ourselves. Movies convince us of the world’s reality in the only way we have to be convinced, without learning to bring the world closer to the heart’s desire (which in practice now means learning to stop altering it illegitimately, against itself): by taking views of it. (*WV*, 102)

Hector’s world is screened from Zimmer; it does not seem to bear any relation to his own situation. The sole response it requires of him is ‘taking views of it’. Anything more than that, he would draw it into his miseries; anything less than that, it would not be able to jolt him out of his depression. This explains why an empirical dimension of that viewing experience is writ large. Meanwhile, we

¹¹³ Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 29; hereafter, *BI*.

should not overlook the uncanniness of Zimmer's 'empirical discovery', which follows from the uncanniness of cinematic images. When describing film as 'a moving image of skepticism', Cavell takes it to mean not only 'a reasonable possibility' but also 'a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist — even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes' (*WV*, 188-89). Hence film's immediate, automatic effects not only signal what Bazin calls 'realism' but also call for a sceptical concern with it, a concern, we might say, always already implied in the moment of stumbling upon something that is not supposed to remain, here and now. In this respect, the sceptical implication in question hinges on a *temporal* displacement, by which I mean we see something that is *not happening* (to us) but is nevertheless *present* (to us), something that is evanescent yet mechanically repeatable. In other words, we are taking views of an anterior world without us, and the consequence is that, with the condition of 'feeling unseen' (*WV*, 102), we may find ourselves either satisfied or powerless or both. In any case, Zimmer's burst of laughter is a genuine response to what unfolds in that two-minute clip. The world becomes present the moment the camera eye fills in for one's mind's eye. This is not always the case, but it *is* the case with a man who closes his eyes and mind and no longer feels that his life is real. The uninvited presence of the world in a sense overpowers human agency, but it also awakens the self. The latter's withdrawal is halted by a reality screened and viewed. What this means is that the end point of withdrawal is not a cessation of the self — as it is now taken over by a strong will to withdraw — but a failure to turn around and see the world. Zimmer does not reach that point because Hector's film allows him to view the world in private, because viewing somehow retains his tenuous link with reality. Even though he has not recovered from loss and bereavement and not yet been prepared to engage with the outside, his revived attention to someone's world registers his interest in life rather than death. Of course, just as Cavell reminds us (again referring to Bazin) that the photographic is like 'a kind of life mask of the world, the twin of a death mask' (*CF*, 124), so it is important to note in *The Book of Illusions* the intricate relationship between film and death.

This will come back later in greater detail, but for the moment we need to bear in mind that the world presented by film is long past and the person who accompanies Zimmer is 'dead' — 'as dead as Chateaubriand and Madame Récamier' (*BI*, 64). In his conversation with Alex Kronenberg, a friend back at Columbia University, he admits that writing *The Silent World of Hector Mann* is 'probably the strangest thing' he has ever done: 'I was writing about things I couldn't see anymore, and I had to present them in purely visual terms. The whole experience was like a hallucination' (*BI*, 64). His succinct description virtually encapsulates the entire process of writing cinema in the novel and, arguably, places its strangeness alongside the strangeness of cinema itself. It is tempting here to

ask whether the former strangeness resides in the gaps between writing and viewing, between pastness and presence, and whether one kind of strangeness is at odds with another. However, to do so we should be wary of misconceiving the nature of these questions: it does not entail that writing and cinema have to compete with each other, though there appear to be good reasons to regard them as rivals. Indeed, Zimmer's description might be interpreted as a struggle to approach cinematic immediacy that clearly relates to automatism. It is this material condition that enables film to transcribe its subject, which defies the notion of representation or imitation. Then what, after all, does writing want to do with the idea of immediacy, given that its material condition does not permit this? In his essay on Auster's cinematographic fictions, Timothy Bewes looks into the novelist's 'yearning' for 'the immediacy of cinema'.¹¹⁴ As he points out, this aspiration either remains a possibility or has been finally given up because, in Auster's case, writing's ethical relation to the present does not allow it to materialise. This, of course, cannot undo what potentially attracts a (post)modern writer, namely 'cinema's disintegration of the distinction between original and reproduction, possibility and actuality, art and life' (Bewes, 291). Interestingly, Bewes also refers to Bazin in his formulation of 'cinema's challenge to ontology itself', and in a way it converges with Cavell's reading; perhaps just in a way. It is true that Cavell further develops the French film critic's thoughts on the sort of ontological strangeness occasioned by photography, but precisely in the section on visual transcription, he expresses his 'dissatisfaction' with Bazin's proposal that a photograph be likened to 'a visual mold or a visual impression' (*WV*, 20). His point is that 'physical molds and impressions and imprints have clear procedures for getting *rid* of their originals, whereas in a photograph, the original is still as present as it ever was'. Here the emphasis on the original speaks volumes. It does not, as some may misunderstand, signify a simple gesture towards an ontology of presence. (This topic pertains to Cavell's response to deconstruction.) Rather, behind this particular emphasis is an attention to the viewer's singular condition: we are looking at a world separate from us; it is with us in our illusion and not with us in its impenetrability. That is why we cannot dispel the thought that 'the original is still as present as it ever was', that viewing it is the only way to keep it present. We feel threatened by the fact that, as long as we are deprived of (or, in some cases, relinquish) our presentness to the world, the world's presence means its separateness from us.

In this light, it could be argued that Auster's writing, rather than being envious of cinema, is unsatisfied with it. Early on I drew on Cavell's comparison of photography and painting; his remarks on the subject remain pertinent here:

¹¹⁴ Timothy Bewes, 'Against the Ontology of the Present: Paul Auster's Cinematographic Fictions', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53.3 (2007), 273-97 (p. 275).

Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether [...].

One could accordingly say that photography was never in competition with painting. What happened was that at some point the quest for visual reality, or the “memory of the present” (as Baudelaire put it), split apart. To maintain conviction in our connection with reality, to maintain our presentness, painting accepts the recession of the world. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it.

(*WV*, 23)

Photographic transcription signals a drastic departure from painting in that it overwhelms the human capacity for representation and unsettles ontology (especially in term of temporality). And if in this process of transcription the human capacity for representation is held in abeyance, so is our old way of relating to reality. It is why, in photography and cinema, our absence from the world is a necessary precondition for its presentness. It may also explain why painting drifts towards another kind of presence, as exemplified by abstract expressionism. In one sense this is equally true of the general practice of writing, as the reality it strives for cannot be rid of human subjectivity. However, the specific ways in which it ‘accepts the recession of the world’ can differ from those of painting. Due to the nature and effect of language, there are oftentimes interpenetrations between recession and presence in writing. Thus the point of writing cinema (as reflected in *The Book of Illusions*) is that, by simultaneously striving for ‘our presentness’ and ‘the presentness of the world’, it puts both to the test. Zimmer’s awareness of how hallucinatory it is to write about Hector’s films implies a recognition of the challenge of sustaining reality and its consequences, that is, what he risks and what he can possibly gain. It might be more than necessary to translate the world viewed into the world worded; yet, by testing its capacity for immediacy, this translation wishes for a transformation that allows the self to trace its vulnerability in the wake of what we might call cinematic events. At least, when automatic projections of Hector’s performance (and life) cease, writing can emerge as a potential way of witnessing its reality and, more importantly, showing why that reality matters to a viewer like Zimmer.

The Silent World of Mr. Nobody

Unlike Effing, who figures prominently in Fogg’s narrative with his own distinctive voice, the voice of the autobiographical self, Hector is a man who does not seem to exist. More precisely, he seems to exist only in film. This is reinforced by the fact that initially Zimmer takes little interest in the *real life* of this man, not to mention that the book he writes is confined to his works alone. That said, its title, *The Silent World of Hector Mann*, can be read as a play on words: Hector’s world is ‘silent’ not only because it refers to his silent comedies in which sound, including the voice, is unneeded, but also because he vanished overnight in 1929 and from then on faded out of public sight and memory.

It is not until Zimmer has received Frieda Spelling's letter and later on meets Alma Grund that Hector's life begins to surface. Both women play important roles in constructing and reconstructing somebody named 'Hector Mann': the former is his wife and collaborator on fourteen independent films; the latter his biographer. But who is Hector Mann? And is this somebody a person or a persona?

To address these questions, let us first consider Cavell's view on the actor or, as he prefers to call, 'the screen performer': 'the screen performer is essentially not an actor at all: he *is* the subject of study, and a study not his own. (That is what the content of a photograph is — its subject.)' (*WV*, 28). Notably, his view is embedded in a distinction between the theatre actor and the screen performer. If the former studies and interprets a character that seems to have an independent life, then the latter embodies a character that solely exists for the camera and lives on the screen. It is in this vein that Cavell continues with a case in point:

An exemplary screen performance is one in which, at a time, a star is born. After *The Maltese Falcon* we know a new star, only distantly a person. "Bogart" means "the figure created in a given set of films." His presence in those films is who he is, not merely in the sense in which a photograph of an event is that event; but in the sense that if those films did not exist, Bogart would not exist, the name "Bogart" would not mean what it does.

(*WV*, 28)

Here what is at stake is a 'type of character' (to use Zimmer's expression; *BI*, 30) that comes to be shaped by both the performer and the camera. When the notion connects with the word 'star', it is tinged with a meteoric quality and, coincidentally, connotes the temporal quality that Cavell stresses in the ontology of film. '[T]he stars are only to gaze at, after the fact' (*WV*, 29) — his observation brings us back to the sense of pastness that marks our distance from and illusory closeness to the subject filmed. This 'human something' (*WV*, 26) lends itself to our view without granting us its actual presence. It passes from one film to another, giving rise to a family of personae. In the case of 'Hector Mann' (note that all the names of the characters Hector plays have never been mentioned), this idea instantly evokes what Zimmer calls 'Hector's repertoire' (*BI*, 31), not least his moustache and suit. No viewer of his films is not struck by the moustache, which offers not only gags but 'the link to his inner self, a metonym of urges, cogitations, and mental storms'. A signature of his silent being, it communicates more than spoken words can do. What's more, 'The intimacy of the talking mustache is a creation of the lens' (*BI*, 29). This transfiguration of the moustache into 'the center of the world', 'with all references to the environment eliminated' (*BI*, 29), should be regarded as a decisive feature of Hector's filmed presence, a presence that cannot be realised on the stage. Then another signature is the suit. As decoded by Zimmer, it 'embodies his relation to the social world' (*BI*, 31). This by no means suggests a simple correspondence between clothing and identity. It

is true that Hector ‘climbs into it every morning the way a knight climbs into his armor’; but it is also true — and all the more ironic — that the white suit acts not as part of protection and empowerment but rather as a source of trouble, a ‘sign of Hector’s vulnerability’. As befits the type of character he plays — ‘the South American dandy, the Latin lover, the swarthy rogue with hot blood coursing through his veins’ (*BI*, 30) — this sort of irony cannot be dissociated from ‘vanity’ (*BI*, 31), which, as it were, amounts to the burden of being conscious of one’s pride. In a comedic mode we are customarily amused by what this pride begets; deep down we sympathise with the man, as this unmistakable trait of his is revealed by the camera to be no less than the ‘torments of self-consciousness’ (*BI*, 32). Following Cavell (and Benjamin), we might say that nothing is more capable than the camera of capturing the restlessness of the body, that nothing is more capable than the body of showing the restlessness of the soul. In this light, the ‘torments of self-consciousness’ can find no better expression than a seemingly petty gesture of ‘flicking specks of imaginary dust from his jacket’ (*BI*, 31). We might too recall Zimmer’s comments on silent comedies: ‘It was thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body’ (*BI*, 15). Thus even though things like costumes and props may go out of fashion or favour, it is acting — variable gestures, body movements, and facial expressions in particular — that essentially grips the viewer well before he/she fully grasps its messages.

The idea (and fact) of having a body is undoubtedly one that the invention of the camera has helped to reshape, in an astounding way that philosophy can hardly imagine. It leads Cavell to declare: ‘The camera is an emblem of perpetual visibility. Descartes’s self-consciousness thus takes the form of embarrassment’ (*CF*, 131). In *The Book of Illusions* the issue is also brought to the fore, curiously problematised. The epithet ‘Mr. Nobody’, another play on words, epitomises the very problem of having a body while losing one’s identity as well as presence. It can be traced back to *Mr. Nobody*, the last film starring Hector (not *Double or Nothing*, as Zimmer tells us). Replete with his usual tricks and gags, the film is nevertheless a thought experiment on the (in)visibility of the human body. If the hypothesis is that someone exists but no one can see him/her, then what we need to consider is whether that is a good or bad thing for the person in question. It is in the unfolding of events that this philosophical question begins to bulk large and take on a moral significance. Although it is Chase’s nefarious scheme (with the aid of his magic potion) that puts Hector in jeopardy, what follows is not a straightforward revenge plot. The crux of Hector’s issue, I think, is his own attitude towards what has happened to his body, and that attitude has a direct impact on what he will do. However, this is precisely where moral ambiguity lies. As he explores and assesses the new situation, it becomes clear that he ‘can be invisible to everyone around him, but his body can

still interact with the world' (*BI*, 45). If so, then the problem of being invisible is that, as long as he has a body in this world, that is, as long as he is still alive, it does not seem to be a problem at all; it even suggests a greater liberty: 'Everything has become possible for him now, and he no longer has to obey the rules. He can do good if he wants to, but he can also do evil, and at this point we have no idea what decision he will make' (*BI*, 46). In this regard, it comes close to an existential choice, a test of one's ethical being. And this fundamentally threatens an a priori assumption about the moral high ground that Hector, as a victim, has.

As Zimmer points out, *Mr. Nobody* is 'a meditation on his [Hector's] own disappearance, and for all its ambiguity and furtive suggestiveness, for all the moral questions it asks and then refuses to answer, it is essentially a film about the anguish of selfhood' (*BI*, 53). This 'anguish of selfhood' gradually emerges in later sequences, as it turns out that Hector does not feel relieved by avenging the wrongs inflicted on him. The fact that he remains invisible weighs on his mind. If having a body means it needs to be present to others, to be acknowledged by others, then disappearance looks worse than death. This explains a shift of mood in this slapstick comedy. After leaving Chase's office, Hector wanders through the deserted streets. The *mise en scène* creates a fantasised scenario in which only this invisible man seems visible. More precisely, a city empty of people nullifies, or at least suspends, the question of visibility. But soon the moment of suspension dissolves in a splash of water caused by a passing truck, which, to Hector's disappointment, does not soil his suit. Hence the supposedly light-hearted scene turns into a devastating proof of his unchanged condition. Even more devastating is the following sequence in which he is unable to let his family know that he is there, with them. Of course he can touch them, as he has done to other people on the street, but it will only give rise to unnecessary frights. Is this the price of obtaining absolute freedom in one's invisible form? If it is, this sequence shows that it harms the blessing of enjoying limited freedom in one's visible form. Indeed, although *Mr. Nobody* does not explicitly state its moral position, its subtle portrayal of a loving father in sadness — with 'one small gesture' (*BI*, 50) of refraining from touching his daughter's head — points to the true 'anguish of selfhood', that is, 'Hector has been reduced to nothing'.

On the other hand, Hector's existence is *not* nothing *to us*, as everything is revealed to the viewer. Needless to say, the fact that other actors and actresses just pretend not to see Hector is beside the point; the point is not to break the spell. What I have in mind is rather the 'perpetual visibility' quoted earlier from Cavell. In the original text, regarding this issue, he also refers to Emerson: 'the price of an Emersonian proof of my existence is a perpetual visibility of the self, a theatricality in my presence to others, hence to myself' (*CF*, 131). From this perspective, it becomes evident that a

function of the mirror in the film is to enhance this Emersonian ‘theatricality’ beside the camera. As highlighted in Zimmer’s writing, the two mirror scenes mark the beginning and the end of Hector’s invisible state. In the first scene Hector’s visibility is indeterminate until he looks into the mirror; in the second he feels doubtful of his returned visibility until he sees his reflection in the mirror. At one moment it is as if the camera were not adequate to prove one’s existence *to oneself*; at another it is as if another person’s (namely his wife’s) exclamation fell short and only a doubling of the body/self could resist a total obliteration (in one’s imagination, anyway) of it. Of course we know that in both cases it is because the camera, as an agent for a kind of second-order observation, is supposed to remain hidden from characters and cinematic events. Given that it emblematises the ‘perpetual visibility’ of the human body and, in the case of *Mr. Nobody*, does so mainly for the viewer, the mirror is needed to further theatricalise that effect, as a surrogate *within* for what the camera can do (‘The proof is in the mirror’ [*BI*, 52]).

It certainly does not stop there. Continuing on in an Emersonian vein, we may recall Hector’s response to his reflection in the last mirror scene. The ‘slowness’ (*BI*, 52) of that response, which ends in an enigmatic smile, intimates an uncanny moment of finding one’s body present to itself, hence finding oneself present to a new self. An important message this conveys is that the body and the self are inseparable; another message is that, to find and re-present one’s being in the world, one may have to temporarily lose sight of one’s own body and, for that matter, one’s old self. The issue of (re)finding oneself is faintly reminiscent of Emerson’s question explored in the chapter on *Leviathan*: ‘Where do we find ourselves?’. With this in mind, we might say that cinematic visibility/presence, together with its Emersonian implications, not only transcribes but, in some cases, transforms its subject. And the mirror, as a route to self-knowledge, does not so much reproduce the existing self as reshape its image. ‘He is no longer looking at the old Hector. He is someone else now, and however much he might resemble the person he used to be, he has been reinvented, turned inside-out, and spat forth as a new man’ (*BI*, 52). This scene prefigures Hector’s own disappearance in 1929. Before leaving for Seattle, he changed his appearance in a men’s room at Central Station: ‘Hector minus the mustache, and then Hector plus the cap. The two operations canceled him out, and he left the men’s room that morning looking like anyone, like no one, like the spitting image of Mr. Nobody himself’ (*BI*, 144).

At the moment it should come as no surprise that the intersection of life and art resurfaces in Auster’s novel. What defines its unfolding in this particular story, however, is that the ontology of film (especially as regards the actor) complicates the contentious issues found in life writing. Who is ‘Hector Mann’? This is a biographical question. Is ‘Mr. Nobody’ a person? This is an ontological

question. When they overlap, things become convoluted and bewildering. In other words, there seem to be both similarities and differences between a ‘human something’ (Cavell: ‘a new star, only distantly a person’) on the screen and a ‘dead man’ on the pages. To begin with, a similarity between them is that both are concerned with a past world, to which we have access only after the fact. It somehow explains why, apart from Hector’s films, Zimmer is preoccupied with Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*. He translates the title as *Memoirs of a Dead Man*, a possible allusion to both the way Hector’s life would have been shown to us and the way he lived his life after disappearance. But the second point can be interpreted somewhat differently. The word ‘dead’ does not necessarily denote finality and thus could mean that the man has to be reborn, to find another self. This interpretation harks back to the epigraph, a quotation from Chateaubriand: ‘Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery.’ Despite its last accent on the downside of human restlessness, the truth it perceives generally coincides with the Emersonian circles or succession. The idea of having a multifaceted self also runs parallel to Cavell’s view that a privileging of the screen performer over the characters he/she plays gives emphasis to ‘the potentiality in human existence, the self’s journeying’ (*PP*, 137). If this potentiality could live with one’s misery, it might not be difficult to see why Hector, instead of ending his life, disappears from a certain kind of life. It is as if he were still playing various roles after leaving Hollywood, ‘[a]ll true, yet all false’ (*BI*, 176). This is a strange feeling; it does not allow him to turn away from his own condition. Like many of his cinematic personae, he ‘seems to live in a state of ironical bemusement, at once engaged in the world and observing it from a great distance’ (*BI*, 35). In this light, no question could be more bizarre and yet more revelatory than the one Nora asks him: ‘Did he know who Hector Mann was?’ (*BI*, 163). It is at that moment that the realisation dawns on him: ‘Life was a fever dream [...] and reality was a groundless world of figments and hallucinations, a place where everything you imagined came true’.

