

Where Flitcraft Lives

An Examination of Chance, Choice and Fate in Paul Auster's Fiction

By

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Abstract

Paul Auster has become known as the teller of the great American cautionary tale. His works have always spoken to the immutable forces of chance and fate. This work demonstrates how Auster's re-writing of Dashiell Hammett's Flitcraft tale, as told in *The Maltese Falcon*, has not only informed but been the driving force behind Auster's body of work.

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1. Introduction

Digging at an Obsession

Many contemporary authors harbour some form of an obsession to which they consistently return in their work. Don DeLillo writes of isolation in America, John Updike contemplates marriage, Haruki Murakami investigates the invisible world, and Paul Auster strains to understand the relation of chance, choice, and fate. Where or why these obsessions originate is not as interesting as how they develop throughout an author's career. For Auster, this obsession struck early and has held his interest for over three decades.

Paul Auster first made a name for himself in the mid-1970s as a poet. Even at this time, Auster was pre-occupied with chance, choice, and fate. As Norman Finkelstein writes in his introduction to Paul Auster's *Collected Poems*:

Long before Paul Auster used "the music of chance" as the title of one of his novels, his work was already the embodiment of that phrase. Throughout his career, his writing has been set to that music but simultaneously opposed to it: an ecstatic, frightening investigation of chance and a resistance to its power. How much credit should we give to coincidence? And if we refuse to give it credit, is a belief in determinism our only alternative? (9)

The opposition Finkelstein speaks of can be clearly seen in the fifth poem of Auster's *Disappearances*, collection:

In the face of the wall-
he divines the monstrous

sum of particulars.

It is nothing.

And it is all that he is.

And if he would be nothing, then let him begin

where he finds himself, and like any other man

learn the speech of this place.

For he, too, lives in the silence

that comes before the word

of himself. (111)

Disappearances was published in 1975 as a collection of linked poems. The ‘monstrous / sum of particulars’ can be perceived as the beginning of Auster’s obsession with chance, choice, and fate. What, after all, are these particulars? Auster answers here ‘It is nothing / And it is all that he is.’ The suggestion is that these particulars are the forces of chance and fate which rule us all. It is this power which Auster writes of again and again. His characters are consistently wounded by chance events, their lives disrupted and sent asunder by coincidence, and belittled in the face of fate. Yet what seems to interest Auster most is not the chance event, but rather how his characters behave after their lives have been altered.

Most of the scholarly work produced on Auster has focused on his first three novels: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. Published in 1985 and 1986 these three short novels were later collected under the title *The New York Trilogy*. Further

essays regarding Auster's work have been produced for a special issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1994) and in various literary journals (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and *The New Criterion*). Yet scholars continued to examine and re-examine these initial three texts. This may be because *The New York Trilogy* is Auster's most post-modern work; all three novels are interlinked, play games with characters, authorship and influences. As well, this trilogy has been readily compared to Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*) both for structure and existential concerns. In 1995 Dennis Barone collected many of the most notable essays regarding Auster in *Beyond the Red Notebook, Essays on Paul Auster*, and recently (2004) Harold Bloom has done much the same adding an Auster edition to his *Bloom's Modern Critical Views* series. Yet even now there are so few scholarly works on Auster that more than half the articles appear in both collections. As well, both collections are inundated with examinations of *The New York Trilogy*.

Much of the scholarly work written on Auster's fiction has looked at his use of the anti-detective format. Scholars have utilized post-modern, post-structuralist and Deconstruction theories to investigate Auster's work as well as delving into existential concerns, yet little has been written regarding the influence of Dashiell Hammett and Nathaniel Hawthorne on Auster's complete oeuvre. This thesis intends to fill this gap in the discussion of Auster's work through a close reading of a number of Auster's novels, starting in 1985 with *The City of Glass* and finishing with his most recent work, *Oracle Night* (2004) as seen through the lens of two short pieces, one by Hammett and the other by Hawthorne. There have been few scholarly works on Auster's later works, specifically *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night*, so I will rely heavily on book

reviews as well as interviews with the author to clarify my arguments when examining these novels.

Almost any author who has been writing for more than three decades mines the same themes as well as structure again and again, and Auster is no different. His fiction normally stars a male protagonist¹ whose life changes course because of something that has happened prior to the opening of the novel - or at the very beginning of the text - and has shattered his world. This life-altering event is often presented as the break-up of a relationship or the death of a significant other. A chance event then propels the protagonist into motion; this event can take many forms, from a phone call to a late night movie. From here the protagonist is sent into a world he does not understand, a world in which he is not comfortable in and therefore is easily controlled or influenced by others. This general structure seems to be greatly influenced by Dashiell Hammett's Flitcraft character, described in Chapter seven of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Hammett and Pierce

In Dashiell Hammett's most famous work, *The Maltese Falcon*, there is a much discussed divergence from the plot in the first pages of Chapter seven. The story, told by the narrator, Sam Spade, to Brigid O'Shaughnessy during a lull in the action, regards a man by the name of Flitcraft. As the story goes, Flitcraft, a real-estate agent in Tacoma, goes to lunch one day and never returns. There seems to be no immediate reason for this occurrence. Flitcraft, "had two children, boys, one five and the other three. He owned his house in a Tacoma suburb, a new Packard, and the rest of the appurtenances of successful American living" (Hammett 58). His affairs are in order but not so much to make anyone suspect he had premeditated this action. As Spade explains, "He went like that... like a fist when you open your hand" (59). Spade finds Flitcraft five years later living in Spokaneⁱⁱ with a new wife and son, under the name Charles Pierce. So, what happened to Flitcraft to cause him to leave this comfortable life? Going out to lunch one day he passed a building which was being erected and a beam "or something" (59) fell and nearly landed on him. He received only a scratch on the cheek but his world view was forever altered. As Spade explains it, "He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works" (60). What set him on the path to a new life was that, "He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them" (60). Hammett goes into more detail regarding this situation:

...in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step with life. He said he knew before he had gone twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he had adjusted himself to this new glimpse

of life.... Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away. (60)

As Spade then explains, “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling” (61). Most scholars regard this tale as an indication of Hammett’s own sense of randomness in the universe. As George Thompson states in *The Problem of Moral Vision in Dashiell Hammett's Detective Novels*:

The meaning of the Flitcraft parable is that if we can see clearly enough to understand that external reality is unstable and unpredictable, then one must be ready to react to its ironies... To some extent the Flitcraft parable, like the Maltese falcon, stands for the absurdity of assuming that the external world is necessarily stable. (183)

This parable exemplifies the concept of randomness and the human desire to attempt to control what is obviously an uncontrollable universe. Beyond, or rather within this story, two further points of interest are specifically in tune with a study of Auster’s work. First, the mention that, “Flitcraft had inherited seventy thousand dollars from his father” (58) must have seemed a striking coincidence for Auster, as it was only because of his own father’s death and the inheritance left to him that he was ever able to become a full-time writer. The second note of interest is the name Flitcraft takes once he disappears to the Pacific North West: Charles Peirce. Charles Peirce (1839-1914), was an American philosopher and mathematician who wrote quite extensively on the concept of chance. In his 1878 essay, ‘The Doctrine of Chances’, which was first published in *Popular Science Monthly*, Peirce discusses the cause and effect of chance:

An individual inference must be either true or false, and can show no effect of probability; and, therefore, in reference to a single case considered in itself, probability can have no meaning. Yet if a man had to choose between drawing a card from a pack containing twenty-five red cards and a black one, or from a pack containing twenty-five black cards and a red one, and if the drawing of a red card were destined to transport him to eternal felicity, and that of a black one to consign him to everlasting woe, it would be folly to deny that he ought to prefer the pack containing the larger proportion of red cards, although, from the nature of the risk, it could not be repeated... But suppose he should choose the red pack, and should draw the wrong card, what consolation would he have? He might say that he had acted in accordance with reason, but that would only show that his reason was absolutely worthless. And if he should choose the right card, how could he regard it as anything but a happy accident? (147)

In a sense, this divide between reason being 'absolutely worthless' and 'happy accidents' rests at the very core of much of Auster's work. What is suggested here by Peirce is a view of the universe as essentially random, whereby any attempt to control our own destiny is foolish. He does submit, however, that we still must always attempt to make choices and, most importantly, try to understand the outcome of these choices. Peirce goes on to look more closely at this concern within this essay:

All human affairs rest upon probabilities, and the same thing is true everywhere. If man were immortal he could be perfectly sure of seeing the day when everything in which he had trusted should betray his trust, and, in short, of coming eventually to hopeless misery. (149)

This 'betraying of trust' is, it seems, what Hammett spoke of through Sam Spade.

Flitcraft's life was set in stone. He *trusted* that little would change without him actively *doing something*. Yet a falling beam completely altered this view; a chance occurrence which forced Flitcraft to make a choice. It is this exact series of events which Auster feeds upon time after time within his fiction.

Hawthorne's Wakefield

Another story which Auster returns to on a number of occasions is Hawthorne's *Wakefield*. In *Wakefield* a man decides one day to simply leave his wife. The story is summed up in the first paragraph:

Wakefield, under pretence of going on a journey, took lodgings in the next street to his own house, and there, unheard of by his wife or friends, and without the shadow of a reason for such self-banishment, dwelt upwards of twenty years. During that period, he beheld his home every day, and frequently the forlorn Mrs. Wakefield. And after so great a gap in his matrimonial felicity--when his death was reckoned certain, his estate settled, his name dismissed from memory, and his wife, long, long ago, resigned to her autumnal widowhood--he entered the door one evening, quietly, as from a day's absence, and became a loving spouse till death. (35)

Unlike Flitcraft, Wakefield does not go far. In fact he moves only two blocks away. He does not find another wife or family. He simply watches his wife live her life, stares at the world he was once part of and then, when it seems that his home would be a comfortable place to live, he returns. The reader has no idea what happens to Wakefield when he re-enters his home. Unlike the Flitcraft tale there is no chance event acting as the impetus of Wakefield's act. He decides, on his own accord, to simply step out of his life. Though this story and the Flitcraft tale are much alike, the simple distinction

between them, and what they each stand for - chance and choice - become very important in Auster's work.