This ‘groundless world’ seems analogous to the world of cinema, given the hallucinatory effect on one who is part of that world. But their full impact cannot be thought through without reckoning with the fact that the world of cinema is one *viewed*. Here what is at stake is the process in which Zimmer approaches Hector’s world. It is worth noting that, before being acquainted with this man’s life (via his conversations with Alma), Zimmer has established connections with reality through viewing. That is to say, the reality of Mr. Nobody’s cinematic presence precedes the reality of Alma’s narration. What this specific sequence induces is that at some point the two realities fail to unify. This is especially the case when Zimmer meets Hector *in person*, which implies that the question whether Mr. Nobody is a person is primarily addressed to the viewer.

What astonished me most, I think, was the simple fact that he had a body. Until I saw him lying there in the bed, I'm not sure that I ever fully believed in him. Not as an authentic person, at any rate, not in the way I believed in Alma or myself, not in the way I believed in Helen or even Chateaubriand.

(*BI*, 222)

Zimmer cannot believe in Hector the way he believes in other persons. What is peculiar about the simple fact that Hector has a body is what is peculiar about the screen performer: he is both real and unreal; or, shall we say, he *exists*, but, as it were, beyond a mundane existence. This is not so much because he is disembodied as because the body filmed, viewed, recalled, that is, precariously present to Zimmer's mind, seems to have supplanted the actual body of the actor. Does this disbelief in a person's corporeal form rather suggest the reifying power of film? I think it does and does so in a striking way that reminds us of film's capacity for both provoking and assuaging the viewer's scepticism. In the case under discussion, Zimmer's initial disbelief also arises from the sight of Hector's ageing body, hence pointing to the implication of temporal displacement that disrupts the viewer's sense of time. It is then interesting to see how he tries to regain a unity of cognition, not by erasing those cinematic images but by recalling them as though they were part of his own history.

When he turned in my direction, however, I saw that his eyes were Hector's eyes. Furrowed cheeks, grooved forehead, wattled throat, tufted white hair — and yet I recognized the face as Hector's face. It had been sixty years since he'd worn the mustache and the white suit, but he hadn't altogether vanished. He'd grown old, he'd grown infinitely old, but a part of him was still there.

(*BI*, 222-23)

Hector has grown infinitely old; yet he has been and will be infinitely young in moving pictures. This first meeting between Zimmer and Hector turns out to be the last one. And just as Zimmer begins to look at him as a real person — a person made of flesh and blood; a person who grows old and remains alive; a person who talks to him and grabs his arm — he passes away and once again disappears into his silent world. 'I couldn't accept that Hector was alive,' as Zimmer puts it, 'And then, once I did accept it, I couldn't accept that he was dying' (*BI*, 239).

For Whom the Work Exists

Indeed, compared with numerous talks and exchanges between Fogg and Effing, the once-in-a-lifetime meeting seems barely substantial. Its illusory quality is manifested through Zimmer's stress on his dim memories of entering and exiting Hector's room. The only thing he remembers or wishes to remember is the feel of his hand: 'I remember telling myself to remember what that hand felt like. If he didn't live until morning, it would be the only proof that I had seen him alive' (*BI*, 226). From

this perspective, his distinct memory of Alma touching his arm later on in the kitchen hints at an almost tactile connection between the two events:

I liked being there, and I liked sitting down at the long wooden table next to Alma and feeling her touch my arm in the same spot where Hector had touched me only a moment before. Two different gestures, two different memories—one on top of the other. My skin had become a palimpsest of fleeting sensations, and each layer bore the imprint of who I was.

(*BI*, 227)

‘Two different gestures, two different memories’ — they evoke the overlap of realities I spoke of, that is, the realities triggered by viewing and understanding. Beneath their seemingly arbitrary association there is an essential link between Zimmer, Alma and Hector. As we know, Alma Grund has been working on Hector’s biography for nearly seven years. She is ‘part of the family’ (*BI*, 217) not only because her parents participate in all the fourteen film projects at Hector and Frieda’s ranch in New Mexico, but also because she is brought up there and all too familiar with Hector’s old silent comedies, not to mention that she is the person who sends them out to different film archives around the world. This anonymous act of disseminating Hector’s works is the very condition of possibility for her making friends with Zimmer even before knowing him. As she tells him, ‘I don’t have any secrets from you, David. Whatever I know, I want you to know, too. [...] I sent out those films blind, and you were the one who found them. [...] That makes us old friends, doesn’t it?’ (*BI*, 215). These words both echo and contrast with their first talk at Zimmer’s home in Vermont. Her sudden appearance prompts him to be sceptical about what she says: ‘I’m not your friend. I’m not anything to you. You’re a phantom who wandered in from the night, and now I want you to go back out there and leave me alone’ (*BI*, 107). With hindsight, we can see how Zimmer’s metaphorical expression inadvertently points to the heart of the matter: everything and everyone related to Hector’s life seem to be nothing more than illusions, and he could have written them off without misgivings. However, precisely at the point of his dismissal, Alma’s candidness and tenacity shine through. Because she knows that Zimmer has written an excellent book on Hector’s films, that they have been, in her words, ‘working together for years’ (*BI*, 215), she does not give up hope of further conversation, which, arguably, evinces a kind of Cavellian moral perfectionism. If it were not for her, Zimmer would never delve into Hector’s secret world, and he would never overcome the dread of flying, of imagining the moment of deaths of his wife and sons. It goes without saying that Alma plays a key role in fleshing out Hector’s story; that her conversations with Zimmer provide true insight into this man’s life and work. At a deeper level, this accords with her drive to appeal for witnesses to all that belongs to the realm of worklessness: ‘I need a witness. I talk about things in the book that no one

else has seen, and my statements won't be credible unless I have another person to back me up' (*BI*, 105).

The idea of witness, alongside the idea of having a body, recurs in *The Book of Illusions*. As Zimmer's account proceeds to its climax, the former idea becomes a dominant theme that stretches a series of tensions to breaking point. Revolving around Hector's biography and late works, conflicts are bound to break out in the wake of his untimely decease. Early on at their first meeting Alma has already notified Zimmer of the fate of Hector's films: 'Twenty-four hours after Hector dies, those films are going to be destroyed' (*BI*, 106). This is an irreversible decision made by Hector himself, on which his work is based. Alma speaks of it as 'a pact' he makes 'with the devil', 'an act of breathtaking nihilism' (*BI*, 207). She also compares it with the case of Kafka, which brings to light a crucial point about death, work and witness. But before we look further into this comparison, let us start from the only film Zimmer views at the ranch, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*. In fact the screening takes place on borrowed time, for Frieda makes no bones about her urgent obligation to burn everything Hector leaves behind, his body as well as his work. Against this backdrop the film, as translated into Zimmer's words, connects with the viewer's (the witness's; the writer's) struggle for his presentness to a fleeting world, a world that should nevertheless be *remembered as being present and real*. Zimmer's writing is a manifestation of that struggle. In so doing, he has to remove the screen, so to speak, and acknowledge the presence of the self and its importance in the action of remembering something. Whether this acknowledgment of the self accounts for the film's allusions to Berkeley and Kant is open to question; in any case they bring into play the notion of self-reference. Do we have to choose between the truthfulness of whatever exists outside ourselves and the truthfulness of our implication in whatever exists outside ourselves? The Berkeley-Kantian thesis seems to opt for the latter: '... *things which we see are not by themselves what we see ... so that, if we drop our subject or the subjective form of our senses, all qualities, all relations of objects in space and time, nay space and time themselves, would vanish*' (*BI*, 264). When Claire reads this passage from Kant to Martin, it looks as if she is alluding to her own mysterious existence. Who is she? Is she just a fantasy springing from Martin's head? Can she still exist without Martin's knowledge of her? Facing Martin's question about her identity, Claire's twist to the Berkeley-Kantian thesis is: 'It doesn't matter who I am. [...] It doesn't matter because you love me' (*BI*, 257). Deep down Martin knows she is right and he has to stand the test: '*Claire was asking me to make a leap of faith, and rather than go on pressing her, I decided to close my eyes and jump*' (*BI*, 262). From that moment on he begins to redefine the choice between two truthfulnesses, which indicates that the presence of the self cannot go on without acknowledging what exists outside of — or, better

still, breaks away from — it. Even if Claire could be a figment, she no longer is; and if Martin's writing will lead to her demise, he does not hesitate to burn the pages. In his words, 'It's only words. Thirty-seven pages — and nothing but words' (*BI*, 268). Does it mean that there is a difference between the embodiment of an illusion and an illusory embodiment (disembodiment)? And does it mean that to save the former we have to destroy the latter? At least it seems so in the film. Martin cannot bear to exchange Claire's life for the completion of his work, even though 'it's not allowed' (*BI*, 268).

We might link this collision between embodiment and disembodiment with the collisions between film and writing, between the viewer's hope and the artist's obsession, between the ethics of witness and the aesthetics of worklessness. Hence there are Zimmer and Alma who want to retain some traces of Hector's world, and there is Frieda who wants to remove any traces of it. As Zimmer insists at the end of the novel — 'I live with that hope' (*BI*, 321) — his writing is his testimony. Martin's writing is the opposite, but then it explains why he destroys it. For the sake of loved ones, both men find it hard to align themselves with an inexorable commitment to the work and death. Contrary to them, Frieda keeps her promise with a dogged determination. Perhaps, as Alma suggests, she has to be out of her mind, to go about this as quickly as possible, or she may change her mind. Besides, since she has lost her husband, there is nothing she can do to bring him back to life; only something she can do to reinforce the meaning of his death, which 'had become an aesthetic principle in its own right' (*BI*, 279). In her case, filmmaking, instead of writing, is consigned to a Kafkaesque desire that at first glance runs counter to 'the survival of the work'.¹¹⁵ As noted by Blanchot, with Kafka we arrive at a 'circle': 'The writer, then, is one who writes in order to be able to die, and he is one whose power to write comes from an anticipated relation with death' (*SL*, 93). In this light, she adamantly sticks to a circular principle that Hector himself is occasionally tempted to flinch from. It is true that he capitalises on an epistemological loophole — 'If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it fall, does it make a sound or not?' (*BI*, 207) — to resume his vocation, as it were, in exile or death; but it is also true that he later puts forward to Alma the idea of writing a biography. In other words, his first decision establishes his relation with death, which follows the death of his son, and which is supposed to produce the work and predetermine its place in death. On the other hand, his second decision betrays that first one, which follows the death of Alma's mother, and discloses his secret wish to reclaim his life. Is this ambiguity allowed? Is a loss of courage allowed? By whom?

¹¹⁵ 'To write in order not to die, to entrust oneself to the survival of the work: this motive is apparently what keeps the artist at his task.' See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 94; hereafter, *SL*.

Even in the case of Kafka, who did not lose his courage, the possibility of death remained pending. Aside from a profound ambiguity in the circle described by Blanchot — that ‘*Write to be able to die*’ and ‘*Die to be able to write*’ are not easily identical; that it is not easy to ‘seek nothing but the point of departure’, to grasp ‘the interminable’ (*SL*, 94) — there is a practical reason for potential failures. That is, the artist cannot himself ensure his disappearance (together with his work), the realisation of which is entrusted to a living person. In this sense what Kafka so much craved became impossible because Max Brod did not have the heart to burn his manuscripts; the craving is subject to an undetermined factor. This calls up Blanchot’s observation about the nature of dying: ‘What makes me disappear from the world cannot find its guarantee there; and thus, in a way, having no guarantee, it is not certain. This explains why no one is linked to death by *real certitude*’ (*SL*, 95). Fortunately or unfortunately, Frieda is by no means an undetermined factor. ‘Brod couldn’t go through with it.’ Alma states firmly, ‘But Frieda will. There’s no question about that. The day after Hector dies, she’ll take his films into the garden and burn them all — every print, every negative, every frame he ever shot. That’s guaranteed. And you and I will be the only witnesses’ (*BI*, 208). What she does not foresee is that according to Frieda’s plans the biography has to be burned too, that destruction will extend to any evidence or witness. This is a ‘chilling’ gesture, of course, yet ‘beautiful’ and ‘seductive’ (*BI*, 280). Zimmer is deeply aware of its complexity. Before he meets Frieda, Alma has told him that ‘Everything with Frieda was complicated’ (*BI*, 218). After meeting Frieda, he confirms that truth by describing her as ‘one of those rare people in whom mind ultimately wins out over matter’ (*BI*, 228). In this regard, she is the antipode of Alma, whose birthmark already bespeaks her distance from the practice of extreme perfection. To be sure, this is not merely a matter of perfection, at least not in a superficial sense. As Zimmer points out, ‘For Frieda, however, the actions must have been one and the same, two steps in a single, unified process of creation and destruction’ (*BI*, 279). Free from Hector’s past, she will not allow ambiguity to get in the way of this unified, circular process. A terrifying innocence sustains her commitment to death, which is not supposed to reside in this world where to live is to be affected by emotions, desires and memories. (Of course it could also be argued that these are precisely what Hector has been for a long time seeking to repress.¹¹⁶) In a Blanchotian light, this kind of innocence can be associated with ‘the determination to establish with death a relation of freedom’ (*SL*, 95). Maybe that is why film serves as a powerful medium to both accommodate and question this relation with death. Its definitive way of screening a world that is complete and past, as well as its recursive way of showing that world to

¹¹⁶ For instance, Shostak believes that Hector cannot accept loss as ‘historical’. By clinging to a ‘constitutive’ absence, he is ‘frozen in the irretrievable past’. See Debra Shostak, ‘In the Country of Missing Persons: Paul Auster’s Narratives of Trauma’, *Studies in the Novel*, 41.1 (2009), 66-87 (p. 78).

the viewer, reminds us of what Cavell says about the importance and danger of film (as quoted at the beginning of this chapter). It brings to mind Peacock's Baudrillardian account of Hector's life and work, in particular his quasi-religious longing for epistemological certainty, and implicitly, death. Yet the Baudrillardian premise, as we know, is that reality diminishes as simulacra multiply. This explains why Peacock's final conclusion is that 'Paul Auster's rhizomatic structure disallows, even as it seems to invite, a spiritual trajectory which culminates in death, salvation and resurrection'; or, in other words, that Hector's longing is ultimately negated in the postmodern proliferation of representations and images.¹¹⁷ Then, given what has been discussed so far, it is conceivable that a Cavellian account of Hector's world — or, more precisely, Zimmer's relations to it — turns to an alternative hypothesis about film, reality and, in our context, witness.

If Hector's late films survived, like some of his silent comedies, Zimmer might concede that the world is coherent without him, that it can only be screened (in both senses of the word), that viewing it haunts him. From this perspective, Frieda's destruction of those films — 'The films were supposed to die a virgin death, unseen by anyone from the outside world' (*BI*, 280) — exemplifies an absolute end that nothing can begin from and everything should return to. It rejects even a haunting (the self's as well as others') of the world, illustrating the very death and freedom a mortal longs for. Having said that, this destruction becomes imperfect and somewhat traceable through Zimmer's viewing of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*. In Frieda's eyes, his presence 'tainted the purity of the moment', as though it were illicit. In our eyes, his presence rather carries the weight of witness. Without doubt, both interpretations reflect the ambivalent implications of viewing, of the viewer's haunting of what he/she sees, so what is at stake is how we make sense of the ethical balance between secrecy and witness. When the screening of a past world exposes the viewer's distance from it, when the destruction of a secret world exposes the witness's inability to intervene, what can this viewer-witness do to redeem his/her powerlessness? Is a world intended to be shown only after the fact better than one not to be shown at all? Both bear some resemblance to what Cavell calls 'a world complete without me'; that is, I cannot present myself, either because I do not have that opportunity or because I am from the very outset excluded. In this regard, *The Book of Illusions* dramatises a situation in which it falls upon Zimmer to bear witness to the *real* passing of Hector's world, to remember it as past, to know that it is subject to irrevocable loss. His anxiety is amplified by the impossibility of its survival of him, which he feels he must recount against all the odds. This is not to say that recounting or writing can ensure the relief of anxiety — namely by (indirectly) denying that the projected world is complete without him. Also, as Cavell suggests, the viewer may deny or

¹¹⁷ See Jim Peacock, 'Carrying the Burden of Representation: Paul Auster's "The Book of Illusions"', *Journal of American Studies*, 40.1 (2006), 53-69 (p. 68).

affirm his/her absence with equal reason. Yet, in Zimmer's case, what is there left to affirm except his helplessness (as a viewer)? When the return of the world is thwarted, when the 'present judgement upon me' will be the last, how can I not take my anxiety seriously? Thus writing becomes the means for Zimmer to address his anxiety, his connection with reality. As said, writing is no guarantee of either 'our presentness' or 'the presentness of the world'. The suggestion is rather that what can be written (or, in this case, translated) is always something that stands between presence and absence, between the world that is no longer there and the world that may come again. Let us recall Zimmer's last words: 'the story will start all over again. I live with that hope' (*BI*, 321).

CHAPTER SIX

What Becomes of the Everyday: Reinventing Communal Life in *Smoke* and *The Brooklyn Follies*

The previous chapter ended in a discussion about the viewer's haunting of the world that is complete without him/her, about the witness's effort to connect with that world — its reality — through writing. The topic of film and writing, however, has not been brought to an end. As I said, including Auster's multimedial experiments in my study would prove to be profitable. In the first half of this chapter I will continue to examine the relationship between film and writing in Auster's work, and look further into its ontological and moral senses. What is interesting about them is that they are not predetermined but take shape in one story and get remoulded in another. Therefore, it is little wonder that his screenplay, *Smoke*, has a somewhat different take on that relationship. For one thing, the script does not stand independently of the cinematic visualisation of it, namely the movie directed by Wayne Wang. As Auster states in a 1994 interview, 'A screenplay is no more than a blueprint, after all. It's not the finished product. I didn't write the script in a vacuum. I wrote it for Wayne, for a movie that he was going to direct.'¹¹⁸ From this viewpoint his collaborative partnerships with the director and cast should not be overlooked. How they influence the renditions of certain scenes; how these scenes contribute to the general tone of the work; how that tone strikes a reader of Auster as both familiar and strange — these issues are part and parcel of our reflections on the relationship between images and words, the work's aesthetic and moral weight on audiences, as well as the implication of communal sentiment in such works as *Smoke*. The last aspect can be further developed by looking at Auster's 2005 novel *The Brooklyn Follies*. Together they enhance an understanding of the whole range of the human condition in his *oeuvre*. From the work of solitude to the world of *Mitsein*, it comes full circle in a place called New York. To be specific, we will look at the ways in which communal life is reinvented through different notions, such as the Christmas story in *Smoke* and the Hotel Existence in *The Brooklyn Follies*. What underlies these notions is, among other things, a view of human existence as divided into two worlds. Its meaning to a community lies at the core of both works. In this regard, their different emphases require different approaches to the issue, which are shaped not only by the idea of America but also by its actualities.

¹¹⁸ Paul Auster, 'The Making of *Smoke*', in *Collected Screenplays* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), pp. 3-17 (p. 6); hereafter, *CS*.