Structure and Approach

In an Auster novel the chance event, or choice a character makes, is normally introduced immediately. As Pascal Bruckner explains in 'Paul Auster, or The Heir Intestate':

Auster excels at sprinkling his characters' adventures with correlations, which have no prior meaning, but to which the story gives unexpected consequences. Noting the signs that fate strews along our path is the only way to combat the arbitrary: suddenly, in the randomness of existence, a certain order appears just below the surface, an order which seems mysteriously to control us. There is meaning in the world, but this meaning is only suggested, never clearly expressed.

Therefore, everything in Paul Auster's work occurs by chance. (Barone 29)

As priory stated, what is particularly of interest to both Auster and the present study of his work is not so much this initial chance event, but rather how a character reacts to it. In Auster's universe there seems to be only two options, one which is closely linked to Hammett's Flitcraft, the other to Hawthorne's Wakefield. The Flitcraft's (Sachs in *Leviathan*, Quinn in *City of Glass*, Blue in *Ghosts*, Nashe in *The Music of Chance*) choose to run away, disappear and never return while the Wakefield's (Hector Mann in *The Book of Illusions* and Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*) leave only to return and stare down the length of their life from the other end of randomness. Finally, in *Oracle Night*, both of these options are presented at once and in such a dizzying degree that the reader

is unable to decide which makes the most sense, which option would most easily alleviate the existential angst of as Beckett put it, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on” (418).

In order to analyze these concepts it seems best to divide this thesis into two sections, each dealing with those novels which fit into the two categories of this reaction to chance. In each section I will examine the chance event, or events, which lead the characters to drastically alter their lives, the choices they make along the way, and how they are then affected by these choices. I will then investigate how, in *Oracle Night*, Auster incorporates all of these scenarios and, in a sense, exhausts the Flitcraft and Wakefield tales and their possible outcomes. Although I will touch on all of Auster’s novels, as well as his essays and poetry, I will focus my study on *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room*), *The Music of Chance*, *The Book of Illusions*, and *Oracle Night*.

2. To Disappear and Never Return

Where Flitcraft Lives

Auster's first work of prose was a biography/memoir titled *The Invention of Solitude*. Broken into two separate books - *Portrait of an Invisible Man* and *The Book of Memory* - *The Invention of Solitude* is a reflection by the author on the passing of his father. As Charles Baxter states in his essay 'The Bureau of Missing Persons: Notes on Paul Auster's Fiction', "Sam Auster is the first missing person to appear in Paul Auster's writing, and he is certainly one of the most memorable of these disappeared ones" (Bloom, 5). At the beginning of *The Invention of Solitude* Auster speaks of his father's death:

Even before his death he had been absent, and long ago the people closest to him had learned to accept this absence, to treat it as the fundamental quality of his being. Now that he was gone, it would not be difficult for the world to absorb the fact that he was gone forever. The nature of his life had prepared the world for his death –had been a kind of death by anticipation – and if and when he was remembered, it would be dimly, no more than dimly. (6)

Here is a man whose disappearance means very little to the world. Chance, or fate, decided his time had come to an end, yet in his passing his son, Paul, felt his life to be unique enough to write about, there-by granting his disappearance a semblance of importance. Auster's father had been privy to a horrible secret which altered the way in which he interacted with his family. The secret (that when he was quite young, his

mother had killed his father) left Sam Auster void of understanding on what it meant to be part of a family. He never seemed to have wanted to become a father and when he did he fled the family he had created. Consequently, Paul Auster was raised in a home absent of his father whether he was physically there or not. Emotionally Sam distanced himself from his son. As Auster explains, "By the time you had managed to establish a common ground with him, he would take out his shovel and dig it out from under your feet" (25). Paul Auster's life, then, was dictated by an absence rather than a presence; so it is little wonder that in his fiction this theme is investigated.

The very first lines of *The Invention of Solitude* - a piece which Auster began writing only three weeks after the death of his father - are reminiscent of Flitcraft's world viewⁱⁱⁱ:

One day there is life. A man, for example, in the best of health, not even old, with no history of illness. Everything is as it was, as it will always be. He goes from one day to the next, minding his own business, dreaming only of the life that lies before him. And then, suddenly, it happens there is death. (5)

Certainly this is not a new concept. We live and then we die and we know not when or how it will happen. However, this idea of blind chance comes into play in both these texts in a dramatic and dynamic way. For Flitcraft, and for the detective Spade (who attempts to put everything in order to solve a mystery) the very concept of blind chance is difficult to deal with. For Auster, blind chance is the foundation of existence. Throughout *The Invention of Solitude*, numerous attempts at understanding blind chance are made. Auster repeats a number of stories regarding strange coincidences to lay out a further argument.

In one story, a son moves to Paris and finds a room in a decrepit boarding house. He writes to his father to tell him he has found an apartment and his father replies asking about the specifics of the boarding house. It seems the return address is the exact same as that of a building in which the father spent a number of months hiding from the Nazis during the war; a situation he had never told anyone about. Coincidentally, it is not only the same building, but the same room his son has rented. In another story, Auster buys a piano which works perfectly but for one key; F above middle C. He and his new wife go on vacation and find themselves in a monastery with a piano. Auster's wife (at this time, Lydia Davis, the poet and translator) sits down to play the piano only to find that F above middle C does not work properly. A number of these situations are laid out before Auster comes to what is his main point within the *Book of Memory* section of *The Invention of Solitude*:

If a novelist had used these little incidents of broken piano keys, the reader would be forced to take note, to assume the novelist was trying to make some point about his characters or the world. One could speak of symbolic meanings, of subtext, or simply of formal devices... In a work of fiction, one assumes there is a conscious mind behind the words on the page. In the presence of happenings in the so-called real world, one assumes nothing... At his bravest moments, he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, and then he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees...^{iv} It means only what it is. Nothing more, nothing less.