Given Auster's engagement, as in *The Brooklyn Follies*, with the nineteenth-century American texts and context, his reinvention of communal life recalls those of his predecessors, notably Hawthorne's dramatisation of the Brook Farm experiment in *The Blithedale Romance*. It is worth thinking about the ways in which the power of American utopianism is mediated and problematised by individual narratives. According to Lauren Berlant, a series of utopian experiments in America, from John Eliot's religious project to George Ripley's community, have shown that 'America [...] is always distinctively post-utopian, but has never "known" it'.¹¹⁹ In other words, certain utopian desires rest on certain forms of historical amnesia and repression of knowledge. As implied in Hawthorne's figuration of the 'unwedded bride', as well as the whole Blithedale enterprise, these collective desires or dreams can run counter to personal recollections and experiences, whose tragic dimension leads to demystification. Moreover, Berlant rightly points out that the bachelor narrator in *The Blithedale Romance*, Miles Coverdale, has an ambivalent attitude towards demystification:

On the one hand, until someone like Coverdale (or Hawthorne) "fathoms" the lost material beneath the fantasy, we will be shocked by each failure of the collective utopian project and compelled to repeat the repression of its existence. Revealed knowledge, in this context, is good, because it "grounds" us in history, and reveals to us our motives. But knowledge also heralds the death of desire, and is set up here as an antithesis of love. The figure and agent of the disappointment of utopian community is a bride: the institution whose repetition repeats the national and socialist pattern of utopian fantasy and tragic knowledge is, implicitly, a marriage.
(Berlant, 32)

This ambivalence again points to the tensions between knowledge and faith, between individuality and collectivity. We can discern its resonance with the sort of originary ambivalence in the Kantian settlement, which Cavell unpacks alongside his readings of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. This will come back in my discussion of *The Brooklyn Follies*, with a further specification of the growing pressure upon the community, especially upon the reciprocity and justice it is thought to promise. If the institution of marriage, instead of fulfilling those promises, is a path towards compromise, disenchantment, and ultimately the demise of the 'unwedded bride', then it is perhaps no surprise that Coverdale's desire for romance ends with a lament for the absence of romance. Hawthorne's coalescing of the discourse of love into the discourse of utopianism somehow anticipates Auster's association of domestic and communal affairs with the subject of democracy. Both, in one way or another, chime with Cavell's observation:

[T]he myth of democracy is found unliveable (at least without prior, visionary transformation of ourselves) in the best of American literature. There we find the absence of romance, of the individual woman and man free to consent to one another; in particular, unable to imagine the bearing of a happy family.

¹¹⁹ Lauren Berlant, 'Fantasies of Utopia in *The Blithedale Romance*', *American Literary History*, 1.1 (1989), 30-62 (p. 32).

That said, in *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Smoke* we also perceive the possibility of domestic happiness and communal closeness, which does not appear unless one takes a (second) chance. This leaves plenty of room for a Cavellian rethinking of friendship, marriage and parenthood, in writing as well as in film. Above all, it calls for a Cavellian rethinking of the common, for all these relationships revolve around its double meaning. This also suggests that what is liveable is always to be rediscovered on the way. It can begin with a Christmas story; it may be interrupted by a disaster. In this sense, the disastrous — its eventuality — is always already embedded within the common and the everyday.

A Good Christmas Story

Before we home in on two key scenes in *Smoke*, it is useful to look into the film's genesis, which can be traced back to a Christmas story commissioned by the *New York Times*. Without 'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story' nothing would become possible. I said so not merely because Wayne Wang read it in the paper and entertained the idea of making a movie based on it (CS, 3-4). There is a deeper reason that concerns the bare-bones material and evolves in the process of visualisation. The material in question basically includes two parts: one is about Auggie's photo project, the other about the (so-called) history of his camera. And the latter constitutes the story Auggie shares with Paul, a writer who gets stuck on a commission to write a short story related to Christmas. Either bored or overwhelmed, he does not feel at home with the subject: 'I spent the next several days in despair, warring with the ghosts of Dickens, O. Henry, and other masters of the Yuletide spirit'.¹²⁰ Here let us pause a little and consider the following questions: Why this awkwardness about Christmas? And what after all is a good Christmas story?

I do not ask them on a whim. Seemingly banal or even pointless, they nonetheless lead to a fundamental question about the difficulty of *reconceiving* true happiness in sociability and human interdependence at large. On the surface, the sign of this difficulty or awkwardness is a fear of sentimentality and hypocrisy, which accounts for Paul's problem with Christmas stories or, more crucially, the notion *per se*.

The very phrase 'Christmas story' had unpleasant associations for me, evoking dreadful outpourings of hypocritical mush and treacle. Even at their best, Christmas stories were no more than wish-fulfilment dreams, fairy tales for adults, and I'd be damned if I'd ever allow myself to write something like that. And yet, how could anyone propose to write an unsentimental

¹²⁰ Paul Auster, 'Auggie Wren's Christmas Story', in *Collected Screenplays*, pp. 141-47 (p. 143).

Christmas story? It was a contradiction in terms, an impossibility, an out-and-out conundrum. One might just as well try to imagine a racehorse without legs, or a sparrow without wings. (CS, 143)

The above contention is quite telling. An unsentimental Christmas story, like a realist fairy tale, sounds oxymoronic. It is a dream lighted and burnt out with the poor little girl's matches, a wish destined to be unfulfilled. Yet knowing this contradiction is one thing; resolving it is another. Paul's feelings are conflicted because, in spite of everything, he still wants to write a good story about Christmas. Thus a deeper sense of awkwardness comes not only from the problematic notion but also from one's inability to dismiss or find a substitute for it. If this is the case, we need to ponder what kind of a sentiment that is not sentimental but, say, genuine and profound, and to what extent it can justify a social vision depicted in a Christmas story while not distorting its effect. Perhaps a measurement of effects can help us tell a vision from a fantasy, but in that case this measurement is too difficult to define. It partly depends on our diverse understandings of social reality, partly on our awareness of potential changes and alternatives to what is, as it were, given, and partly on our readiness to recognise each individual's part in the process of constructing reality. The issue invokes Cavell's comments on Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, especially its last scene. The film, Cavell remarks, 'adopts the terms, and at least equals the effect, of *A Christmas Carol*, told as it were from Cratchit's point of view' (WV, 190). It is curious to know whether Paul will be as uneasy about Capra as he is about Dickens. In any event, there is one promise Capra's film does keep, in such a compelling way that a genuine sentiment wins out over an ideological sham. The promise is that a hero (in both senses of the word) can be saved, first by his *realisation* of his indispensable place in others' lives, and second by the *gift* from and of the community. In other words, this wonderful life is possible both for what an individual has done and for what he has received; its promise expressly extends to each member of the hero's family that amounts to the community itself. Cavell notes how deep this sentiment is in the last scene:

The hero's ruin is averted when the good people, the little people, band together with their individual contributions, returning personal favors done for them over the years by this man. The sentiment in the scene is very deep. It has been constructed as cunningly as a Keaton gag; what caps it, finally bursting the dam of tears, is the crowding of this band of goodness into this hero's house, each member testifying individually to his or her affection for him; so that the good society, the good of society at large, is pictured as this man's family (personally sponsored, what's more, by a denizen of heaven). This justice, hence this society, is poetic or nothing. (WV, 190)

Can a good Christmas story end in this justice, this society that is poetic or nothing? In other words, can a transcendental vision of society be allowed to present itself? I believe it can and probably ought to be presented in the way Capra has shown us, as long as we know at the same time that this

vision must be transformed into something more than a mere fantasy. Consequently, outside the scope of this society in question, this end may be opened once again to nothing. Yet in another sense it can no longer be nothing: one's realisation that his/her life is worth living also for others' sake proves to be something valuable in its own right. The gift from others is unbidden; it comes as a touching surprise for the hero and us.

With this in view, we can now better understand why it is so difficult for Paul to write a Christmas story in good faith. Every happiness bestowed upon an individual by his/her community *seems* always already past (say in Capra's film) or not yet in existence. Meanwhile, we can also understand why he does not lay down that burden of writing. Mere deflation cannot dissolve it, since serious questions are posed as to whether or not one is willing to take responsibility for discovering a community and whether or not one still has a hope of finding happiness, or at least compassion, in it. Fortunately, for Paul the process of writing a Christmas story turns out to be the very process of answering both questions. It is when he walks into Auggie's cigar store that things begin to take an interesting turn.

He [Auggie] asked me how I was. Without really meaning to, I found myself unburdening my troubles to him. 'A Christmas story?' he said after I finished. 'Is that all? If you buy me lunch, my friend, I'll tell you the best Christmas story you ever heard. And I guarantee that every word of it is true.'

(CS, 143)

Given Auggie's reply, perhaps we need to modify what was said just now: a happy ending in community could be already past or not yet in existence, but it could also be not yet known to us. Put differently, we have yet to learn to listen and share so that we will not miss something that a possibly good Christmas story can proffer, especially something that has previously been unheard of. Auggie is quiet right on that score: 'if you can't share your secrets with your friends, what kind of a friend are you?' (CS, 147). And his secret is one you may want to verify not with hard evidence but with your heart. By the time Auggie finishes his recount, Paul has got that point: 'I had been tricked into believing him, and that was the only thing that mattered. As long as there's one person to believe it, there's no story that can't be true.' (The equivalent to this inner thought in the movie, I gather, is the closing line spoken by him: 'Life just wouldn't be worth living, would it?') He is by no means gullible; every detail of the tale — how a young man named Robert Goodwin shoplifts at Auggie's cigar store and drops his wallet in running; how Auggie returns that wallet and meets Robert's blind grandmother; how he is mistaken (or not) for Robert and winds up having a Christmas dinner with Granny Ethel; how he on impulse takes a camera from Robert's hauls and later tries to return it but fails — is worth believing because they make a difference in his perceptions of the neighbourhood

he lives in. He rediscovers in its humdrum routine a form of human relationship that is based on make-believe. Here I am speaking of make-believe favourably in view of its role in making and reconstructing meanings of that relationship, which are not circumscribed by a narrow sense of family ties. In this regard, Christmas serves as a stage or occasion for transformative events to take place. Granny Ethel is so glad that her grandson does not forget to see her on Christmas; her initial expectation leaves no time for Auggie to think. The only thing occurring to him, on the spur of the moment, is a kind response to this old lady. He does not intend to deceive her, and it seems to him that she probably detects her mistake too: ‘that woman *knew* I wasn’t her grandson Robert. She was old and dotty, but she wasn’t so far gone that she couldn’t tell the difference between a stranger and her own flesh and blood’ (CS, 145). To some it would appear incredible that Ethel should let go of such a mistake about identity, but this is precisely a *convincing* part of the story — in the sense that one is convinced of another’s benevolence, of human trustfulness, even though, and perhaps because, trustfulness is fragile and inexplicable (as embodied in the fifteen locks she undoes). Indeed, as we have seen, for instance in *Moon Palace*, communication and understanding, by virtue of their plasticity and complexity, contain more mysteries than we think. There is a question about what gives rise to a sense of togetherness. There is a further one about the time for answering it. The point is that we act and oftentimes create certain situations before things are thought out. Except that indefinable conviction in the human, we have nothing to hold. That is why, to the kind of community we are concerned with, improvisation and experience are far more pertinent than planning and institutionalisation. They do not subject us to rules; yet they seem to produce something both more immersive and vulnerable than rules. As Auggie puts it, ‘It was like a game we’d both decided to play — without having to discuss the rules.’

Truth can come not only from revelation but also from concealment. A misunderstanding is not cleared up as no one feels confused; a lie is not exposed as one feels cheated. The ‘game’ played by Auggie and Granny Ethel does not so much go against reality as improvise a reality, which fuses odds and human wishes, facts and perceptions. In a similar vein, Paul is not tricked into believing something false or meretricious; he chooses to believe a new reality that helps him find the interface between human separateness and connection. Like Capra’s film, Auggie’s story taps into the spirit of Christmas, the spirit that promises communion and fellowship. It is hard to say whether the latter must be more down-to-earth (or the former more rosy). After all, we are talking about making a Christmas story good and unsentimental, not about making it gritty and unpalatable. There are some particular reasons, though, for Auggie’s story to strike a chord with Paul. They relate to Auggie’s manner of telling it, as well as to the photo project he has been doing for years.

Human Relations on Film

It is a time to bring in the last scene of *Smoke*, in which Auggie relates the story while having lunch with Paul in a local restaurant. It lasts ten minutes or so, dominated by Harvey Keitel's engaging performance of speech. This is rarely seen at the end of a movie; what is implied, I would argue, is the strong influence of Auster's original text, or its discursive power. In turn I would also argue that in the present case it is the subtle performances that truly realise the full potentials of both storytelling and dialogue. Not only are words brought to life by the rich voices of the speakers, but their characters are animated with soulful expressions on the face and in the eyes. These points highlight the importance of paralinguistic features of communication, but we should further note that these features are captured on film, which determines the unique mode of their existence and the equally unique mode of our perception. This takes us back to the ontology of film — to a world screened from us, to its belated visibility on the condition of our invisibility. It is worthwhile to dwell a moment on its relevance to the sentiment of the scene and the implications generated by the Christmas story.

In the same passage that contains his comments on Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, Cavell writes: 'I doubt that we yet know what becomes, on film, of the distinction, hence the relation, between nature and culture, or between individual and society. [...] society tends to be projected in human relations which are either wholly personal or wholly anonymous' (*WV*, 190). His words invite us to rethink the cinematic projection of community. Later, when he remarks film's tendency to anarchism, the subject is further explored:

I speak here within the condition of the doubt expressed earlier that we yet understand the relation, on film, of individual and society. I might say that we have yet to understand the images of society we offer ourselves. For of course we can be shown a gathering of persons — say around a leader — meant as a gathering of the city within earshot of itself. But what city would this be? Who might these individuals be for one another? What future can a collective image affirm as their common happiness? Such images will suggest that film's natural alternative to an anarchic response to social existence is a utopian one. — Which is more important, for us to know our society to be just, at least open to justice; or for us to know that even in the absence of justice we may enact and satisfy our private need of one another? Which would you rather have, a mind or a brain?

(*WV*, 215)

Our innocent wish, it seems to me, is to embrace both the individual and the collective, to synchronise one's presence with the presence of others. In this light, we would rather deny or at least avoid such a choice: a mind or a brain, a chimerical collectivity or a finite individuality. But in reality facing the difficult choice is precisely what our ideal has brought upon us. We want our society to be open to justice; we imagine ourselves being present as its citizens. Then, disappointed by its actual absence (or else its false presence), we are either tempted by anarchism or subject to a

form of solidarity that is potentially myopic and stifling. As Cavell observes, film's depiction of male comradeship is often associated with imminent threats and revolts, 'as though the sense of belonging together as citizens could only appear as an intimacy of discipline, and only after the nation had been threatened (as by war) or exercised its rejection (as by prisons)' (*WV*, 190). In any case, we would refrain from admitting of any overtly utopian picture of community, whether in a Christmas story or in a movie originating from a Christmas story. From this standpoint, *Smoke* is an interesting case, and its last scene in particular illustrates an attempt to balance film's anarchic approach to our social being with a voluntary participation in reconceiving its, shall we say, transcendental possibility.¹²¹ Precisely because the scene intends to accommodate this possibility, it takes pains to steer clear of a utopian naiveté. That is why, before Auggie begins his tale, the camera shows him reading a newspaper article about a deadly shoot-out in Brooklyn. A close-up of the paper tells us that one of the two robbers killed in the shooting is named Roger Goodwin, a variant of the grandson's name used in the original story. This subtext appears only in the movie (as well as in the shooting script¹²²), and on the surface one can surmise that it helps to reinforce the indication that Auggie makes up the whole story, that he simply borrows the name offhand from a piece of news. However, this addition could be viewed as a more significant prelude to what his tale is going to express. How do we imagine another's life, for instance, someone who might grow up in this neighbourhood and yet ended his life this way? What moral can we draw from a local event, whose theatricality is obscured by its frequent occurrence? Some may prefer social commentary, or treat the revealing close-up as a stinging understatement, or may simply consider Auggie's subsequent improvisation as less than serious. What these readings dismiss is precisely the seriousness of his fabulation, which neither makes light of individual and social fallibility nor imposes a moral lesson but reimagines his role in others' lives so that the latter, in relation to his own conduct, can truly be a concern to him. This fabulation may or may not correspond to personal recollections, but, with a view to confabulation, it creates a chance of sensitising us to the good and evil we are capable of, hence to the imperfection and perfectibility of the world we inhabit. His (Auggie's/Keitel's) performance — in the sense that this *is* a performance and, more crucially, contains a theatrical (or

¹²¹ Duneer draws a comparison between *Smoke* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Based on Sartrean existentialism and Rushdie's comments on *Oz*, her analysis stresses the power of imagination, which, when put to good use, presents possibilities of shaping a new future. Thus, if an American dream betokens a utopian vision, it nonetheless is far from complete and should accommodate the freedom of choice and unpredictability. See Anita J. Duneer, 'Brooklyn in the Making: Reading the Existential Utopian Vision in Paul Auster's "Smoke" through "The Wizard of Oz"', *Midwest Quarterly*, 50.1 (2008), 57-73.

¹²² The entire shooting script of *Smoke* can be found in *Collected Screenplays*, pp. 21-139 (p. 130). Subsequent quotations come from this written version and may be slightly different from the dialogue in the film.

you might call poetic) gesture towards daily life — lends itself to whatever the chance can bring about. This is where its pathos lies. The story, as well as the performance, is believable or nothing.

The scene demonstrates how intricate a conflation of storytelling and performance is. Keitel's expressive face is an outward manifestation of this intricacy. The camera captures a fleeting shade of graveness on his face while he puts down the newspaper, ponders briefly and begins the story. Then liveliness and conviviality come back, brightening his face as he describes the photos in Goodwin's wallet and recounts what comes of his decision to return that wallet on Christmas. Yet when he approaches the last turn of events, namely the regrettable act of taking a camera from Granny Ethel's house, the shot zooms in on his increasingly grim and doleful face. By the time the story comes to a close, the close-up has tightly framed his mouth, as if magnifying what the scene is essentially about, that is, the act of telling a story. It is immediately followed by another close-up of Paul's eyes, suffused with a kind of wistful sympathy. After a second of silence, we hear him asking (we cannot see his mouth): 'Did you ever go back to see her?' (CS, 138). Auggie's reply prompts a conjecture: Ethel probably spent her last Christmas with Auggie because a few months later, when he tried to return the camera, she was not there. Of course it is only a likelihood proposed by Paul, but we sense that by seeing this likelihood he not only lends credence to the story but derives a deeper meaning of their make-believe Christmas reunion from its truthfulness. At the same time, because the meaning can perhaps only be kept alive by an awareness of eventual parting and a confessed regret, the sentiment evinced in the final dialogue is intrinsically nuanced. This adds an ambiguous touch to the scene. With the witty way Auggie downplays his 'good deed' ('I lied to her, and then I stole from her. I don't see how you can call that a good deed.'), his enigmatic grin and intimation ('And now you've got your Christmas story, don't you?'), as well as Paul's tacit understanding ('Yes, I suppose I do.'), the dynamism of confabulation is successfully maintained until the moment they light up cigarettes and puff on them. We see smoke curling upwards and fading into the air, and we *seem* to know what it conveys.

I have tried to delve into the thick of the scene, to recall those details presented to the viewer, because only by paying attention to precise details can we perceive what Cavell calls 'the poetry of the ordinary' (TOS, 14). Still, it might seem to some that the truthfulness of a performance should not be confused with the truthfulness of a story. But to my mind the objection misses the mark. If there is any question regarding the scene, it is why the two cannot be separated. According to Auster, the original idea was to intercut the restaurant scene with shots that bodied forth the content of Auggie's story, but it did not work out in practice (CS, 12). The crux of the matter, I think, is what *looks real as a whole* to us on film. Why do we want to let time unfold on its own, to experience the

natural presence of a happening, to immerse ourselves fully in the reception of a story, to see Auggie's expressions while he speaks? At this point it should be clear that, against the backdrop of film's anarchism, its concern with reality is no longer simply phenomenological. We should ask what is embedded in our illusion of being together with Auggie and Paul in that restaurant. We somehow identify ourselves with Paul, who sits across the table and looks at Auggie; however, unlike him, we are not present to Auggie. The significance of this 'viewing unseen' (in Cavell's words), in the present case, is that we are simultaneously approaching human intimacy and displaced from it. On the one hand, we need to concur with Auster's comments on the last shot: 'It's as if the camera is bulldozing through a brick wall, breaking down the last barrier against genuine human intimacy. In some way, the emotional resolution of the entire film is contained in that shot' (CS, 13). On the other hand, we also feel, at the back of our mind, that we do not really belong there and in a sense nothing, including 'genuine human intimacy', can be retrieved from there. Consequently, we are facing another, more intractable ambivalence: even if we, like Paul, are moved by Auggie's account and try to discover its truthfulness, we are not, as it were, discovered by it individually, which in turn means its world is in effect complete without us and our social existence is not yet developed to the full. Perhaps we can never escape from film's anarchism, not only in terms of the society it shows us, but also in terms of the position it puts us in. 'The anarchism of movies', Cavell writes, 'is already contained in the condition of viewing unseen' (WV, 215). This is not to say that film is culpable for the (modern) condition of the viewer/citizen; instead, by questioning 'the myth of democracy' (WV, 214), by hinting at (sometimes in a form of concealing) our condition, it requires us to reimagine and rediscover the possibility of community. If one is unsettled by his/her invisibility, then there is a chance that he/she will be awakened by the overwhelming presence of a world that is not actually here. Otherwise it would be hard to understand why an apparently plain scene should be placed at the end of a movie and shot in such a bold manner. The decision has its moral justification, only insofar as we are aware of our condition and responsibility.