(148-149)

What does have meaning for Auster is what people do following these chance events, these strange coincidences. The chance event itself, by its very nature, is not something that can be controlled, or even predicted. In fact it flies in the face of logic, of all planning and understanding. Auster, in a 1992 interview published in *Contemporary Literature*, states that:

What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in. When I talk of coincidence, I'm not referring to a desire to manipulate – mechanical plot devices, the urge to tie everything up, the happy ending where everyone turns out to be related to everyone else – but the presence of the unpredictable, the powers of contingency. Chance? Destiny? Or simple mathematics, an example of probability theory at work? It doesn't matter what you call it. Life is full of such events. As a writer of novels, I feel my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for the mysterious goings-on in the world. (3)

In his fiction, Auster creates these strange situations and then investigates the effects these single events have on the lives of his characters. For Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass* the chance event is a wrong number, and the ramifications of this occurrence are endless.

A Wrong Number Started it All

City of Glass

City of Glass, Auster's first published novel, begins when Quinn, a mystery writer, receives a phone call in the night. The person asks to speak to "Paul Auster" of the "Auster Detective Agency" (8). Quinn informs the man that he has the wrong number and hangs up. This same event occurs another two times until, finally, "Quinn did not hesitate. He knew what he was going to do, and now that the time had come, he did it" (12). Quinn states that he is Paul Auster of the Paul Auster Detective Agency and arranges to meet the mysterious man the next day regarding an assignment. Quinn is then hired by Peter and Virginia Stillman to follow, and, in a sense, protect them from Peter's father (also named Peter Stillman) who has recently been released from jail. Peter Stillman, the father, has served twenty years for confining his son to a single room during his adolescence in an experiment to discover the, "...original language of innocence" (76). Virginia and Peter (the younger) fear that Peter's father will attempt to kill them so they hire Quinn (under the guise of Auster) to protect them. Quinn soon finds that Peter Stillman (the elder) has no interest in harming anyone. He does little more, in fact, than wander the streets attempting to establish a new Tower of Babel.^v He collects broken items from the sidewalks of New York and assigns them new, unique names. As Peter Stillman (the elder) explains:

Consider a word that refers to a thing – 'umbrella,' for example. When I say the word 'umbrella,' you see the object in your mind. You see a kind of stick, with collapsible metal spokes on top that form an armature for a waterproof material which, when opened, will protect you from the rain. This last detail is important.

Not only is an umbrella a thing, it is a thing that performs a function – in other words, expresses the will of man... What happens when a thing no longer performs its function? Is it still the thing, or has it become something else? (93)

This principle is of particular interest in the *New York Trilogy* as well as in much of Auster's oeuvre because characters often either take or create new names once they have disappeared into the modern world. The question raised here by Auster then is, what is in a name? What does a name truly signify?

Quinn, at the loss of everything else in his relatively comfortable life, obsessively follows Stillman on his wanderings around New York. Quinn eventually totally disappears into the city, installing himself in an alleyway across the street from Peter and Virginia's apartment building. "Little by little, Quinn adapted to his new life" (135), a life of watching delivery men come and go and of "...looking up at the sky" (140). Quinn lives in the alleyway, relieving himself in a dumpster and rushing for food every few days, for a number of months before he runs out of money. He returns to his apartment only to find that in his absence someone else has been allowed to move in; another example of Quinn's life being slowly erased. Quinn then ventures to the Stillman apartment only to find it emptied of its contents. Suddenly, not only has his own life been disrupted or interrupted, but the lives of the people he was meant to be watching over have also been altered. For lack of any options, he lays down on the bathroom floor and begins to write in a red notebook.^{vi} Here Quinn's story ends. He disappears from the text altogether and, as the unnamed narrator explains, "... my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (158).

At the conclusion of *The City of Glass* four of the main characters have utterly disappeared. Virginia and Peter Stillman step out early in the text, no longer answering their phone. Peter Stillman (the elder) leaves one day when Quinn is not watching him closely enough and Quinn himself disappears once these other characters have left him. A chance event brought these four people together, a wrong number. What is of interest, however, is how Auster investigates the ramifications of this chance event. Certainly, examinations into the logic of words, into detective fiction, into the principles of fear are made, but in the end everyone simply disappears. What, then, is the point?