It seems to me that a sense of responsibility is likely to stem from a certain anxiety characterising film audiences, which Cavell links with 'an experience of my contingency' (WV, 212). As he puts it, 'This sense of contingency may express itself mythologically as the contingency that I am not *there* — as though my absence requires an explanation.' Shortly afterwards, he puts it in another way: 'The sense of contingency may express itself unmythologically as the sense that I am *here*, that it is my fate to exist and while I exist to be one place rather than any other' (WV, 213). What is the distinction between the two expressions? To make it explicit, we might think about the distinction between my displacement *from* the subject (say human relations) on film and my displacement

before it. At first glance they seem to be only two ways of saying the same thing, but we should not forget that different expressions sometimes do make a world of difference; they reflect different perspectives on, and attitudes to, the contingency of one's existence that correlates with a state of displacement triggered by film. In other words, which one would you give weight to, 'there' or 'here'? Do you believe you should belong there but are condemned to the place you are now in? Or do you hold on to the moment of being here but would also like to consider the implications of your absence from another place? I am not suggesting that these perspectives/attitudes must collide and one has to choose one or the other; what I have in mind is that one's anxiety cannot easily settle into either frustration or fascination, that the twin ideas of contingency and fate, of placement and displacement, are both intriguing and inscrutable. Then it conversely indicates the reason why to some they are not instructive questions at all; they watch the world on the screen with little anxiety, hence with little interest.

The viewer's experience is not merely associated with a sense of his/her contingency; it is also affected by the evanescence of the cinematic subject. The peculiarity of this phenomenon, without doubt, is that it is at the same time preserved and perpetuated. Put differently, once captured at a specific moment, the subject becomes timeless on film. From this perspective, we might claim that the notions of evanescence and permanence are held in abeyance by film's automatic transcription. Any serious thinking on film would not discount this feature of photogenesis, but this is not my major point here. Let us think further about what Cavell says about this feature: 'In a film, unlike a painting or sculpture or piece of theater, we are given (captivated by) a forever fixed, captured, image of a human being in this precise environment, in these precise attitudes and relations, remaining silent or saying precisely these words precisely this way' (*CW*, 117). The passage contains not so much a statement of fact as an epistemological question, a question raised by Thoreau in *Walden* (which appears as the epigraph to Cavell's *The World Viewed*) — 'Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?' Yet it also seems that this question about the singularity of each being, each relation, each environment, as if emphasising their unrepeatability, is not truly a question waiting for answers. (Traditional answers, sceptical or otherwise, have been eclipsed by the invention of the camera.) Rather, it waits for the viewer's response, that is, his/her responsiveness to the precise moment when the above elements are crystallised, as well as to the implications of their taking shape in a particular way. Therefore, the discovery of visual implications depends partly on what is *shown*, but, more importantly, on what is *perceived*. In Cavell's words, it depends on 'the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that *matter to us*' (*TOS*, 183; my italics). This reminds me

of the central locale in *Smoke* and in its sequel *Blue in the Face*. From New York to Brooklyn to Auggie's cigar store, the idea of a place's specificity is concerned not so much with its location as with its relation to a community. As González notes, 'The cigar store acts as a metaphor for this area of Brooklyn (Park Slope) where different races can meet and lonely disoriented characters have the time to relate to one another and establish family-like relationships.'¹²³ Let us develop this strand of thought alongside Auggie's photo project.

Auggie calls the project 'my life's work' (*CS*, 43). Like the Christmas story, it comes from Auster's original article published in the *New York Times*, which is connected with the former by an object, namely Auggie's camera. In *Smoke*, the relevant sequence begins with a scene taking place in Auggie's cigar store where Paul spots a camera on the counter. He is a little surprised to learn that it actually belongs to Auggie. A new dimension of an old acquaintance has thus been uncovered: 'So you're not just some guy who pushes coins across a counter' (*CS*, 41). And the other's rejoinder is quite revealing: 'That's what people see, but that ain't necessarily what I am' (*CS*, 42). Their dialogue then shifts to the subject of Auggie's pictures, scintillating with his usual, adroit avoidance of pretension: 'Well, let's not exaggerate. I take pictures. You line up what you want in the viewfinder and click the shutter. No need to mess around with all that *artista* crap.' These remarks set the tone for what is coming up, and they somehow recall Cavell's view: 'the perception of poetry is as open to all, regardless as it were of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject' (*TOS*, 14). I would not say that Auggie's attitude is absolutely identical to Cavell's, but it is worth devoting more time to a comparison for the next scene testifies to its affinity with the general tenor of Cavell's discussion of automatism and perception. As when Paul has difficulty in creating a Christmas story, this time Auggie teaches him another important thing that has scarcely crossed his mind before. It is how to perceive the ordinary, its poetry, as well as its repetition of the unrepeatable. To do so one does not need talent so much as patience, because only the latter can help sustain a seemingly dull process of poring over the everyday minutiae. And Auggie's project is intended exactly as a collection of them: every morning at eight o'clock he will stand in front of his cigar store, at the corner of Third Street and Seventh Avenue, and take a picture of almost the same view. The result is fourteen albums, more than four thousand pictures. Paul is not at all prepared for that. He flipped through one album after another, nonplused by the sheer repetitiveness of a familiar scene. 'They're all the same' (*CS*, 43). This is his first impression. There is no denying that Auggie's work may be viewed as monotonous; then it only means that life may be viewed in the same fashion.

¹²³ Jesús Ángel González, 'Words Versus Images: Paul Auster's Films from "Smoke" to "The Book of Illusions"', *Literature Film Quarterly*, 37.1 (2009), 28-48 (p. 30). See also his discussion of how *Blue in the Face* further develops the theme of community, including its portrayals of ethnic minorities and women, as well as its criticism of capitalism.

Auggie certainly would not take things this way. The implication of similarities consists in their subtle differences. He smiles and tells Paul to ‘slow down’: ‘You’ll never get it if you don’t slow down, my friend.’ He goes on to explain, ‘each one is different from every other one. [...] Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones. And sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear’ (CS, 44). He is right. Following his advice, Paul begins to study more closely the pictures and unexpectedly spots his deceased wife Ellen in one of them. Pointing to that picture, he bursts into tears: ‘It’s Ellen. Look at her. Look at my sweet darling’ (CS, 45).

The scene is striking for its juxtaposition of Paul’s contrasting spirits. The viewer will get no less baffled if he/she does not, like Paul, pay close attention to what is shown to him/her. This necessitates the close-ups of some of Auggie’s pictures, in which the same people’s gestures and expressions differ. Does singularity come out of recurrence? If so, it could mean that what recurs is actually changing. That is to say, what happens at a precise time and in a specific place can be captured only once; yet only by an *attempt* to repeat the unrepeatable — though the spot can remain geographically unchanged, the same time today is *not* the same time tomorrow — can one discern the true face of the everyday. Auggie feels himself attached to its successiveness and fluidity. After all what is recorded is his ‘corner’, ‘one little part of the world’ where ‘things happen’ (CS, 43). Doing this project for fourteen years proves him to be a man caring about his life, which he connects with many other lives converging in this place. And this attentiveness to detail in a way chimes with Cavell’s reference to what Emerson and Thoreau admire about ‘American business’, that is, in Thoreau’s words, ‘a little more Yankee shrewdness’ (TOS, 15). (Perhaps just ‘a little more’, or one will only perceive the everyday, not its poetry.) It is worth noting that his reference immediately follows a passage on ‘the perception of the ordinary’ (as cited above). What Cavell wants to stress is our tendency to ‘miss the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject’. This tendency or ‘failure’ can but be attributed to ourselves, ‘as if to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things — that is, to fail the perception that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong — requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves’ (TOS, 14). I have noticed that here his comments mainly apply to the case of film, whose existence in motion is sometimes differentiated by him from photography’s stillness. However, it seems to me that Auggie’s situational approach, as well as his strict adherence to time (there is a subsequent shot showing him looking at his watch and triggering the camera shutter), essentially underscores the notion of evanescence. This harks back to Paul’s interior monologue contained in the original article: ‘Auggie was photographing time, I realized, both natural time and human time, and he was doing it by planting himself in one tiny corner of the world and willing it to

be his own, by standing guard in the space he had chosen for himself' (CS, 142). From the viewpoint of cinematic language, one would hope to optimise visual recourses to convey a similar message. It is of course not an easy task to concretise a thought or feeling. Perhaps that is why Paul's emotional reaction to the photographic appearance of his dead wife is chosen as a cinematic substitute for the verbalisation of his understanding of Auggie's project. And that is also why it falls upon us to 'guess' and 'trace' the meaning of human interaction passing on the screen (for instance, seeing Paul on the point of tears, Auggie gives him a comforting pat on the shoulder). Images are powerful in that they sometimes speak louder than words, but it does not mean that we do not need to make efforts to perceive what they speak in their muteness.

Overall, the two scenes in *Smoke* illustrate certain reflective ways in which human relations can be presented on film. Both are aware of the nature and possibility of the medium they engage with, and both embed this awareness in the key theme they explore. This is not to say that other parts of the movie are less important; they form a web of relations that flesh out the communal theme. For example, Rashid conceals his identity so as to get acquainted with his father Cyrus and his new family, hoping one day he can have the courage to tell him the truth and be accepted as a family member. On the contrary, Felicity refuses to face the question of who her father is and makes hurtful remarks to her mother, who implores her to take care of herself for the sake of the baby she is carrying. These scenarios of re-parenting lost children produce complex effects but in general remain open to the possibility of happiness or, at least, of reconciliation. Moreover, the subject should not just be construed in a literal sense. Indeed, a deeper sense of family ties, as indicated in the case of Paul and Rashid (the former can be viewed as a father figure who offers the latter a place to stay; yet most importantly he acts as a friend and interlocutor and once playfully claims to be the latter's son¹²⁴), depends on a willingness to reconceive one's relationship with others, to engage in moral conversation with them, to discover the worth of a common world one continues to feel responsible for. This is part of what the title 'Smoke' means. As Auster points out, 'Smoke is something that is never fixed, that is constantly changing shape. In the same way that the characters in the film keep changing as their lives intersect' (CS, 13-14). In this light, the trope of smoke bears on human relations, which can either effect drastic changes or pass into oblivion. They may be partially traceable but can never be wholly graspable. It is why one has the illusion that they are *part of* the self. This is not to say that the reverse is true — at least not apt in expression. What can be said of

¹²⁴ It happens in the bookshop scene. Going along with Rashid's joke, Paul says to April: 'It's true. Most people assume I'm his father. It's a logical assumption — given that I'm older than he is and so on. But the fact is, it's the other way around. He's my father, and I'm his son' (CS, 92). We might take this as a display of deadpan humour, but there is some truth in his flippant remark. This may also echo the story told by Paul in the previous scene, which is about a young man who finds his father's body in the Alps.

human relations, apart from what has already been said, is that they permeate everyone's life and connote the notion of 'existence'. This brings us to *The Brooklyn Follies*, in which the notion in question is particularly highlighted.

The Effects of Hotel Existence

In many ways *The Brooklyn Follies* is a companion to *Smoke*: it is set mainly in Brooklyn; it is loosely structured as a compilation of various narrative fragments; its narrator, Nathan Glass, exudes the sorts of shrewdness and humour that characterise Auggie Wren; it even alludes to the subject of smoking, which is thematised in the novel that attracts Nathan, namely Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*. And, above all, it is another attempt to explore the idea of America, which, like writing and smoking, can neither be cured nor be given up. Only this time the idea has been seriously wounded by a fatal blow, a disaster that not only haunts the last page of the book — the book that contains many parts that strive for a 'city of words', as Cavell would put it (or Kant's intelligible world, or what Emerson calls 'the world I think') — but befalls the actual city in our sensuous world. It is curious that a post-9/11 novel could be written in a way that seems at once remote from and pertinent to the event. According to Nigel Rodenhurst, some critics, like Mark Brown, consider Auster's engagement with 9/11 as 'tangential', whereas others are committed to unearthing social, political clues to his post-9/11 works.¹²⁵ The division of opinion harks back to what we discussed in the introduction, namely the issue of literary engagement and detachment. But this issue alone does not make *The Brooklyn Follies* a curious case. My own impression is that other related issues, such as the juxtapositions of the ordinary and the disastrous, of the comic and the tragic, have the potential to deepen our understandings of the book, especially in terms of its treatment of the personal and the political.

As one may perceive, Nathan's tone of voice is not grief-ridden, not even strained; yet his last words about happiness perhaps generate the profoundest resonance in all of Auster's novels, which is no less powerful than Anna Blume's dystopian account in *In the Country of Last Things*, or Zimmer's shock at the sudden loss of his wife and sons in a plane crash. Given that *The Book of Illusions* was published in 2002, the very phrase 'a plane crash' (*BL*, 5) mentioned at its beginning evokes the tragic event in 2001. Zimmer pulls himself together by writing about comedy movies; likewise, Nathan creates a project for himself after barely surviving his lung cancer, which is called *The Book of Human Folly*. In this regard, both cases imply that the comic episodes of life are never far from the poignant ones and that the unutterable traumas may be channelled through something

¹²⁵ See Nigel Rodenhurst's review of Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* and Mark Brown's *Paul Auster*, in *Journal of American Studies*, 43 (2009), 155-56 (p. 156).

quite opposite. In Nathan's case, it is as though horror had to arrive at the last minute, assailing those unprepared for the rupture of the ordinary. This is something we should look into later. Our current task is to continue with the thought on existence, which is key to our discussion as a whole, and I propose to develop it along with the idea of America. Conjoining the two notions is called for not only from a Cavellian perspective; in fact both are brought up in a conversation between three characters in the novel, Nathan, his nephew Tom Wood, and their friend Harry Brightman.

The conversation takes place in a French restaurant in Brooklyn on 27 May 2000. It is recorded in a section named 'A Night of Eating and Drinking'. I call it a record because, except a short description introducing the scene, it contains almost nothing but passages of dialogue, which reads like a script. Corresponding to this impression is the statement in that description: 'Once the conversation begins, further stage directions will be kept to a minimum. It is the author's opinion that only the words spoken by the above-mentioned characters are of any importance to the narrative.'¹²⁶ Here what is spotlighted is the staging of a discursive space that seems to stand apart from other sections. This is as remarkable as the last scene of *Smoke*; the difference is that the present scene is reserved for arguments and ideas. It begins with Tom's expression of dissatisfaction with the world, the 'it' that Harry asks him to clarify (*BF*, 100). From 'the big black hole' (*BF*, 100) to 'the horrible place this country has turned into' (*BF*, 101), it becomes clear that he is talking about the actual America that disappoints him. At the same time, he believes all of them, willy-nilly, 'are right in the thick of it' (*BF*, 100). The question is whether one can escape and where one can go. On the one hand, it is true that there is no way out. As Harry says to Tom, 'Out? And where are you going to go?' (*BF*, 101). On the other hand, new questions ensue: *Can we find another way of living here? Can we reinvent America?* This is the issue addressed in Tom's undergraduate thesis on Thoreau and Poe, which is recalled by his uncle Nathan during the talk:

A place to live life on your own terms. That's what we're talking about, isn't it? "Imaginary Edens" revisited. But in order to do that, you have to be willing to reject society. That's what you told me. It was a long time ago, but I think you also used the word *courage*. Do you have the courage, Tom? Does any one of us have the courage to do that?

(*BF*, 101)

We should not take these thoughts at face value or at the moment rush to any conclusions; besides, they end in questions. I suggest that we consider the circumstances under which they are presented and what effects they produce. Seven years ago, when Tom discussed his thesis with Nathan, he was going to be a promising postgraduate student. According to him, the similarity between Poe and Thoreau is that 'each took it upon himself to reinvent America' (*BF*, 16). He notes in their works the

¹²⁶ Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2006), p. 99; hereafter, *BF*.

presence of ‘the ideal room, the ideal house, and the ideal landscape’ (*BF*, 15). What’s more, given the times they lived in, it is self-evident that they experienced two Americas. In Tom’s words, ‘Both men believed in America, and both men believed that America had gone to hell, that it was being crushed to death by an ever-growing mountain of machines and money’ (*BF*, 16). Of course Poe is in many aspects not a transcendentalist, but the double world both men face points to a fundamental discrepancy that tends to preoccupy anyone who believes (or once believed) in the possibility of America. There is no reason not to believe that Tom once held such a belief. Then, seven years later, when Nathan by accident finds him working in Harry’s bookshop, he has already abandoned his doctoral dissertation on Melville’s epic poem *Clarel*. ‘I bit off more than I could chew, Uncle Nat’ (*BF*, 22). This is what he tells Nathan. To add to Nathan’s surprise, his prior job is driving a taxi in New York. Does the contrast (if we could call it a contrast) mean that Tom’s dream has been crushed, and that he has turned himself into one of those living in what Thoreau calls ‘quiet desperation’? I ask this question because we are apt to look at Tom’s change as his failure; and we may connect his apparently pessimistic view of the world, as expressed in the dinner conversation mentioned above, with his own misfortunes. But the connection is unfounded. Tom does not seem to be the kind of person who merely complains and does nothing about his life, nor does he cling to a past that has become unliveable. Granted, a part of him is chagrined by the current state of things, but this is not the whole picture: ‘another part of him thought that perhaps this job would do him some good, that if he paid attention to what he was doing and why he was doing it, the cab would teach him lessons that couldn’t be learned anywhere else’ (*BF*, 25). In other words, he wants to live with hope, to undergo what comes his way. If we think this is pure self-deception or feeble compromise, then we are underestimating (our capacity for receiving) what life offers us. Tom’s riffs on ‘the ontological value of the cabbie’s life’ (*BF*, 30), such as ‘speculating on such questions as spiritual strength and importance of finding one’s path through patience and humility’ (*BF*, 27), albeit self-mocking, might be a sly confession — a confession of his way of finding a second chance.

He had found a method to atone for his stupidity, and if he could survive the experience without losing heart, then perhaps there was some hope for him after all. By sticking with the cab, he wasn’t trying to make the best of a bad situation. He was looking for a way to make things happen, and until he understood what those things were, he wouldn’t have the right to release himself from his bondage.

(*BF*, 25)

I am not suggesting that his choice is the only feasible one for examining day-to-day lived experience, and I certainly do not wish to romanticise the seedy side of urban life. My point is rather that we cannot exclude the possibility that doing this job opens up a way of knowing the world (not

least the city and the people living in it), as well as a way of thinking (say Tom's seemingly facetious argument about 'real transcendence' [BF, 31]). Hence it does not *necessarily* go against what Tom is supposed to be. (Besides, what is he *supposed* to be?) After all who you are depends on how you live and whether you take your life seriously. If the change from Dr. Thumb (a nickname given by Nathan) to a taxi driver means 'missed possibility', which Cavell associates with 'the sense of our leading lives of what they [Emerson and Thoreau] call quiet desperation' (TOS, 15), it also suggests that, as long as Tom does not take the job to seal his fate, possibility or possibilities (though presently not clear to him) can be regained from an 'Emersonian loss'.

In *The Brooklyn Follies*, possibilities always go hand in hand with the connection of people. The first possibility in Tom's life appears with Harry's job offer, the second with his reunion with Nathan, the third with the three men's talk in the restaurant. As I said, we need to take into account changing circumstances when weighing certain thoughts. We have looked into Tom's case; my feeling is that he does not really mean it when he says he wants out. Nathan asks him whether he has the courage to reject society, but the effect induced by his question is whether we have the courage not to escape but to little by little change our condition. This signals the turn of their conversation. Tom does not immediately answer Nathan. It is Harry who then puts forward the idea of the Hotel Existence. In his opinion, 'A hotel represented the promise of a better world, a place that was more than just a place, but an opportunity, a chance to live inside your dreams' (CS, 102). There is no denying that Harry's dreams in a sense smack of escapism — what Tom calls 'Adolescent jerk-off material' that is 'getting us nowhere' (CS, 106). Yet his definition of existence does lead us to a crucial point: 'Existence was bigger than just life. It was everyone's life all together' (CS, 103). Tom does not challenge the existence part of Harry's idea, which coincides with what he later declares:

I want to live in a new way, that's all. If I can't change the world, then at least I can try to change myself. But I don't want to do it alone. [...] What's my Hotel Existence, Harry? I don't know, but maybe it has something to do with living with others, with getting away from this rathole of a city and sharing a life with people I love and respect.

(BF, 107)

What he has in mind is 'a community' (BF, 107), with Nathan, Harry, Flora (Harry's demented daughter) and Rufus (a Jamaican assistant working in Harry's bookshop) as its potential members. He also thinks about Aurora, his sister who has gone missing. The plan may sound no more practical than Harry's juvenile heroism of rescuing children from the ravages of the Second World War. That said, from both men's descriptions emerge what Nathan later calls 'the principles of Hotel Existence' (BF, 215). The significance of the principles, I would argue, is their emphasis on the meaning of existence or *Mitsein*. Therefore, they are not simply concerned with inner refuge or exile.

Admittedly, the issue is always embedded in the talk, for instance, when Tom says that he wants to change himself even though he cannot change the world (once and for all?). But he may or may not realise that, if he does it together with others he loves and respects, the world will change. In other words, it will no longer be the same for all of them. This invokes two matters in Cavell's further discussion of Emerson and Kant in *Cities of Words*. The first, as indicated in the chapter on *Leviathan*, is a distinction between Emerson's and Kant's responses to the relation between the will and the world. An Emersonian concern is the standing of the will against social conformity not, as Kant would insist, the purity of moral obligation. Beneath this distinction is the growing burden of 'the world in which it is doubtful for whom I speak and who speaks for me' (*CW*, 142). Against this backdrop of doubt comes the second matter about how we can enter the realm of ends (a sort of Kantian utopia), that is, how reciprocity can be achieved between us. If we consider an Emersonian take on the issue, using moral perfectionism to modify the Kantian universal law, we might say that through conversation (or even confrontation) change is likely to happen in a realm where members treat each other as respectable equals. In this regard, as Cavell claims, the Kantian 'perception of duty, or obligation to show duty's purity, is one within which Emersonian perfectionism will not seem a moral outlook at all, [...] because its concerns for others are characteristically for friends, hence based on attraction not obligation' (*CW*, 133). This might be viewed as an Emersonian way of *letting* the will come into effect, at the expense of Kant's grand gesture of objectivity. It somehow reminds me of Tom's opening remark: 'I'm not talking about saving the world. *At this point*, I just want to save myself. And some of the people I care about. Like you, Nathan. And you, too, Harry' (*BF*, 100; my italics).

Another reason for rejecting inner refuge as the main principle is that the Hotel Existence first and foremost represents 'a refuge for lost children' (*BF*, 103), which recalls the subject of re-parenting lost children in *Smoke*. As we shall see, this phrase of Harry's suggests more than he intends it to mean. In a broad sense we may put several characters in this category of lost children, Rufus, Aurora and so on. The former is saved by Harry, the latter by Nathan. What I want to highlight here, though, is the case of Aurora's daughter, Lucy, who one day appears at the door of Tom's apartment. She abstains from speech. As later revealed, this is dictated by her father's religious belief, but at the moment Tom has no idea what has happened to her and her mother as she refuses to give any information. Having little experience with children, he turns to Nathan for help, who at least has an extra room to put her up. As a temporary solution, they decide to send her to the home of Tom's stepsister in Burlington, who is presumably more capable of looking after her. Then comes the most critical part of the story. Beyond everyone's expectation, the Hotel Existence is discovered on their

way to Burlington, with the help of Lucy's prank, which, of course, is originally intended to frustrate the 'Burlington Solution' (*BF*, 170). The girl's quirks and quiddities never cease to amaze Tom and Nathan; at the same time, the two adults possess certain qualities that make them more affable than Tom's stepsister. One is solicitude, the other imagination. And the latter, as already found in *Smoke*, relates to storytelling. During the drive Tom discusses with Nathan the link, via Poe, between Mallarmé and Whitman. In his vast store of anecdotes there is a different Kafka, who wrote his first novel about an imaginary America, and who used his tale to solace a little girl that had lost her doll. In one sense the dream Kafka created in earnest runs parallel to the one Tom and Nathan invent for Lucy, for themselves and perhaps for the Chowders as well. It is when Nathan's car breaks down in Vermont and they have to find a place to stay as repair is underway that the Chowder Inn comes into the picture. The inn is supposed to open on the Fourth of July and everything is still in preparation. Yet thanks to the generosity of its owner, Stanley Chowder, Nathan, Tom and Lucy are welcomed as 'the first paying customers in the history of the Chowder Inn' (*BF*, 166). This marks the beginning of their Hotel Existence, which lasts four days. In the section 'Dream Days at the Hotel Existence', Nathan writes: 'I want to remember it all. If all is too much to ask, then some of it. No, more than some of it. Almost all. Almost all, with blanks reserved for the missing parts' (*BF*, 167). 'All', 'some of it', 'almost all' — these expressions are loaded with nostalgia and unease. Nathan seems to be expressing his homesickness for a place that has never become a home (partly the reason why it is called a hotel). Or, let us say, he is trying to remember something that does not seem to have happened, something like America. In this light, it is no wonder that the threesome have to leave the Hotel Existence before the Fourth of July, which means that the day has not yet come, that the history of an ideal America has not yet been entered, and that 'blanks' have to be 'reserved for the missing parts'.

A figurative gesture in this section is self-evident. Its implication is found in every detail of narrative and dialogue — in the scenery viewed, the book read, the topic discussed, the interest kindled, the hope dashed. Both Nathan and Tom know that they have not 'driven all the way up here for nothing' (*BF*, 171), that they are in congenial company, that Lucy begins to talk again. Meanwhile, they are also wary of hoping for more than they can afford, both literally and metaphorically. The fact is that a forged manuscript of *The Scarlet Letter* cannot buy them a Hotel Existence. Harry's death, which puts an end to their 'dream days', is a dear price paid for his misplaced belief in fiction. 'Misplaced' (*BF*, 129) is the word used by him to justify his attempted forgery; ironically it is perhaps even more so in terms of his belief in a former lover who betrays him. Nathan has warned him of Gordon's ulterior motive, but Harry is determined to go ahead in any

case: ‘If you’re right about Gordon, then my life’s finished anyway’ (*BF*, 132). What does that mean? It means that precautions against double-crosses cannot redeem a loss of faith in someone he once loved, that he will have to face his own despair and ruin even (or especially) when precautions take effect. In a wider sense we may ask: how can one distinguish a true belief in dreams from a false one? It is a difficult question since one can have both at one and the same time, as exemplified by a man like Harry Brightman, whose former name, Harry Dunkel, denotes ‘dark’ (*BF*, 36). If we cannot always separate dreams from illusions, perhaps we have to let them happen or else be interrupted so that they do not turn into something misguided. In addition, we have to discover dreams from where we stand, which may be the only way to start over again, to find another intersection of two worlds. From this perspective, Nathan’s confession that he remains attached to Brooklyn (‘I have only recently begun a new life of my own, and I’m perfectly content with the decision I made to settle in Brooklyn’ [*BF*, 181]) suggests a movement of the Hotel Existence — not exactly in the sense that it migrates from one place to another, but in the sense that it has latent effects on the existence proper. The Hotel Existence will not disappear, because it has not been fully realised, because its effects do not grant us the permanence of bliss but return us (time and again) to its transience.

The Ordinary and the Disastrous

What then are the effects of the Hotel Existence? Or let us put the question this way: Have Nathan, Tom and all those we care about been saved? It seems that Harry has forever lost the chance. That said, one thing enables him to save others after his death — not a forged manuscript but his will. Devastated, Rufus does not want to be a beneficiary of it. He leaves America for ‘The only America he believed in was the one that had Harry Brightman in it’ (*BF*, 219). Tom temporarily maintains the business of Harry’s bookshop. Now that the property is bequeathed to him, he has to decide on his future. As Nathan observes, ‘what did he want? That was the fundamental question, and for the time being it was the one question that has no answer. Was Tom still interested in pursuing the idea of the Hotel Existence?’ (*BF*, 226). What Tom forgets to take into account is the surprise in store for him: Honey Chowder comes to New York with a view to furthering their relationship. Early during their Vermont sojourn Nathan notes that ‘Tom has met his match’ (*BF*, 178). Later, when Tom explains the idea of the Hotel Existence to Honey, Nathan confirms himself in that view as Stanley Chowder’s daughter is obviously touched by his nephew’s words. The manifestation of attunement here in a way coincides with the possibility of happiness Cavell discovers in the Hollywood remarriage comedies. His interpretation of *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) is an example, which

associates the Philadelphia in its title with ‘the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and of the Constitution of the United States’ (*TOS*, 15). Similarly, we might recall Honey’s reappearance in front of Tom when he is reading ‘an old softcover edition of *The Federalist Papers*’ (*BF*, 237). Does that have an equal effect of invoking the meaning of America, that is, in Cavell’s words, ‘the name of the locale of the second chance, or it was meant to be’ (*TOS*, 15)? Put otherwise, does it suggest a new possibility of love and respect that figure in Tom’s longing for a community? Honey has confidence not only in herself but in Tom, whom she views as ‘a great man’ (*BF*, 239). For the moment the opportunity for further development presents itself as something the couple can hold on to, not to mention another clincher, namely Lucy’s endorsement. The three form a provisional family, and Tom’s future begins to take shape. Broadly speaking, the little girl is the sign of hope for the entire community. As Nathan says to Tom after Lucy returns to her mother, ‘a part of Lucy still belongs to us, to each one of us. She’s our girl, too, and nothing will ever change that’ (*BF*, 281). Perhaps he is also alluding to the Hotel Existence, which lingers, or emerges, in Brooklyn.

The conjunction of lingering and emerging is characteristic of what we might call the task of the ordinary, the common. It does not oppose our experience to the extraordinary, the singular. Contrariwise, it exposes us to the vulnerability of the ordinary, which might be seen as its extraordinariness. In the later part of *The Brooklyn Follies*, this extraordinariness of existence pivots on the simultaneity of births and deaths, which harks back to the early scene in which the demented Flora proclaims that she has discovered ‘the truth of the world’:

[T]en births every forty-one seconds, ten deaths every fifty-eight seconds (or whatever the figures happened to be). [...] in order to get a grip on that truth, she had decided to spend the day sitting in the rocking chair in her room, shouting out the word *rejoice* every forty-one seconds and the word *grieve* every fifty-eight seconds to mark the passing of the ten departed souls and celebrate the arrival of the ten newly born.

(*BF*, 50)

The ‘truth of the world’ consists not in the figures *per se* but in the act of counting the lives that come and go, of acknowledging one’s condition of being involved in shared human existence. The alternation of rejoicing and grieving encapsulates the basic pattern of human reaction to that ‘truth’. We see, in a series of events happening to and around Nathan, how that pattern unfolds. Honey is pregnant; so is Rachel (Nathan’s daughter). With one announcement immediately followed by the other, Nathan finds himself turning into ‘a person who wept at the mere mention of babies’ (*BF*, 284). Then comes the strange moment of his own ‘brush with mortality’ (*BF*, 301): just a few minutes after a movie line (‘I kind of relish getting old [...] It takes the bother out of living’ [*BF*, 296]) makes him laugh, a sudden excruciating pain in the chest brings him, as it were, to the brink of

death. Although the attack turns out to be less serious than he thinks, it dawns on him that he ‘could die at any moment’ (*BF*, 301). This is the case with everyone; only that everyone tends to forget both the contingency of life and the necessity of death. As Nathan gets to know other patients in hospital, the idea of ‘biography insurance’ (*BF*, 304) occurs to him. Since he and the strangers he meets will eventually be forgotten (that is, all of them are ordinary people whose lives will not be documented individually), there should be ‘a company that would publish books about the forgotten ones, [...] rescue the stories and facts and documents before they disappeared [...] and shape them into a continuous narrative, the narrative of a life’ (*BF*, 303).

Like Auggie’s photo project, ‘the narrative of a life’ is an attempt to maintain the continuity of everyday life through recording and (re)counting. It is part of the task of the ordinary. Yet unlike Auggie’s project, Nathan’s idea is notably precipitated and unsettled by an existential crisis, which is not fully unveiled until his narrative reaches its end. In a sense this is not so much an end as an interruption. Nathan’s proleptic allusion to the event on the morning of 11 September 2001, the very morning when he leaves the hospital and feels so good about remaining alive, is, of course, not a result of premonition but of retrospection. And this is precisely where the narrative becomes uncanny; it is as if the two events simultaneously spread before us, demanding our response. But how to respond? It seems to me that most of us will be too stupefied to comprehend, let alone respond. The way things are juxtaposed — the ordinary and the disastrous, the comic and the tragic — is nothing but a challenge to our moral understanding. It recalls Cavell’s observation about the dialectic of ordinariness and extraordinariness:

The extraordinariness of what we accept as ordinary does not manifest its power over us until we are conscious at the same time of the ordinariness of the extraordinary. A stone on which this coupling breaks we might call a miracle or a holocaust, a departure from and within the ordinary that is not merely extraordinary, but irreversibly traumatic. (There may then be such a phenomenon as a retrospective trauma.)

(*LDIK*, 61)

Is what happens ‘forty-six minutes’ (*BF*, 306) after Nathan’s departure from hospital ‘a departure from and within the ordinary’?¹²⁷ If so, his closing remarks might be seen as the manifestation of ‘a retrospective trauma’. Accordingly, the hospital scene, with detailed description of individual patients Nathan has met, betrays a struggle to forestall the rupture of the ordinary, to at least alleviate the pain it will have caused. In this respect, narration helps him (re)form his connection with the dead and the injured, for which exposure is a prerequisite. We should bear in mind that involvement

¹²⁷ Nathan leaves the hospital at eight o’clock (‘It was eight o’clock when I stepped out onto the street’), the time at which, if we consider the intertextual coincidence, Auggie will take a picture in front of his cigar store. With the import of Auggie’s photo project in mind (say perceiving the poetry of the ordinary), anyone will find the coincidence and later juxtaposition eerie and catastrophic.

in shared humane existence is at the same time exposure to it. It might beckon an ideal community, but that does not entail that it is immune to something horrible. ‘The worst has befallen, befalls everyday. It has merely, so far as I know, not befallen me.’ Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*, ‘Tragedy figures my exposure to history as my exposure to fortune or fate; comedy as my exposure to accident or luck. Each will have its way of figuring this as my exposure to nature; meaning, in the end, human nature’ (CR, 432). From this perspective, Nathan’s oblique reference to the impacts of that disastrous event is meant to trace the unnameable loss that has missed him. By instead focusing on his chance of living through a personal disaster, he seeks to understand what it means to go on living in an ordinary that is bound to return with an imperiled existence and a wounded community.

CONCLUSION

The Imperative to Go On

Our Lives after the Brooklyn Follies

Let us pause at the end of *The Brooklyn Follies*. It is hard to tell whether everything preceding that catastrophic moment has been suspended by it or, in a narrative space, the reverse would be true. Many parts of the last chapter appear to uphold the latter view, with a relatively scanty assessment of the dark undertow that lurks in Nathan's account. But this impression has to be qualified by the fact that, if one cannot speak of the moment in question, he/she has to defer its presence by going back or skipping ahead (which could turn out to be going back again, only in a different way). This is not an escape from a dead end. Nor is the moment, strictly speaking, a dead end. A disaster like 9/11 is a rupture, out of the ordinary and yet within the ordinary, while writing, as a rupture itself, does not evade the magnitude of the disaster but instead tries to approach it in its own way. The practice invokes what Blanchot calls 'the step not beyond', which, 'not accomplished in time', 'would lead outside of time'.¹²⁸ Moreover, he immediately points out that this 'outside' is not 'intemporal' but a space where 'time would fall'; in other words, writing draws us to this 'outside of time in time'. In the same vein, we might say that writing calls our attention to the ordinary that neither totally disappears nor fails us all the time but may reveal its fragility at any moment. From this perspective, 'a departure from and within the ordinary', as cited at the close of the last chapter, can also be regarded as an important area of concern for writing. When we conjoin the questions of time and of the ordinary, what we arrive at is more or less the question put by Cavell: 'the question, in all soberness, is how we can go on. Or isn't it rather how it happens that we do go on' (*LDIK*, 61). Perhaps we can go on to ask ourselves: isn't this also manifested in writing, for instance, in its incessant returns to a dilemma, its (re)discovery of a puzzle, its desire to (re)place the significance of experiences, its attempts to bear the weight of trauma, or, above all, its restlessness in the face of an ending, whether utopian or apocalyptic. If 'going on', as Cavell observes, 'is fundamental in both Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's sense of the human' (*LDIK*, 61), writing embodies this sense of the human par excellence. And this would help to explain why many characters in Auster's stories

¹²⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. by Lycette Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 1.

emerge at the very beginning as persons who either have old wounds, hidden pain, or have survived some tragic events. That is, most of the time his writing shows us how to go on in the aftermath of the disaster, the locus at which the individual and the social are no longer clearly separable.

This can sometimes be truly haunting — to go on with one's life in these circumstances — as one's perception of things will be ceaselessly challenged by the remains of different pasts. I stated in a footnote that Auggie's photo project somehow turned into an eerie irony against the backdrop of 9/11. The same is true of the opening shot of *Smoke*, in which the Twin Towers stand as a remarkable part of the city skyline. Now seeing them on the screen, we cannot but find ourselves faced with a ghostly, repeatable projection of something that is no longer there, or a presence that is virtually missing.¹²⁹ A similar sentiment reverberates through *Sunset Park*, starting from Miles Heller's habit of photographing 'the abandoned things' (an antithesis of Auggie's project), and culminating in his disillusionment at the end of the novel:

[A]s the car travels across the Brooklyn Bridge and he looks at the immense buildings on the other side of the East River, he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.¹³⁰

The missing buildings are a reminder of that calamity on 11 September 2001, and the missing hands a reminder of its ramifications, not least wars. The latter stems from a key reference in the book, namely William Wyler's 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The film is a prime example included in Alice Bergstrom's PhD research on post-World War II America, which argues that 'once the war was over, American life had to be reinvented' (*SP*, 96). What has it to do with Miles Heller, a young man who has never fought on battlefields? In *Sunset Park* the story about him does not directly address the subject of war, except mentioning in passing that the husband of his girlfriend's sister is still serving in the armed forces in Iraq. Yet one does not have to, shall we say, look for wars; they are interspersed between the lines: in Alice's reflections on Wyler's film and her grandparents, in Morris Heller's memories of baseball and his parents. It seems that life and war, shedding light on one another, are not two distinct states. These strands of thought are woven into narrative sections led by different characters, which implicitly provide insight into an existence — let us recall the notion brought up in *The Brooklyn Follies* — that begins from Miles's experience of

¹²⁹ An equally indelible but far more gruesome image is the decapitation of Titus Small in *Man in the Dark*. It magnifies the haunting effect of film, its ontological significance (as explicated in the chapter on *The Book of Illusions*), as well as the viewer's urge to *bear witness*, which verges on the limits of visual writing, and which again concerns the (im)possible presence in writing.