The City of Glass is a very intricate work of cause and response. Taken as individuals, each of the characters in this work represent a different way in which human beings attempt to organize a chaotic and unpredictable world. As Stillman explains,

...the world is in fragments. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the language whereby we can speak of it. These are no doubt spiritual matters, but they have their analogue in the material world. My brilliant stroke has been to confine myself to physical things, to the immediate and tangible. My motives are lofty, but my work now takes place in the realm of the everyday. (92)

On his final meeting with Peter Stillman (the elder), Quinn states that *his* name is Peter Stillman and that Peter Stillman (the elder) is his father. Once Peter Stillman (the elder) has told who he supposes is his son about the nature of lies, life, and death, he says, "I'll be able to die happily now, Peter" (103), and then disappears. This occurrence is rare in Auster's fiction only because a final defining statement is made before a character disappears. Why this seems possible in *City of Glass* is that Peter Stillman (the elder) had simply been waiting to tell his son something before he left. Not an apology for what

he had done to him, but rather the explanation that, “A father must always teach his son the lessons he has learned. In that way knowledge is passed down from generation to generation, and we grow wise” (103). What was it that Peter Stillman wished to pass along to his son? “Time makes us grow old, but it also gives us the day and the night. And when we die, there is always someone to take our place” (102). In *City of Glass* this someone is Quinn, for when all the Stillmans disappear and only Quinn remains, it is Quinn who writes their story, Quinn who lives in their apartment, Quinn who continues to search out the mysteries of language which Peter Stillman set forth.

Beyond this simple disappearing act, *City of Glass*, is an examination into identity. As Auster states,

The question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process that Quinn undergoes in that book is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing. (*The Art of Hunger* 279)

Quinn goes through a number of name changes in this novel. He writes under a pseudonym, William Wilson,^{vii} yet, “Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart” (*City of Glass* 5). Taking this idea a step further, “Quinn treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man” (5). This is the first level of disappearance for Quinn. The impetus for Daniel Quinn to take on a pseudonym is the fact that “(he) had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead” (3). His wife and son had been killed in some form of accident and, since that time

(five years had passed) Quinn had sunk into the most basic life available. When examining who Quinn eventually 'becomes' it is evident that he is a fractured person through out the novel. William Wilson is his homage to detective fiction, the way in which he makes money. The next name he assumes is Paul Auster, believing this man to be a lead detective in a detective agency. Later he discovers that this is not the case and that Auster is actually a writer of literature; as well as a man with a beautiful wife and son. He then takes the name Henry Dark, a name which Stillman states is not possible for Quinn to have because, "...there never was any such person as Henry Dark. I made him up. He's an invention" (97). Yet Quinn, from the beginning of the novel, is little more than an invention himself. Next Quinn becomes Peter Stillman (the younger) and finally he is simply Quinn again.

These changes in names are book-ended by Quinn being naked. When the phone rings for the first time Quinn, "...climbed out of bed, walked naked to the telephone, and picked up the receiver on the second ring" (7). At the end of the novel, when Quinn grants himself entry to the Stillman apartment he, again, disrobes. This laying himself bare is the only way in which he can change so seamlessly into another person. Like a snake losing its skin, Quinn sheds all that he has been before moving on to another life. In a sense, Quinn is allowing himself to be seen as whomever other people wish to see him. It is in this way that Auster is able to examine identity. As Alik Varvogli explains in *The World that is the Book*, "In *City of Glass*, the writer-turned detective- seeks to erase his identity, not only to annihilate his former self but actually to divest himself of his very selfhood" (27). This same concept is taken one step further in the second novel of *The New York Trilogy - Ghosts*.

Black, Blue or White, What Difference Does it Make?

Ghosts

Ghosts reads like an intensified version of *City of Glass*. The same concepts of language, identity, and solitude are investigated. In this strange, detective-like story, Blue is hired by a man named White to watch another man named Black. Black and White, however, could possibly be the same person and the true reason Blue has been hired is so that Black can watch him. Blue is given an apartment directly across the street from Black's apartment from where he watches Black writing and reading. This is a bizarre set-up for a novel, yet Auster explains how the impetus for this work came:

In *Ghosts*, the spirit of Thoreau is dominant – another kind of passionate excess. The idea of living a solitary life, of living with a kind of monastic intensity – and all the dangers that entails. Walden Pond in the heart of the city.” (*The Art of Hunger* 281)

In *Walden*, Thoreau creates one of the most comprehensive examinations of solitude in modern literature.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life... I wanted... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (89)

Ghosts examines many of the same themes as *Walden* yet comes to entirely different conclusions. *Walden* tells of a man who steps out of society in order to look back at it from a distance, to examine himself and what he has become in modern society. *Ghosts* attempts to do much the same though the hermit-like scholar is replaced here by a gumshoe detective. The place is the city, an urban forest, and the mysteries this detective is asked to solve belong to someone else. Thoreau went into the forest to find himself, to examine society, whereas Blue is propelled into isolation for the sake of work. Blue's seclusion, his disappearance, is forced by someone else's hand. Chance, as Auster often sees it, can be sought out. Blue is a private detective, available for anyone to hire. A private detective's life is one in which he is constantly drawn into other people's problems. Therefore, in many ways, it is possible to see the private detective as someone who leaves himself open to chance at all times. Blue's life, then, is a constant flow of the ramifications of chance.

At the beginning of *Ghosts*, Blue tells a story^{viii} about a man named Gray who had been missing for one year when Blue was hired to find him. He searched for three months and was about to file a final report when he located Gray in a bar "...not two blocks from where the wife was sitting, convinced he would never return" (167). Gray had changed his name to Green and, as Blue reports, had been struck by a case of amnesia. Blue returns Gray to his wife, though he has no recollection of her. But, as time goes on, Gray begins to like Mrs. Gray and, eventually, proposes marriage.