¹³⁰ Paul Auster, *Sunset Park* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2010), p. 5, pp. 307-08; hereafter, *SP*.

homelessness and ends in his re-experience of it. If the former is more or less self-imposed, the latter comes as an awful incident that breaks up the whole company that includes Alice Bergstrom, Bing Nathan and Ellen Brice. The four squat in an abandoned house in Sunset Park, an area of Brooklyn. This is a temporary home, ‘a glitch in the system’ (*SP*, 38), as well as an ‘experiment’ (*SP*, 77) — perhaps also a war against domineering authorities, especially from Bing’s perspective. The project is initiated by him and in part influenced by what he has learned from Miles, the young Miles whose political and economic perspicacity once deeply impressed him. But Miles has already been in a war, so to speak, before he joins Bing and company in Sunset Park. ‘Miles has been in a war,’ as Alice believes, ‘and all soldiers are old men by the time they come home, shut-down men who never talk about the battles they have fought’ (*SP*, 236). She wonders what kind of a war it is and what sort of ‘an inner wound’ he remains silent about, and we know that it has something to do with the accidental death of his stepbrother, which brings shock and guilt upon him, and which is the deep-seated cause for his seven-year self-exile, his first experience of homelessness. The crisis of self-knowledge can contribute to the crisis of moral perception. This is the case with Sachs, who broods over his nearly fatal fall from a fire escape; so with Miles, who is no longer sure of the natures of will and accident: ‘It seems certain that Bobby didn’t hear the approaching car. [...] But what about you? Miles asks himself. Did you know or didn’t you know?’ (*SP*, 25).

He will never know for certain. What’s more, because transparency of knowledge fades on this point, the push he gave Bobby is bound to be a silent torment in years to come; and because his inner wound is at the same time an inexplicable blemish, it cannot be easily cured. Leaving it at that only makes it fester. From this standpoint, overhearing the conversation between his father and stepmother is not totally a bad thing. There is no denying that he is further upset and even hurt by their innermost feelings about the worrisome problem with the family, particularly with him, but on second thoughts the last straw is a hurt that might put a stop to the state of festering. It precipitates a radical change that is irreducible to a cowardly escape from the problem. Mary-Lee Swann, Miles’s mother, holds the same opinion: ‘Running away was a stupid thing to do, of course, but maybe some good would come of it in the end, maybe being on his own for a while would give him a chance to straighten himself out’ (*SP*, 176). What her analysis suggests, besides the content, is the proper attitude towards others — in Morris’s words, ‘calm, compassionate, and thoughtful, not judging Miles so much as trying to understand him’. We have seen this attitude before, for instance, in Fogg’s approach to Effing’s confession; as I also pointed out, Aaron falls short in this respect. Then in *Sunset Park* it comes as no surprise that, later, when Miles returns to New York, Mary-Lee plays a

crucial role in restoring familial bonds between him and Morris. She is the first person to whom Miles confides his struggle in the past seven years:

I did want to become a better person. That was the whole point. Become better, become stronger — all very worthy, I suppose, but also a little vague. How do you know when you've become better? It's not like going to college for four years and being handed a diploma to prove you've passed all your courses. There's no way to measure your progress. So I kept at it, not knowing if I was better or not, not knowing if I was stronger or not, and after a while I stopped thinking about the goal and concentrated on the effort. [...] Does any of this make sense to you? I became addicted to the struggle. I lost track of myself. I kept on doing it, but I didn't know why I was doing it anymore.

(*SP*, 263)

What is implied in the wish to become a better person is the idea of going on. At the same time, it is worth noting that this idea is foregrounded, more often than not, at a time when going on looks impossible. And if one nevertheless decides to — or indeed is morally compelled to — go on, one needs to ask oneself what it means and what it entails. Now here is the rub: the goal is there, yet not as clear as one would expect. Little by little it disappears into the very act of reaching it. We see Miles express his doubt about the goal as well as the measurement of his progress, which betrays his fear of losing track of himself. To be sure, neither the doubt nor the fear is unfounded. More precisely, cursed with both in the contemporary world (not to say a post-disaster world), one can be either assaulted by a sense of aimlessness or caught up in a circle that can hardly tell its beginning apart from its end. Is this pattern mirrored in the structure of Miles's experience, which, as suggested, unfolds between two kinds of homelessness? At first glance the answer is affirmative. The first section of *Sunset Park* describes how he has been learning 'to live in the present' with 'no burning ambitions' (*SP*, 6). This seems to echo his thoughts at the close of the last section: 'he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now' (*SP*, 308). Yet when we say 'two kinds of homelessness', it already implies certain changes in his circumstances. In other words, he 'will stop hoping for anything' because he has begun to hope for something in the course of movements. Finding his true love and being reunited with his parents are themselves neither illusions nor hopes. They are reasons for hope. But if they give rise to hope, isn't the reverse also true?

It is worthwhile to dwell a moment on the meaning of hope here. As in *Leviathan* and other cases, hope is not a pat answer to the moral purpose of life; instead, it provokes questions and doubts. If Miles used to be a boy 'with no illusions, no false hopes' (*SP*, 242), what does hope mean to him now? If it is not a specific goal, what is its use? Does hope demand reasons, or is it rather unconditional? In the latter case, can it be equated with the imperative to go on? On the one hand, humans are liable to hope *for something* and in so doing render it conditional; hence there is a risk of losing hopes. On the other hand, humans may go on with hope despite the disappearance of certain

conditions, because new conditions will arise as long as hope remains, which is no longer a sure sign of success or happiness but a precondition for all possible conditions, whether good or bad, favourable or unfavourable. The wish to become a better person registers or at least gravitates toward the latter sense, which necessitates the unknown — not only the futural that is yet to come but also the past that is either missed or eluded. So understood, hope has to be bound up with patience since ‘the genius’, in Emerson’s words, has not yet been transformed into ‘practical power’. More precisely, since every effort to transform the self (along with the world) contains the possibility of its failure, hope essentially involves a process of *constant renewal of patience*. Can this serve as an antidote to despair, as confession to trauma? Yes and no. It means that despair, like trauma, cannot be totally eliminated from one’s life but may be alleviated or even transmuted into the drive to address and redress one’s relations to individual experience and common existence. Even though Miles’s final thoughts smack of disillusionment, it is open to question whether ‘the now’ to which he resigns himself defines his ultimate relation to all he has experienced and will experience. Further, it is doubtful whether the magnitude of that climactic incident in Sunset Park can simply be reduced to a heightened sense of futility. All efforts and struggles, not only his but Bing’s, Alice’s and Ellen’s as well, have already turned into discoveries of the self and the world of others — one’s distance from and attraction to the other; one’s lack of knowledge of itself; one’s responsibility for its actions. In this light, we may better understand why Morris wants Miles ‘to *stand up* and face the music’ (*SP*, 306; my italics). Turning himself in is not necessarily a gesture of surrender. The point is to defend himself and remain accountable for everything the project brings about. Hence he should not run away; otherwise it would negate not only what Sunset Park stands for but also his father’s unwavering resolve to ‘stand up there with’ him.

But exactly what Sunset Park stands for is not easy to say. One thing is for sure: it is not a communitarian project; nor does it represent the idea of communion.¹³¹ In *The Brooklyn Follies* a critical distinction is drawn by Tom between ‘a commune’ and ‘a community’ (*BF*, 107). I think it is still pertinent here, despite the glaring difference between Hotel Existence and Sunset Park. Sunset Park, like the novel itself, is a plural universe, an emblem of youthful nonconformity and singularities. Meanwhile, it is also a wounded community, a community coming after the disaster and accompanying its social, political and economic repercussions. We sense its fragility, its proximity to death, which is symbolised by the cemetery it faces. Nevertheless, within this fragility life smoulders. This alone appears less dismal than the initial picture of those empty houses in Florida. There not only are houses deserted but the very promise of life, let alone community,

¹³¹ One might thus consider it to be a libertarian project, whereas I prefer to use the term ‘existential’.

diminishes. Here traces of life and creation ‘return’ the characters to another, fuller space while masking its difference from one with which the narrative begins.¹³² Hence the symmetry between beginning and end, between two kinds of homelessness, is implicitly interrupted by writing’s own surplus, which somehow oscillates and goes on at the same time. This occurs not merely in *Sunset Park*; in *Moon Palace*, as well as in other works we have discussed, similar patterns unfold in varying degrees. One might use this to argue that, from (post)modern writings to post-9/11 writings, the bleak dreariness of existence is no longer a writer’s fantasy but reinforced by the worsening state of reality. I think the plausible argument to some extent misjudges the nature of that surplus: it will not be pulverised by pessimism just because reality is ever more disappointing and human experience is ever more difficult to express, any more than it will feed on cheap optimism just because we can endlessly invent fairylands for escape.¹³³

In Auster’s later works, the conjunction of going on and unworking is more frequently observed in human relations, as characters are more closely entangled in common existence and shared concerns. This is not to say that the issue of selfhood has become unimportant; similarly (or conversely), as I argued in the chapter on *Leviathan*, highlighting individuation in a certain form of moral perfectionism does not mean belittling the role of others. Where there is a tendency to simply go along with the majority and excuse one’s inertia, there is a need to rethink individuation, to transform oneself in search of one’s own voice. This is my interpretation of Sachs’s character. Needless to say, in a different context things could be different. In *Man in the Dark*, when August Brill asks Titus Small why he decides to serve in the Iraq War in spite of his strong condemnation of it, Titus denies that there is any contradiction in his decision. It is not about ‘supporting something you’re opposed to’.¹³⁴ Rather, it is about redressing his ‘safe’ and ‘dreary’ life, which shrivels with his unfulfilled ambition to write: ‘I don’t *know* anything, August. I haven’t *done* anything. That’s why I’m going away. To experience something that isn’t about me. To be out in the big rotten world and discover what it feels like to be part of history’ (*MD*, 173). To know the world, to act in the world, to be part of history — they are doubtless vital to the quest for true existence. Yet it remains a question whether Titus has much hope in this quest. Although his last words in the conversation — ‘I know there’s a risk. But I have to take it. I have to change my life — *right now*’ — in a way recall something Sachs would say, it is more likely that he will have to lose (in both senses of the word)

¹³² These traces are further evidenced by the way in which multiple perspectives are structured, namely the development from the first section (‘Miles Heller’) to the last section (‘All’).

¹³³ This brings to mind Blanchot’s notes in *The Writing of the Disaster*: ‘“Optimists write badly.” (Valéry.) But pessimists do not write’ (*WD*, 113).

¹³⁴ Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2008), p. 172; Hereafter, *MD*.

himself to and in this world, a ‘weird world’ (Rose Hawthorne’s phrase, as cited in *Man in the Dark*), or, shall we say, a world no less weird and perhaps even worse than the one in which Sachs lives. If there is any worth in comparing their fateful decisions, it is not because they are fundamentally the same, but because they offer a more nuanced understanding of one’s reassessment of the world’s weight upon oneself. As histories of the world and ideas of the world seem to be heading in opposite directions, reassessments may bring terror upon the self, opening it up to its divergent causes and effects. Insofar as Titus’s death is concerned, writing is *implicitly* a proof of surviving this terror through others who choose to go on — not only go on living but also go on confronting the grisly image of dying, which goes beyond what is humanly endurable. In this respect, the surplus of writing provides covert interventions, namely making detours, such as the stories that simultaneously defer and lead to the depiction of Titus’s death, so that we can struggle to bear what is unbearable.

Then what about *Sunset Park*? We have analysed both the weight of self-transformation and the weight of the (un)working of community upon Miles. However, the double weight is not just upon him. It is noteworthy that everyone in the novel has his or her own problems — especially those seemingly unremarkable yet significant crises. When intersecting or overlapping, they engender uncertainty that affects all those involved. For instance, Miles’s stepmother, Willa, is still unwilling to forgive him. This arises not so much from acrimony as from distress, compounded by insecurities about her own life. But then one should not forget that forgiveness takes time (in other words, she is not unforgiving, even though she is being unforgiving, that is, not in a forgiving mood); that the likelihood of union and reunion is born of a mixture of uncertainty and hope. In this regard, it is Morris who shows the greatest patience, as reflected in his ‘book of observations’ (*SP*, 266): ‘Hope endures, then, but not certainty. [...] you cannot renounce the boy for her sake. Nor can you renounce her for the boy’s sake. You want them both, you must have them both, and one way or another, you will, even if they do not have each other’ (*SP*, 268). He is determined to mend frayed relations between his wife and his son, as if preventing the self from splitting into two parts (or two separate worlds, if Willa does not, in his words, allow Miles ‘into her world again’). No doubt there is an ingredient of guilt in that determination, for his one-time infidelity contributes to Willa’s depression. That said, his hope for saving himself and everyone around him — not only his family but his publishing company as well — is not driven by guilt. At some point he confesses that it is nothing other than ‘a sense that it is still too early to succumb to resignation and despair’ (*SP*, 173); at another it amounts to a belief that ‘the story hasn’t come to an end’ (*SP*, 179). As always, one may list a few reasons for Morris’s tenacity, his ‘Can Man’ spirit. But if there is truly something to

account for human resilience, it resides not so much in positive signs of life as in an understanding of human vulnerability.

Retrieval of the Other from Death

Sufferings and losses do not disappear over time; they are preserved in memory, reproduced in imagination, and transfigured in confession. Shifting to Morris's perspective enables us to look at things afresh. To be sure, this is not the only alternative. Due to the complex way in which multiple points of view operate, the reader can shuttle between different states of mind while seeing how they interconnect and progress forward. Not simply aiming for a clash of perspectives, Auster's polyphonic structure invites the reader to expand the world of *Sunset Park* in various directions. Apart from Miles and Morris, characters like Bing, Alice, Ellen and Mary-Lee also furnish valuable threads that can enrich our reading experience. It is of course impossible to at once cover, and uncover, all of them. My reasons for shifting to Morris's perspective may be further explained as follows: first, his position interlinks two generations and forms another narrative centre that stands beside and illuminates the one occupied by Miles; furthermore, his ruminations and recollections hark back to those in *The Invention of Solitude*. In a sense the connection between Auster's first major work and other later works is much stronger than it appears. As we move further into the conclusion of this incomplete study (incomplete because new works will come out), I propose to relate Morris's story to the fragments in *The Invention of Solitude*, especially its first part 'Portrait of an Invisible Man'.¹³⁵ I will then focus on some key themes in its second part 'The Book of Memory', which herald Auster's characteristic fusion of American and Continental inheritances in his *oeuvre*, and which remain pertinent and essential to this day.

For the moment let us revisit *Sunset Park* from Morris's perspective. I have maintained that he is still living with hope — not expectations but hope. In addition, I have just suggested that this has something to do with his understanding of human vulnerability. Does the relation of human vulnerability to hope make sense? Or does its relation to despair make more sense? Fortunately or unfortunately, the question cannot be solved by empirical or logical investigations. While tempted to fall back on the notion of 'faith', I nevertheless think it more compelling to dissect Morris's attitude

¹³⁵ Just to mention in passing in case doubts arise: in our discussion the conventional divide between fiction and nonfiction will be held in abeyance. Put otherwise, the generic divide — or even the divide between fact and fiction — is of little relevance here. What is relevant to our discussion is that, from Auster's debut work to his second most recent novel, certain scenarios recur, certain ideas metamorphose, and all these take place in a form of prose that constantly explores its literary and philosophical potentials. Therefore, it does not seem to me problematic to read one text alongside the other. For the same reason, instead of highlighting the matter of identity, I will henceforth refer to the 'I' in 'Portrait of an Invisible Man' as 'the writer'.

towards death and sufferings.¹³⁶ Maybe in it we can discern a different logic or, rather, a different thinking governed by memory and writing. And the first thing we need to note is that the section about him opens with the funeral of his friend's daughter, Suki Rothstein, who commits suicide at twenty three. The occasion could evoke all memory of Bobby's death; that is why Willa does not want him to attend the funeral. Morris understands the worry of reliving old sorrows, but, as he puts it, 'how not to feel ravaged by Suki's death, how not to put himself inside her father's skin and suffer the ravages of this pointless death?' (*SP*, 140). Avoiding pain does no good. When facing the loss of a young life, one ought to mourn for it: to recall the past of its blooming, such as Morris's remembrance of Suki on her way to her high school prom, who was 'decked out in a flamboyant red dress' (*SP*, 141); more importantly, to at the same time absorb the painful truth that this 'singular example of *youth on fire*' has now morphed into an image of 'a head splitting open from the sheer force of the darkness within it, a life broken apart by the too-much and too-little of this world'. There are many implications in the idea of 'a life broken apart by the too-much and too-little of this world'. One implication has been embedded in Morris's impression of Miles's girlfriend, Pilar, who later reminds him of the young Suki. If we take the hint seriously, then Miles's anxiety about losing home ('Alice and Bing are homeless, he is homeless, the people in Florida who lived in the houses he trashed out are homeless, only Pilar is not homeless, he is her home now, and with one punch he has destroyed everything' [*SP*, 307]) might be integrated into a sense of youth being crushed by the world.¹³⁷

Morris is thoughtful enough not to intrude his comments upon Suki's suicide. So is everyone speaking at the funeral: 'no one who appears onstage tries to draw any meaning or consolation from Suki's death — there is nothing more than the fact of it, the horror of it' (*SP*, 143). This, however, does not mean that silence is the only proper response to this horror. Another response is writing, as implied in Morris's thoughts on the way Martin Rothstein responds to his daughter's death:

With Bobby, there had been no words. Willa hadn't been capable of writing or saying anything, he hadn't been capable of writing or saying anything, the accident had crushed them into a state of mute incomprehension, a dumb, bleeding sorrow that had lasted for months, but Marty is a writer, his whole life has been spent putting words and sentences together, paragraphs together, books together, and the only way he could respond to Suki's death was to write about her. (*SP*, 142-43)

¹³⁶ Related to my reservations about endorsing either side (namely empirical investigations as opposed to faith) is philosophy's question, which, in Cavell's words, 'now comes into its own — as if purified of religion and of science' (*CHU*, 61).

¹³⁷ Another implication is concerned with the world — how it appears to us and why we may feel powerless or enervated before it. In this light, 'the too-much and too-little of this world' is a pithy and rich expression — about modernity? about the human condition? — that can potentially extend its meaning to various contexts. For instance, it somehow recalls Titus's frustration and implicitly suicidal attempt at a radical change by subjecting his life to war. Besides, war, as a literal and metaphorical component of the world, is obviously a subject that binds *Sunset Park* to *Man in the Dark*.

A writer is gripped by an urge to express, even, and especially, in pain and incomprehension. What Morris suggests, as I understand it, is not that writing can stave off the unintelligibility of death; rather, writing tries to approach that unintelligibility so as to stave off death. But how to approach? Martin's eulogy is fairly specific to his disposition and situation: a 'comic writer of baroque' (*SP*, 142) who has to pull himself together to write a 'passionate, complex, and clear-sighted' (*SP*, 146) text about his daughter, while waiting for her corpse to arrive from Venice. Morris is unable to do the same thing, let alone delivering a eulogy in public. What he can do is count and recount the deaths of others in his memory: 'His father, thirty years ago. Bobby, twelve years ago. His mother, five years ago. Three. Just three in more than sixty years' (*SP*, 155). The dead body of his mother, for example, sticks in his mind, the image of which remains vivid to this day: 'the blue-gray skin, the half-open-half-closed eyes, the terrifying *immobility* of what had once been a living person' (*SP*, 157). It is an uncanny experience to describe the dead body of someone who talked to you over the phone last Saturday; it is even more so if that person is your mother, as you might, like Morris, be seized by the feeling that your 'own life as a sentient being began as part of the now dead body', that your life 'began *within her*' (*SP*, 158). Of course the feeling is supported by nothing but 'a leap of imagination', as Morris admits. We know that the dead body has nothing to do with life, but the shock of an *actual* death — 'the terrifying *immobility*' — does not confirm but rather confuse our knowledge. Put otherwise, even though the body is now dead and immobile, the impulse to identify it with the person (the 'her' or 'him') remains. It strikes me that the (ontological) uncanniness occasioned by death in a way runs parallel to that which is found in photographs (and occasionally in inanimate objects).¹³⁸ In order to understand what this uncanny experience implies, let us bring in a passage from 'Portrait of an Invisible Man', which revolves around the writer's rediscovery of his dead father's 'physical presence in the world'.