This story, told at the outset of *Ghosts*, appears to be the first time that the Flitcraft fable is re-told, in a slightly different way within Auster's fiction. Here, some foreign force (amnesia) has made a man alter his life. Likewise for Blue, an outside force

(Black) has altered his life. Black's true intention, however, is to watch and be watched. In a sense, both Black and Blue are living like modern day Thoreau. Black is watching Blue and writing about his descent into solitude while, at the same time, he himself is being watched as he investigates solitude. Blue remains suspicious of Black and believes that:

It would not take much, Blue reasons, for the entire picture to change. A single moment's inattention – a glance to the side of him, a pause to scratch his head, the merest yawn – and presto, Black slips away and commits whatever heinous act he is planning to commit. (171)

Here the want of controlling fate arises. Blue has been hired to watch Black for an un-given reason and is therefore prepared for anything to happen at any moment. Yet on the very next page it is explained that:

For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself. Life has slowed down so drastically for him that Blue is now able to see things that have previously escaped his attention. (172)

Like Thoreau by his pond, Blue is able to step outside his life and examine it; though this is done both by watching another and watching himself more closely. By watching Black and understanding that he is, in this act, watching himself, Blue has two distinct perspectives of himself. As Alison Russell states in 'Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction', "Experiencing complete ontological instability, Blue tries to recover language by verbally cataloguing objects according to their colour, but he realizes that 'there is no end to it' (77). The colors blue, black, and white are meaningless distinctions, he

realizes, for each can be applied to any number of people, places, and things” (104-105) As is quickly explained, “For Black is no more than a kind of blankness, a hole in the texture of things, and one story can fill this hole as well as any other” (173). Black is a non-being, an embodiment of chance or fate. So how, once Black has entered his life, does Blue change?

“I’m changing, (Blue) says to himself. Little by little, I’m no longer the same” (174). Here Blue recognizes the life-altering effects of chance. *Ghosts* is like a slow-motion examination of chance. How would a person adapt to chance were they given the opportunity to move slowly through it? Blue seems the perfect subject for such an experiment. In *Ghosts*, for a time, it seems that Blue invites chance, even desires it.

There is something nice about being in the dark, (Blue) discovers, something thrilling about not knowing what is going to happen next. It keeps you alert, he thinks, and there’s no harm in that, is there? (182)

Certainly, Blue is alert, possibly even over-alert. Yet his daily routine, his every move is controlled by someone else (Black). Blue does not know what is going to happen next, yet Black does; for both of them. This dichotomy soon becomes clear to Blue, even though he has no idea what Black is doing:

Something happens, Blue thinks, and then it goes on happening forever. It can never be changed, can never be otherwise. Blue begins to be haunted by this thought, for he sees it as a kind of warning, a message delivered up from within himself, and try as he does to push it away, the darkness of this thought does not leave him. (193)

We make things happen, Auster seems to be saying, and then things happen and we cannot control them. Or, at the very least, we wish for change, look for chance to effect us, and when it does it takes on a life of its own. It is immediately after discovering this truth that "...the sky falls on top of him" (195). Blue is confronted by "the ex-future Mrs. Blue," on a street corner. She is with a new man. She pounds on Blue's chest, screams at him for leaving her, for worrying her, until the other man pulls her from him and leads her away. "This brief scene, so unexpected and devastating, turns Blue inside out. By the time he regains his composure and manages to return home, he realizes that he has thrown away his life" (196). Quickly after this realization Blue understands that, "He has lost whatever chance he might have had for happiness, and if that is the case, then it would not be wrong to say that this is truly the beginning of the end" (196). Certainly it was Blue's choice to take the case, but Black's control of him has overtaken every aspect of Blue's life. Not knowing how Black is controlling him, Blue settles more deeply into the case and, consequently, more deeply into himself, until he sees that he is living much like a character in a book. Though:

...this book offers him nothing. There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book. That's all there is, Blue realizes, and he no longer wants any part of it. But how to get out? How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room? (202)

It is at this point that Blue finally acts and speaks with Black, much like Quinn in *City of Glass*. To Blue's surprise Black explains that he is a private detective hired to "...watch someone, no one in particular as far as I can tell, and send in a report about him every

week. Just that. Watch this guy and write about it. Not one damned thing more” (214). Blue quizzes Black further on his job as a private eye and Black eventually explains the reason for watching Blue, “...he needs me... He needs my eyes looking at him. He needs me to prove he’s alive” (216). The next time the two meet, Black states that he is rushing to finish a book he is writing. “There are days when I don’t even know if I’ll live that long (to finish it)” (220). To which Blue replies, “Well, we never know, do we? One day we’re alive, and the next day we’re dead. It happens to all of us” (221). Blue believes, at this point, that he is on a path with only one possible outcome. His goal, it seems, is to kill Black and nothing else will do. Though he does contemplate altering his path:

What if he stood up, went out the door, and walked away from the whole business? He ponders this thought for a while, testing it out in his mind, and little by little he begins to tremble, overcome by terror and happiness, like a slave stumbling onto a vision of his own freedom. He imagines himself somewhere else, far away from here, walking through the woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder. Alone and free, his own man at last. (222)

Suddenly, the man who could not imagine, “Why anyone would want to go off and live alone in the woods” (193) desires exactly this. But Blue’s craving is slightly different from Thoreau’s for he only wishes to not be watched. To live a life where he alone controls what happens to him and his successes and failures are not seen by anyone else.

Slowly Blue realizes that Black will never leave him alone. No matter where he goes Black will be there right behind him, watching him. So he confronts Black and, after a quarrel, beats the other man.

He removes the mask (which Black had been wearing) 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. If he's alive now, Blue thinks, it won't be for long. And if he's dead, then so be it. (231)

Blue has killed off his double, in a sense, setting himself truly free. With this act Blue is able to take his life back from chance. He has made a decisive move and regained control of his actions. With Black gone there is no one for him to watch and, likewise, no one watching him. Blue becomes an ultimately free man, something akin to Thoreau. Yet the narrator has different hopes for Blue than Thoreau likely would:

Where he goes after that is not important. For we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood. Anything is possible, therefore. I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. It is even possible that America was not the end of it. In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on a ship and sailing for China. Let it be China, then, and we'll leave it at that. For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing. (232)

China, in this modern world, has become the new 'outside'. As Auster explains, Blue had, "...the determination to reject everyday American life, to go against the grain, to discover a more solid foundation" (281). Thoreau's Walden Pond no longer exists in America. To escape America one must truly leave America.

Combined, *City of Glass*, and *Ghosts* is an examination of chance and choice; two novels in which Auster lays out a number of different possibilities for a person's response to chance. For Blue there seems to be a complete annihilation of self. Black ruled Blue's world. He was, metaphorically, fate. Quinn does not have quite the same dilemma as Blue for he blindly follows the Stillmans. At the very least he made his own decisions during the course of his investigation. Though, in the end, the protagonists simply disappear and the narrator cannot say where it is they have gone. What is important to remember from this discussion is the way in which Auster guides the reader along after the chance event has occurred. In *The Music of Chance* the forces of chance and control are intensified by incarceration.

The Power of Money

The Music of Chance

In *Invention of Solitude*, Auster writes of his base understanding of the world:

At his bravest moments, he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, and then he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees.

He is in his room on Varick Street. His life has no meaning. The book he is writing has no meaning. There is the world, and the things one encounters in the world, and to speak of them is to be in the world.

(147-148)

This is not the writing of a desperately depressed man, but rather the observations of someone who feels he has aligned himself with the reality of the world. A person who is 'in the world'. Auster goes on to state that, as humans, we attempt to give our lives, "...meaning, to look beyond the bare fact of existence, to build an imaginary world inside the real world" (149). In *The Music of Chance*, Auster utilizes the Flitcraft tale to examine this exact conundrum. How do we, as humans, give our lives meaning without necessarily looking beyond ourselves to something greater? In a 1992 interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Auster speaks of the concept of contingency:

In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency. Our lives don't really belong to us, you see – they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding. We brush up against these mysteries all the time. The result can be truly terrifying – but it can also be comical. (*The Art of Hunger* 289)

This 'belonging to the world' is at the centre of *The Music of Chance* and is a way in which Auster infuses a sense of meaning into the novel and human existence itself.

Nashe, the protagonist of this novel, is a recently divorced fireman. Six months after his wife leaves him he inherits two-hundred thousand dollars from his father's estate. With this money he decides to buy a car and travel randomly on the roads of America. At first this novel reads like a traditional road novel. Nashe drives without stopping anywhere on purpose but rather because he is tired or the car needs some work. He drives for the sheer thrill of driving and, "Little by little, he [falls] in love with his new life of freedom and irresponsibility, and once this happens, there are no longer any reasons to stop" (11).

During this time many chance events are introduced into the text. First, Nashe has an affair with Fiona Wells, a woman who once interviewed him for a public interest story, a situation which "...like most of the things that happened to him that year, came about purely by chance" (14). He meets 'Jackpot' Pozzi, an event which is explained on the first page of the novel as, "...one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air" (1). Nashe picks a bloodied, beaten Pozzi up on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. Pozzi had been at a high stakes poker game where he was winning when, "...out of nowhere, the door flies open and in burst these four huge motherfuckers. 'Don't move,' they shout. 'Don't move or you're dead'- yelling at the

top of their lungs, pointing goddamn shotguns in our faces” (26). The one night Pozzi happens to be at this high-rollers weekly table, the house gets robbed. Of course the other men believe that Pozzi has set them up and they beat him to within an inch of his life. Hence, Pozzi’s relationship with Nashe begins out of blind, bad luck.

When he meets Pozzi, Nashe’s road life comes to an end and as Ilana Shiloh states in *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest*, “The dual nature of chance is metaphorically conveyed through the setting of the road – traditionally associated with the unpredictability of accident- juxtaposed with that of the castle and the wall, which suggest the finality of destiny” (159). Pozzi is at the crux of these two worlds, and with his entry into the narrative the rest of what occurs is pre-determined. “Pozzi, who first appears beaten half to death, will eventually be beaten to death. And Nashe, who first appears driving on the road, will eventually die on the road” (Shiloh 160).