Death takes a man's body away from him. In life, a man and his body are synonymous; in death, there is the man and there is his body. We say, "This is the body of X," as if this body, which had once been the man himself, not something that represented him or belonged to him, but the very man called X, were suddenly of no importance. When a man walks into a room and you shake hands with him, you do not feel that you are shaking hands with his hand, or shaking hands with his body, you are shaking hands with *him*. Death changes that. This is the body of X, not this is X. The syntax is entirely different. Now we are talking about two things instead of one, implying that the man continues to exist, but only as an idea, a cluster of images and memories in the minds of other people. As for the body, it is no more than flesh and bones, a heap of pure matter.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ As to the implications of death and the body in photography and film, I would like to refer the reader to the chapter on *The Book of Illusions*.

¹³⁹ Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, 25th anniversary edition (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 12.

The passage is interesting in that it touches upon something that is key to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, namely the relationship between one's soul and body; meanwhile, it looks at their relationship from a unique perspective, namely death. It is instructive to develop the points in greater detail.

(1) 'In life, a man and his body are synonymous' — this is the first point concerning the relationship between soul and body. Moreover, precisely because the two are one, it is less than precise to say that the latter *represents* the former as if the two could be clearly separated. Isn't the point self-evident? But perhaps too self-evident to grasp.¹⁴⁰ Throughout the present study I have never explicitly presented the soul-body relationship as a main issue. I have, though, paid particular attention to certain relevant questions in my reading of *Ghosts*, such as the (apparent) disjunctions between inner and outer, between private and public, and addressed them from a Cavellian viewpoint, on which is based my attempt to add a new dimension to the relations between Black and Blue. Needless to say, not only in *Ghosts* — in *Moon Palace*, *The Book of Illusions* and *Sunset Park* there are variations and extensions of the issue. It is embedded in Effing's guileful persona and elusive gesture, in Hector's mesmeric performance, in Ellen Brice's ruminations about the human body ('The human body can be apprehended, but it cannot be comprehended' [*SP*, 216]). These examples illustrate the liveness of the body and this liveness consists in the body's expressiveness.¹⁴¹ Can we say dissemblance and reticence, too, are two kinds of expression? Can a man's invisibility be redefined as his presence? But again we had better replace 'presence' with 'presentness', as Cavell would suggest. In other words, it is *not impossible* for *someone* to interpret a man's invisibility, as long as this interpretation is not 'mere knowing' (*CR*, 356). What Cavell goes on to state in *The Claim of Reason* is this: 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul — not [...] primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is *of* the soul; it is the soul's; a human soul *has* a human body' (*CR*, 356). His accentuation of the power of human expressions — their call for responses — always reminds me of another assertion in *The Claim of Reason*: 'The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul' (*CR*, 430). As he explains elsewhere, the picture is put forward when he realises that one's relation to the other is not that of knowledge but of

¹⁴⁰ Does it help to account for Wittgenstein's nearly obsessive emphasis upon those ordinary — but also enigmatic — experiences, such as one's attitude toward another's pain? Sometimes, something strikes us as ungraspable because it is simply a natural response. Interestingly, in the cited passage the case of shaking hands with *someone* (not with someone's hand) coincides with Wittgenstein's case in *Philosophical Investigations*: 'if someone has a pain in his hand, [...] one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face' (§286).

¹⁴¹ Indeed, as Jack I. Abecassis would further suggest, Auster's writing *per se* is based on the connection between body and language, which aligns him with a heretical Montaigne rather than orthodox semioticians. See Jack I. Abecassis, 'Montaigne in Brooklyn: Paul Auster's Body Writing', *MLN*, 129.4 (2014), 1035-1059.

acknowledgement.¹⁴² Hence the withholding of acknowledgement is *not essentially* concerned with a failure of knowledge; there is something else at stake. On many occasions Cavell uses tragedy (say Shakespeare's plays and Hollywood melodramas) to suggest the consequences of such a withholding. But what if death, as in 'Portrait of an Invisible Man', is not one of those consequences but instead the beginning of a story. What does it entail?

(2) It entails, I would say, a true understanding of human separateness, and based on this understanding one arrives not at a denial of the other but at a complex retrieval of the other from death. If death jeopardises a person's relation with his/her body, it also, in so doing, reveals this relation, as something that has not been traced before and is now no longer available. It is from this starting point that the writer entrusts himself to the search for a ghostly presence, to fill this presence with words, memories, and photographs. To be sure, he does not dream of bringing his father back to life, so to speak. In the case of his father, solitude is no less formidable than death, which means the difficulty of approaching his enclosed world, of synchronising his inner being with his outer physical expression, has always been there, whether in life or in death. At one point he seems to despair of writing about this invisible man at all: 'Impossible, I realize, to enter another's solitude. If it is true that we can ever come to know another human being, even to a small degree, it is only to the extent that he is willing to make himself known' (*IS*, 17). Then, after a Wittgensteinian case about shivering, he somehow shifts to a neutral tone: 'Where all is intractable, where all is hermetic and evasive, one can do no more than observe, But whether one can make sense of what he observes is another matter entirely. I do not want to presume anything' (*IS*, 18). Reading another's silence, as if seeing another's soul, seems both difficult and 'presumptuous'. Nevertheless, can this soul be just left in silence and oblivion without a chance of showing its traces? As he asks himself, 'if there had been anything more than silence, would I have felt the need to speak in the first place?' Silence and death, solitude and separation — they are not only obstacles to meeting his 'obligation' (*IS*, 4) to write about his father; they are also important reasons for him to go on with (or to constantly return to) his obligation. This accounts for a recurring sense of frustration, which alternates with a renewed determination to keep his subject from vanishing.

Precisely because he cares for his father, he has to inch along the contours of the latter's separation from him. Two things come to mind: the failure to impress his father with his performance in a baseball game; and, much later, the failure to impress him with his writing. It is

¹⁴² 'I eventually arrive at the idea that what we require in accounting for our sense of relation, or loss of relation, to the other, in place of the best case of knowledge, is the best case of acknowledgement. It is within this ambience that at a particular turn of a corner I allow myself such a formulation as: "The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul" (p. 430).' See Stanley Cavell, 'What is the Scandal of Skepticism?', in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, pp. 132-54 (p. 150).

worth noting that in *Sunset Park* baseball and literature, quite contrastingly, characterise Morris's fond memories of his father: not merely that 'the one thing they ever talked about with any passion together was sports' (*SP*, 162), but also that Morris's father deeply sympathises with Herb Score, a pitcher who sustained the same injury as he did in 1932; not to mention that Morris's publishing enterprise is largely funded by his father, who calls himself '*the silent partner*' (*SP*, 166). The invisible man and the silent partner — this curious association between characters suggests a unique form of rewriting, which, by infusing variability into its subject, contains the possibility of remembering. But why use one character to shed light on another? Why allow chances of reinterpretation? Because we can never understand a person once and for all; because we can be mistaken and forgetful; because things may look different in a different light. It explains why in 'Portrait of an Invisible Man' the writer tries so hard to glean what he calls 'fragments':

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 the others. Fragments. Or the anecdotes as a form of knowledge.

(*IS*, 62)

In this light, perhaps 'failure' is too harsh a word to describe the writer's attempts to attract his father's attention and share interests and dreams with him. At least there were a few comforting words after that baseball game. Likewise, there would be a call of gratitude each time he sent home his newly published book, not to mention that his father once went to the public library to read his poems. Learning this from his father's letter, he pictures him 'sitting at one of those long tables with his overcoat still on, hunched over words that must have been incomprehensible to him' (*IS*, 62). He will not forget the image, 'along with all the others that will not leave it'.

It should be clear enough that I am not suggesting a positive image or fragment takes precedence over a negative one (or one can cancel another out). What I want to point out is rather that, no matter what image we face, we should bear in mind that it is an image of a human soul. Thus, however reserved and distantly polite in outward expression, one is not necessarily heartless. In the episode that describes his father's growing anguish over his sister's mental illness, we see how the former's initial reluctance to face the problem gradually gives way to a quiet and prolonged state of misery. 'He was negligent and stubborn. But still, underneath it all, I know he suffered' (*IS*, 25). The writer says so because, when his father talks about his sister over the phone, he discerns a subtle sign of 'helplessness' from his voice. This is a parent's helplessness; yet with a parent like his father, it cannot be openly acknowledged. He is obviously caught up in conflicted feelings, saddened by his father's pain and yet unnerved by his reticence. What is he supposed to do in response to this pain?

And how can he know a hidden pain through its expression or lack of expression? The answer is writing. His writing is always already an acknowledgement in this regard, no matter how remote and unreal his father's inner world seems. That is why, after reiterating his father's 'despair' ('His despair became very great') as if convincing himself of its reality, he pauses at a loss for words and turns to Van Gogh: "Like everyone else, I feel the need of family and friendship, affection and friendly intercourse. I am not made of stone or iron, like a hydrant or a lamp-post." Perhaps this is what really counts: to arrive at the core of human feeling, in spite of the evidence' (*IS*, 26).

A special testimony to his father's existence, his writing is not solely dependent upon a certain material proof of that existence. More precisely, writing, aided by memory, alters the material so that the meaning of proof (if we keep the notion) no longer centres on binary oppositions between the spiritual and the physical, between the inner and the outer, between the self's limited capabilities and the other's infinite demand. I think it is high time that more could be clarified about two approaches to the relationship between the writer and his father. Like many previous discussions, they are largely influenced by the Cavellian and Blanchotian lines of thought. It goes without saying that throughout the present study I have in mind the possibilities of bridging the gap between American and Continental traditions, as many issues arising from Auster's works direct me to their connection. Yet one's connection with the other is more complicated than a matter of agreement or disagreement. In fact, 'mutual shunning' (in Cavell's words) has for a long time characterised their attitudes toward each other. In the foreword to *The Claim of Reason* Cavell pinpoints a source of his interest in 'a tradition, anyway an idea, of philosophizing opposed to the tradition in English': 'the connection of writing and the problem of the other' (*CR*, xiii). Looking back on his work that, consciously and unconsciously, links the Anglo-American and Continental traditions (say *The Sense of Walden*, *The World Viewed*, and the Fourth Part of *The Claim of Reason*), he adds that 'the philosophical pressure to comprehend this division or splitting between cultures has begun transforming itself for me into the pressure to comprehend the division between the writing of philosophy and the writing of literature, hence the splitting within (one) culture'. Put otherwise, an attempt to resituate European thought in the American context may not be motivated by cultural differences as such; it can instead be spurred by a feeling that the core of that mutual shunning mentioned above lies in the rift between philosophy and literature, especially given that facing the other has become part of the condition of being human. We have broached this subject in the introduction, which indicates a potential link between Auster, Cavell and Blanchot. Here I wish to demonstrate, once again, that a combination of the Cavellian and Blanchotian approaches can not only illuminate Auster's text but bring forth its

complexities and ambiguities. As we probe further the father-son relationship in ‘Portrait of an Invisible Man’, these sorts of implications should be brought to the fore.

Let us recall that, in my reading of ‘Portrait of an Invisible Man’, two points are highlighted: (1) the relationship between soul and body; (2) retrieval of the other from death. The first point centres on a Cavellian reconfiguration of human expressions and responses, which evolves against a backdrop of what he calls ‘the scandal of skepticism’ (*PDAT*, 151). Anyone, with a total collapse of knowledge, may at any time turn into that scandal, trapped in simultaneous discovery and denial of the other. Admittedly, the writer’s frustration sometimes seems to verge on this state. Yet my argument is that this frustration, whether with knowledge or with writing, needs to be weighed against the ‘obligation’ he mentions at the very beginning. As long as he is committed to the memoir, he has to persist with all it gives and withholds. Apart from the cases I have given, the memoir is interspersed with vivid descriptions of his father’s countenance, gait, habits and idiosyncrasies (for example, see *IS*, pp. 27-28). If they do not aid in giving expression to the person as a whole, why does the writer feel like depicting them? The same is true of his father’s photographs. It should be noted that the key passage I quoted about death and the body is originally a part of his reflections on those photographs. What he derives from a peculiar sense of ‘physical presence in the world’ is as follows:

The fact that many of these pictures were ones I had never seen before, especially the ones of his youth, gave me the odd sensation that I was meeting him for the first time, that a part of him was only just beginning to exist. I had lost my father. But at the same time, I had also found him. As long as I kept these pictures before my eyes, as long as I continued to study them with my complete attention, it was as though he were still alive, even in death.

(*IS*, 12)

From a Cavellian viewpoint, this sense of physical presence is indissociable from the ontological fact of a photographic subject. In this sense it prefigures some ideas explored in *The Book of Illusions*: the idea of being connected with (or disconnected from) reality; the idea of having (or losing) a body. Most importantly, what Cavell calls ‘a world past’ (*WV*, 210) — ‘as its being complete without me’ (*WV*, 211) — is implied in the writer’s fascination with those pictures he has never seen before. Take, for example, one family portrait from his father’s early childhood in Kenosha: ‘A whole world seems to emerge from this portrait: a distinct time, a distinct place, an indestructible sense of the past’ (*IS*, 32). If this is what his first impression tells him, then a second perusal guides him to the most unsettling part of this world, that is, a missing presence or, more precisely, haunting absence of his grandfather. What is haunting about this absence is that it is caused by a deliberate erasure and, as such, paradoxically reveals its traces. In other words, what characterises this absence is not simply mortality but something traumatic and unspeakable. ‘My

grandmother murdered my grandfather' (*IS*, 36). The writer puts the matter quite plainly, only because he cannot put it in any other way. What is beyond an open secret — though always a forbidden topic within the family, the murder was made public in newspapers at the time — is beyond language, beyond outward manifestations. But where else can he find traces but in language and outward manifestations? Perhaps there is nothing more telling than that uncanny photo of the family, which, to borrow Cavell's phrase, is 'the best picture' of a trauma hidden within the past that is also the present, as the writer is now trying to understand its impact on his father's life.

So far we have clarified the first point and aligned it with another aspect of Cavell's philosophy, photography and film. However, there remain some unanswered questions about the implications of photography and writing. To begin with, photography is marked by a stillness that smacks of death. In this light, one might doubt that, unlike the case of Hector, the photographic presence of the writer's father lacks the kind of expressiveness or liveness found in motion pictures. I will not reject the view outright. Since the meaning of stillness is open to interpretation, one can of course associate it with death. That said, in the current context I would rather consider it to be a reminder or recollection of life. What is the meaning of a world that is complete without me and yet insinuating an incompleteness that haunts me? It means that the world still murmurs in its pastness, which is embodied, for instance, in the fingertips of the writer's grandfather. Moreover, it means that my isolation from that world is a condition of the possibility of approaching and responding to its unfinished existence. This prompts a transition to the second point — retrieval of the other from death — and it blends in certain Blanchotian implications of writing. As said, when the obligation to write is triggered by another's death, it is always already an acknowledgement of the other. Otherwise one would not have begun writing in the first place. Partial retrieval is a foregone conclusion; so is human separateness. The question is how to live with them, how to survive a final silence that is nothing other than a form of (second) death: 'No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever' (*IS*, 65). It is from here that a Cavellian approach and a Blanchotian one reveal their different paths. Needless to say, their difference will not be absolute. As always, my view is: what Cavell calls 'the connection of writing and the problem of the other' can serve as a site where the two paths meet, and it is precisely their difference within commonality that enriches our reading of Auster.

One thing we have to deal with is a quotation from Blanchot, which appears near the end of 'Portrait of an Invisible Man':

For the past two weeks, these lines from Maurice Blanchot echoing in my head: “One thing must be understood: I have said nothing extraordinary or even surprising. What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it.”

To begin with death. To work my way back into life, and then, finally, to return to death.
Or else: the vanity of trying to say anything about anyone.

(*IS*, 63)

Is the writer suggesting that knowing his father is simply impossible? Having examined at length the inevitability of his frustration, I surmise we will no longer take these words at face value. The vanity of trying to speak for someone (and for oneself as well), the frustration arising from that vanity, the obligation to remain responsive and responsible — these feelings are inextricably connected. Thus speaking of one’s vanity can also be taken as a way of showing one’s accountability for what one has said and will say (again), which suggests that the self’s participation in the world of others is built upon the endless partialness of its existence. This might conceivably be thought to be the Cavellian gist of the extract. Then from a Blanchotian perspective, what is at stake? What would require the writer to relinquish his voice and subject himself to a basic principle of writing, namely ‘giving withholding’ (*WD*, 110)? Two things Blanchot calls our attention to: the gift of language (as in Heidegger) and, furthermore, the infinite demand of the other (as in Levinas). The former may not be immediately relevant to the present case, partly because it involves, in Heideggerian terms, the history of being. Still, we need to bear in mind two questions Blanchot derives from the rich senses of giving: ‘Who gives? What is given?’ They do not invite quick answers. What they imply, in relation to what is under discussion, is the generosity of the inappropriable — first and foremost, the inappropriable gift of speaking. Perhaps it is why ‘what is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop’: what language gives exceeds what I am able to speak of, here and now; but it is also the demand of the other — or paradoxically what it gives — that exceeds what I can cope with, once and for all. Do these account for a recurring sense that something has rather been withheld? Once again a Cavellian reply might be that something may come through even when I find myself unable to articulate it. If we cannot formulate ‘what is given’, then we cannot be sure what is withheld either. In Blanchot’s case ultimately literary writing becomes a neutral way of maintaining one’s infinite relation to the other. For him consigning one’s words to a sovereignty that consists in nullity and detachment is a choice of dispensing attention, often born from devastation, without reducing the other to the same. This implication of writing is consistent with a Levinasian ethics conveyed in *The Unavowable Community*:

An ethics is possible only when — with ontology (which already reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat — an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself.

Given mutual influence between Blanchot and Levinas, we might say that an ethics preceding ontology is reflected in a type of writing that forms a nonidentical relation — a relation without relation — to the empirical world and existents. It requires the effacement of an authorial voice that is ‘content with recognizing the Other’, because the self’s response to the other should be neither exhaustible nor subject to the law of exchange. Then the question is: does it run counter to Cavell’s emphasis on the self’s attachment to its expression and, as expounded in my reading of *Moon Palace*, ‘the world-boundness of language’? The crux, given the text under discussion, is whether a memoir can have a individual voice that nonetheless is not authorial. ‘Portrait of an Invisible Man’ adopts a first-person voice. This seems to be a conventional choice, but its conjunction of the confessional mode and the fragmentary structure steers the single-voiced narrative away from a unified and final form of memoir. So understood, the distinctness of that voice is generated by its exposure to the radical otherness and fragmentariness of experience associated with another person. Hence an acknowledgement of the other is possible when the first-person voice is no longer used to strengthen or protect the self in face of the other; instead it repeatedly interrogates the self, particularly about its ethical vision and standing, to remain faithful to the infinite demand of the other. In fact experimentation with voices is not uncommon in Auster’s work. In the second part of *The Invention of Solitude* third-person narration revolves around a man named A., who is presumably Auster himself. The function of that narrative voice is to disrupt the continuity of the self, estrange it in the solitude of writing, and open it up to the infinite, seemingly random, connections between one thing and another. Then in Morris’s book of observations (in *Sunset Park*’s last section ‘All’), as well as in another memoir of Auster’s, *Winter Journal*, the use of second-person voice enhances the effect of self-reflection. Granted, the bifurcation of the self into ‘I’ and ‘you’ (or ‘I’ and ‘he’) might still be seen as a sign of egotism, but, considering a Cavellian modification of Blanchot’s thesis, it seems to me that the potentialities of losing oneself in inner experience (that is, its excess), of facing the abyss of writing (that is, its impossibility), have to nevertheless be channeled through a human voice, which is inevitably, and in this case ashamedly, tethered to the self. Contrariwise, one might consider a Blanchotian modification of Cavell’s hope for reciprocity or attunement. From this perspective, it is not hard to see why death emblematises the limits of writing in Blanchot, not only because it is insurmountable but also because it cannot be shared. In this sense, ‘to begin with death’ (in the writer’s words) always already implies what Blanchot calls ‘the irreciprocity of the ethical relationship between the other and me, I who am never on equal terms with the Other’ (UC, 41). Hence, while I can understand the writer’s attempt ‘to work

my way back into life' in a Cavellian, therapeutic spirit, I cannot at the same time ignore the message that the place he starts from is virtually a non-place and the relation he tries to resume with his father is not decreed by ontology. In other words, the gift of writing does not presuppose reciprocity, whose possibility, albeit desirable, is now out of the question.¹⁴³

All in all, writing and death are two complicating factors in one's acknowledgement of the other. If writing can help to build a connection between the self and the other, it also problematises that connection; if death defines what is absolutely other, it also provides an emotive impetus for one's work. Then the question one should consider is not what can be gained from what is given but how to align what is retrieved with what is given. At the close of his memoir the writer quotes Kierkegaard: '... here it holds good that [...] only he who descends into the underworld rescues the beloved, [...] he who is willing to work gives birth to his own father' (*IS*, 69). What he gives birth to is not possessed by him, nor even by his father. As a book it is given to the reader, from whom new prospects of reciprocity might arise.

Everything ... as a Gloss on Everything Else

In this conclusion I have highlighted two themes: the imperative to go on and retrieval of the other from death. The reason for presenting them as overarching themes in Auster is that they encompass manifold aspects we have discussed in previous chapters, such as solitude and understanding, moral perfectionism, ontology of film/photography, disaster and community. Shifting from *Sunset Park* to *The Invention of Solitude*, I hope our discussion has succeeded in joining those aspects together. I am not sure whether they can offer a full picture, but at least they serve as a useful clue to a Cavellian reading of Auster, which always already brings into play certain strands of European thought. Extra material of interest could be garnered from 'The Book of Memory', the second part of *The Invention of Solitude*. I will not and in fact cannot expand on everything contained in that treasure trove, knowing that the word 'everything' connotes inexhaustibility rather than totality. What I can and wish to point out at the close of this study is the meaning of history hidden in writing and thinking; this is not unrelated to the themes of retrieval and going on. Interestingly, in Cavell as well as in Blanchot history bespeaks something endlessly present and absent. With Cavell this paradox bears on what he calls the ordinary; with Blanchot on what he calls the disaster. That is to say, if we simply

¹⁴³ Drawing on Stephen Fredman's reading of Auster, Rachel McLennan argues that the ambivalences in Auster's construction of 'same' and 'other' account for the difficulties of evaluating Anne Frank's role in *The Invention of Solitude*. She can be considered as a Levinasian other but at the same time functions as an agency that links A. to both his father and son. Though not free from problems, the tension between effacement and reference in Auster's autographical writing also signifies, in Derridean terms, the 'impossibility or double bind of the gift'. See Rachel McLennan, 'Anne Frank Rescues the Writer in Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*', *Journal of American Studies*, 46.3 (2012), 695-709.

take history as a discourse severed from genuine experience, we will never truly tune into the ravages of existence, its rupturable fragility; nor will we perceive its tenacious continuation. Perhaps it is why neither of the two thinkers directly engages with the concept of history, which reflects the orientation of philosophy or, alternatively, of writing. I think we should ask ourselves in what sense history is still relevant to both, that is, in what sense history does not disappear but rather embeds its essence in both. Or to put it another way, we should ask ourselves in what way writing helps us relate life to history. Insofar as Auster is concerned, the importance of memory comes to the fore: one needs to discover and indeed rediscover his/her own connection with the past. As A. writes in 'The Book of Memory', 'Memory in both senses of the word: as a catalyst for remembering his own life and as an artificial structure for ordering the historical past' (*IS*, 114). From this perspective, many of Auster's books can be read as books of memory. From *Leviathan* to *Moon Palace*, from *The Brooklyn Follies* to *Sunset Park*, historical components are filtered through one's experience and narration, attaching one reality to another, or, in A.'s words, the 'real thing' to the 'shadow thing' (*IS*, 135). This somehow presents Auster's practice as an alternative to postmodern amnesia, although it, too, originates from a crisis of modern subjectivity.

To work through this crisis, one cannot sidestep what A. calls '*the modern nothingness*' (*IS*, 108). It stems from his translation of those notes Mallarmé wrote at the bedside of his dying son, Anatole. What A. tries to achieve is rewrite this nothingness or, shall we say, *translate* it into his own memory:

It was a way for him to relive his own moment of panic in the doctor's office that summer: it is too much for me, I cannot face it. For it was only at that moment, he later came to realize, that he had finally grasped the full scope of his own fatherhood: the boy's life meant more to him than his own; if dying were necessary to save his son, he would be willing to die. [...] Translating those forty or so fragments by Mallarmé was perhaps an insignificant thing, but in his own mind it had become the equivalent of offering a prayer of thanks for the life of his son.

(*IS*, 108)

We should not underestimate the profundity of this translation; even a nothing can be translated into something in memory. In Mallarmé's notes, the sense of nothingness that 'invades' the self is in fact expressive of the self's pain caused by another's death, who is addressed by the 'I' as 'you'. To 'consent to live' — 'to seem to forget you' — is meaningful only because 'I' want to devote the rest of my life to 'true mourning' (*IS*, 110-11). One implication is that writing, sometimes under the guise of '*apparent forgetfulness*' (my italics), is a form of mourning. Another is that the crisis of subjectivity and the death of the other are inseparable. The parallel curiously recalls Emerson's 'Experience', another piece originally written for the death of a child. As discussed in the chapter on *Leviathan*, the death of Waldo (Emerson's son) signifies the loss of oneself, hence the loss of a world

one believes in; yet at the same time Emerson's essay, according to Cavell, 'is the promise of a gift in view of the testator's death'. Therefore, we might say that it is the son who gives his father a second life in writing, in mourning, and perchance in detouring around a promise. In a broader sense, a book of memory grants its writer a second life that no longer centres on one's own. It also suggests an understanding of history in relation to life. If history is largely concerned with the lives of others, then memory further explores one's connection with those lives; and although an actual connection is important, an imagined connection may be even more so in the sense that one feels compelled to write, that is, to repeat and respond to the distant voices of others. Sometimes it strikes one as a miraculous coincidence, a blissful echo. Yet more often than not it means that one has to face the sufferings of others while not giving in to total despair. When A. dwells on the fate of those war-time children in Cambodia, he begins to realise that 'the thought of a child's suffering [...] is even more monstrous than the monstrosity of the world itself. For it robs the world of its one consolation, and in that a world can be imagined without consolation, it is monstrous' (*IS*, 157). Juxtaposed with the image of his son, the image of those Cambodian children becomes fundamental to the idea of parenthood. Of course, in Auster this idea always expands beyond its literal sense and maps onto questions concerning moral perfectionism and shared existence. *Sunset Park*, as we just discussed in the first section, is a prime example. I have also touched upon Sachs's disappointment at American society and himself, which is partly attributable to his failure to redress Lillian's wrong attitude to her daughter. Other cases can be found in *Moon Palace*, *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Smoke*, as well as in those works not featuring in previous discussions, such as *Oracle Night*. The reason why I consider the image of tormented children as fundamental here is that it epitomises the horror of history. In a ruthless repetition of disasters and destructions, the sufferings of young lives reverberate: "A Belsen-like appearance," as the engineer in Cambodia noted. And yes, that is the place where Anne Frank died.'

'It is too much for me, I cannot face it.' Repeating Mallarmé's words, A. recalls where the book of memory comes from: he stands in Anne Frank's room and weeps (*IS*, 80). Yet what is too much is not merely horror, there is also an inconceivable conjunction of the (epistemic) impossibility of understanding horror and the (moral) imperative to come face to face with it. One cannot face/bear it; one must live with it; one cannot understand/know it; one must remember it. This predicament defies reason, but parenthood, as a most commonplace element in human life, defies reason too. In A.'s writing, the relationship between victims and survivors/witnesses is reinscribed in the relationship between parents and children, which signifies, at one and the same time, one's powerlessness before the other's pain — an other that is both familiar and strange, both innocent and

fragile — and one's infinite responsibility to pay attention to that pain. If one cannot suffer it in the other's place, at least there should be a chance for writing to begin from a (non-)place that endlessly approaching a substitution beyond (and beside) knowledge:

He does not even pretend to say that it can be understood, that by talking about it and talking about it a meaning can be discovered for it. No, it is not the only thing, and life nevertheless continues, for some, if not for most. And yet, in that it is a thing that will forever escape understanding, he wants it to stand for him as the thing that will always come before the beginning. As in the sentences: "This is where it begins. He stands alone in an empty room and begins to cry."

(*IS*, 157)

It is true that A. 'can go no farther than this' — the horror of seeing children suffer and die, the horror of seeing Anne Frank's last hope dashed by a senseless world, a world already buried in death. But the 'crushing' (*IS*, 81) solitude A. tries to imagine in her place is not paralysed by horror through and through; it instead sustains writing in a process of circling around horror. Can it be a way of going through it? Put otherwise, is there a way that neither rationalises nor averts horror, hence neither embraces forgetfulness nor yields to despair? This gestures toward a kind of moral perfectionism that might be conceived in tandem with the Nietzschean recurrence. Considering what we have discussed so far, the last point reached here refines a convergence of the Cavellian and Blanchotian perspectives and helps us register the philosophical subtlety concealed in Auster's fragments of memory.

On horror perhaps there is nothing more insightful than Blanchot's observation. I have deferred my reference to him on this score because I wish to draw on Cavell's comments, particularly those on such notions as 'the horror of knowledge' and 'the disaster of understanding':

Classically, or postclassically [...] skepticism becomes a possible intellectual fate that must be warded off, to be managed by argument or by distraction, since the world is after all supposed to be abjectly subject to human knowledge, as modern science is supposed to show. But then something further happened to the world, something that not simply challenges the human capacity to know, but, let's say, mocks the desire to know. It is accordingly a kind of New Fall, or a Second Fall, or a Second Going, of man and woman. Nietzsche called it the death of God. Blanchot, I suppose, calls it disaster. [...] I have for half a century expressed what happened to the world to be the advent of skepticism itself, marking a historical departure of the human, inherently at odds with itself, beyond itself. But in its role in Blanchot, reconsidering, or reconstituting, Nietzsche's Madman's warning against the knowledge he brings, namely, that it is on its way, hence that he is (that we are) premature, skepticism would be a welcome protection against knowledge for which we are unprepared, for what no one could be prepared, namely, the cost of surviving the disaster, of living in an aftermath, a devastation.

(*LDIK*, 528-29)

This 'something' that 'mocks the desire to know' is the disaster. Aside from its metaphysical sense, it first of all resides in the actualities of history; that is why this 'departure of the human' has a historical dimension. Nonetheless, emerging from the abyss and ruins of history, it appears not so much enlightening as disruptive. That is, it not only disrupts our innate propensity to give meaning

to past events, hence the idea of history as a subject of knowledge, but fundamentally threatens our moral sensibility as human beings.¹⁴⁴ It is in this sense that a human disaster leads to a disaster of humanity; it is also in this sense that horror (and, after 9/11, terror) signals the ‘cost’ of surviving the disaster, which may go on to create nightmares, but which may otherwise be taken as an alert or a wake-up call. This is partly what Cavell means, or so I think, by speaking of ‘a Second Fall, or a Second Going, of man and woman’. Let us recall what Blanchot says in the passage on the horror of knowledge: ‘And how, in fact, can one accept not to know? We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know’ (*WD*, 82). If we follow Cavell’s suggestion, namely ‘reconsidering, or reconstituting, Nietzsche’s Madman’s warning against the knowledge he brings’, we can probably construe Blanchot’s difficult decision to think the unthinkable, to speak when silence shall prevail. He is not unaware of the danger of words, which, in the name of knowledge (or actually ignorance), misrepresent what we are still unready for: ‘the danger (here) of words in their theoretical insignificance is perhaps that they claim to evoke the annihilation where all sinks always, without hearing the “be silent” addressed to those who have known only partially, or from a distance the interruption of history’ (*WD*, 84). ‘And yet’, he continues, ‘to watch and to wake, to keep the ceaseless vigil over the immeasurable absence is necessary, for what took up again from this end (Israel, all of us) is marked by this end, from which we cannot come to the end of waking again.’ It seems that this ‘interruption of history’ Blanchot talks about also signifies an interruption of the future, which resonates with all that sinks into oblivion, so that we have to keep waking in a night that has not yet come to an end. And it remains uncertain whether the dawn will come. In his reading of Blanchot, Cavell additionally alludes to ‘the dawn that Emerson and Thoreau and Nietzsche propose for our orientation, or renewal’ (*LDIK*, 529). I think this dawn is not meant to be an antithesis of Blanchot’s nocturnal space or, as noted by Cavell, loss of ‘sidereal orientation’. As said, we do not know whether it will come (or whether we will truly wake); yet at the same time, as Cavell reminds us: ‘Thoreau: “There is more day to dawn.” This is not something to be counted on. Thoreau says it is up to us to anticipate dawning.’ (May I add: even though it is not up to us to end the night? but up to whom else?)

Then what is the Nietzschean recurrence supposed to do with our ability or inability to renew ourselves, hence our world? What has it to do with our fate to endure all the horrors bequeathed to

¹⁴⁴ As Cavell mentions the case of modern science, it somehow recalls the topic included in my reading of *Moon Palace*, namely how science, the very product of knowledge and enlightenment, ends up amplifying horror and senselessness. At present one more case comes to mind, as prompted by Blanchot’s text: ‘Another sign is Himmler’s fainting at mass executions. And the consequence: fearing he’d shown weakness, he gave the order to multiply the executions, and gas chambers were invented: death humanized on the outside. Inside was horror at its most extreme’ (*WD*, 83).

us and all the horrors to come? From *The Invention of Solitude* to *Sunset Park*, what has changed and what has not? My reply is already implied in my alignment of one book with the other. Change does not progressively build up. As long as the logic of recurrence is operative, change is *overall* smaller and slower than we think. This, however, does not deny the effects of becoming, of (re)turning from one critical moment to another; nor does it give us respite from constant vigilance. While alerting us to the danger of words, of mistaking our power of knowledge, Blanchot nevertheless does not release us from the demand of writing (and thinking), which springs from nothing but attention and care. Can we thus find our way in the midst of horror? Can we thus rightly respond to the other? I may seem to have been beating around the bush for too long, as no definitive answer has yet been given to the issue arising from A.'s meditations on suffering. But does such a definitive answer exist? In my view, there is nothing that can deny the moral *potential* of writing in responding to the other, but equally there is nothing that can count as a sure recipe for whatever this 'rightly' promises.

A potential I do have in mind, as suggested in this section, is A.'s exploration of memory. I have already revealed its functions in relating history to life, in connecting the lives of others with one's own. Yet there is a further sense of why discovering parallels and committing them to memory are important — so important that it is well worth trying this potential to see how far a compassionate engagement can go without being contaminated by the 'theoretical insignificance' Blanchot cautions against. That is, it is in memory that things return, not only those that have happened but those that have not happened. 'Memory', as A. puts it, 'the space in which a thing happens for the second time' (*IS*, 81). Coincidences, such as that between Anne Frank's birthday and his son's, may sound trivial. That said, we could end up trivialising A.'s point if we only saw its triviality. In other words, it is *up to us* to delve into the configuration of fragments his memory provides. The reason why this configuration looks haphazard is that it sacrifices its hold on meaning for more latitude to express and circle around something unfathomable. This is partly the purpose of seeing everything as potentially a gloss on everything else. If we cannot grasp what we are still unprepared for, which keeps its presence in its absence, then our task is to open writing and memory to its elusiveness. Accordingly, the book of memory does not close in on itself; nor does A. exchange what he experiences and knows for what he does not. What he does is to accommodate the reverberations of phenomena, to immerse himself in a labyrinth that 'build[s] an imaginary world inside the real world' (*IS*, 147). Does this labyrinth mirror the double world we pointed up previously? Yes and no. On the one hand, A. immediately confesses that it 'would not stand'. He is conscious that the 'connection' he ponders may well be meaningless — not that the connection is made up ('The connection exists.') but that its meaning is imponderable. On the other hand, the whole book to some

extent amounts to a gloss on imponderables, as though there were no limits to an attempt that, bereft of grounds, neither fails nor succeeds. Here ‘no limits’ does not mean that one can say anything definite about everything; it instead means, as Cavell puts it, a ‘sense of the fatefulness in relating the metaphysical and the ordinary’ (*LDIK*, 522). It appears to Cavell that Blanchot’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, a departure from the Hegelian synthesis and totality, demonstrates this fatefulness or fateful movement, which neither progresses beyond nor completes itself. If we regard the metaphysical and the ordinary as constituting the double world, whose rift becomes particularly noticeable after ‘a Second Fall’ (as mentioned above), then the relatedness of the two, hence the possibility of ‘a Second Going’, can but manifest itself in an unceasing succession of turns and returns, not least an endless alternation of meaning and meaninglessness. This helps to explain A.’s hesitant tone: ““meaninglessness is the first principle.” Perhaps that is what he means when he writes: “He means what he says.” Perhaps that is what he means. And perhaps it is not’ (*IS*, 149). In a similar vein, we might get a handle on the penultimate paragraph in ‘The Book of Memory’, which depicts A.’s restless movement in his room. Somewhere else he expresses amazement at ‘the ordinary actuality of his experience’ (*IS*, 120), such as breathing and walking, but here, at the very last moment, walking and turning literalise the movement of writing. This is, to all intents and purposes, an act of writing; what Blanchot calls ‘the step not beyond’.

Do I have to reiterate that history is (at least partially) implicated in this apparently ahistorical, apparently inward, apparently textual step toward an apparent void? Do I have to reiterate that A.’s book begins from the moment when he stands in Anne Frank’s room and cries? Whether the modern nothingness or the random connections of fragments, they carry responses to his experience of or, better still, exposure to, history — above all, the history of horror and tragedy. Let us recall and reconsider Cavell’s statement, which I quoted at the end of the last chapter: ‘The worst has befallen, befalls everyday’ (*CR*, 432). A person who feels singled out before the other, whose historicity leads fatefully to a metaphysical enigma, should find his/her own placement in an approximation of testimony. If the meaning of history can still be found in the here and now, and the meaning of the other in writing, then there is an imperative to go on but also, as it were, (re)turn to gloss (not, however, conceptualise) what looks horrible, inarticulate or unfathomable. What’s more, the unexchangeability of writing for historical interest always already constitutes its engagement with an incomplete history, which suggests that this engagement is irreducibly ethical. And what else could it be? That is why the double world functions as a basic pattern, a condition of possibility for reconceiving one’s relations to the world and to others, which are historically bound but not historically confined. At the same time, it should be clear to all of us that the gift of writing is

patience; put otherwise, to speak despite the power of silence, to wake between night and dawn, to *re-member* within human separateness, to work in the knowledge of unworking.¹⁴⁵ It is a combination of these directions that shows us how to simultaneously move on and return in the labyrinth of Auster's work.

¹⁴⁵ The end of *The Unavowable Community* hints at an opening of Blanchot's later thought. And this opening may hopefully justify my last efforts in this conclusion to underscore the interconnection of writing, history and community, and to develop it at the juncture of different traditions:

The unavowable community: does that mean that it does not acknowledge itself or that it is such that no avowal may reveal it, given that each time we have talked its way of being, one has had the feeling that one grasped only what makes it exist by default? So, would it have been better to have remained silent? Would it be better, without extolling its paradoxical traits, to live it in what makes it contemporary to a past which it has never been possible to live? Wittgenstein's all too famous and all too often repeated percept, "Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent" — given that by enunciating it he has not been able to impose silence on himself — does indicate that in the final analysis one has to talk in order to remain silent. But with what kinds of words? That is one of the questions this little book entrusts to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and, perhaps extend it. Thus one will discover that it also carries an exacting political meaning and that it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking, *désœuvrement*.

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