Nashe, like many of Auster’s protagonists, escapes a life which has fallen apart. His wife has left him and he has left his daughter with his sister so that, “For six months, he had been nothing but a voice to her (his daughter), a vaporous collection of sounds, and little by little he had turned himself into a ghost” (4). Nashe has severed almost all ties with his family in order to satisfy his own inexhaustible hunger for escape. He decides to quit his job as a fireman and, on the way back home from a visit with his daughter he:

... missed the ramp to the freeway – a common enough mistake – but instead of driving the extra twenty miles that would have put him back on course, he impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. It was a sudden, unpremeditated decision, but in the

brief time that elapsed between the two ramps, Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same. (6)

In one sense both ramps are the same because no matter what Nashe does it is simple chance or destiny^{ix} that will lead him to his ultimate destination and in another way neither ramp matters because life as he knew it was already over. A new life needs to begin, or has already begun, and therefore whatever 'choice' he settles on makes little difference. The road trip becomes (as it often is does American literature) a metaphor for finding the self. Yet Auster quickly turns this around when:

After the second night, Nashe realized that he was no longer in control of himself, that he had fallen into the grip of some baffling, overpowering force... Every morning he would go to sleep telling himself that he had had enough, that there would be no more of it, and every afternoon he would wake up with the same desire, the same irresistible urge to crawl back into the car. (7)

Choice has been taken away from Nashe at this point in the novel as he has released himself to chance. Auster quickly examines the ways in which chance rules the roadways of America:

There were constant perils to watch out for, and anything could happen at any moment. Swerves and potholes, sudden blowouts, drunken drivers, the briefest lapse of attention – any one of those things could kill you in an instant. Nashe saw a number of fatal accidents during his months on the road, and once or twice he came within a hair's breadth of crack-ups himself. He welcomed these close calls, however. They added an element of risk to what he was doing, and more

than anything else, that was what he was looking for: to feel that he had taken his life into his own hands. (13)

This idea of someone taking their life into their own hands is prevalent throughout Auster's works and is linked directly to the Flitcraft story. As Hammett states: "(Flitcraft) adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling" (61). The difference, of course, is that Nashe is unable to adjust himself to beams not falling for though he believes he has control of his life, he truly has no control whatsoever.

What Nashe desires more than anything is freedom. Freedom to do as he pleases, to roam back and forth across America on a whim. He wishes to avoid being tied down to anything. With the inheritance from his father he is able to do exactly this. Yet the problem then becomes: if money equals freedom then what happens when the money runs out?

Nashe's perspective of 'taking control of his life' breaks because, "He was gradually coming to the realization that he was stuck, that if something did not happen soon, he was going to keep on driving until the money ran out" (19). On the very next page Nashe finds Pozzi on the side of the road and, "For better or worse, that was how the whole business started" (20). With Pozzi by his side the relationship between freedom and money becomes more corrupt. As Shiloh states, "From the start, Nashe associates money with freedom: he does not value it for its buying power, but for its potential to liberate him from bondage to necessity. But if money, for him, signifies freedom, it also signifies control" (164). This control is utilized both by and against Nashe. In one case he has control over his life because of his wealth. Yet as much as he

feels control he understands that once the money runs out he will no longer have control of anything. To ward off this inevitability, Nashe 'invests' in Pozzi, and his dream of winning big at a poker game.

Nashe's financial means enable him to feed and clothe Pozzi, to take charge of the kid's life. In an ironic foreshadowing of his reversal of fortune, in which he himself will be staged by people who have more money, Nashe reflects in satisfaction, looking at the transformed Pozzi, that "it all boils down to a question of staging." (Shiloh 164)

The motion of this novel then shifts from the road to a castle with the poker game as a separator. When Nashe and Pozzi ring the doorbell of the rich poker players, Stone and Flower, house, "The doorbell chimed with the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. They both grinned stupidly in surprise, but before either one of them could make a remark about it, the door was opened..." (68). This piece of music's first motif is called the Destiny motif, a fact which neither Nashe nor Pozzi either know or take seriously. In fact the entire encounter with Stone and Flower – described as two men "dressed in white summer suits" (69) - is not taken seriously by either Nashe or Pozzi. Pozzi even refers to them at one time as Laurel and Hardy^x. But the ridiculous nature of chance and destiny are at play here and who better to introduce the protagonist to the remainder of his life than a slapstick comedy team?

Stone and Flower came into their money by winning the lottery. The ultimate game of chance, the lottery here signifies the level of luck with which these two men are blessed. Poker, however, is a game of skill as much as chance and the belief that these two stumbled into their fortune leads Pozzi and Nashe to think even more so that Stone

and Flower present easy targets. Tim Woods examines the poker game in detail in his essay, 'The Music of Chance: Aleatorical (Dis)harmonies':

Perhaps the single most tantalizing issue of chance occurs in the poker match, and the extent to which the loss in the poker game was due to bad luck (chance) or to Flower and Stone cheating (agency)... Auster's novel deals with the perennial postmodern anxiety of neurosis and paranoia about the extent to which everything is plotless or totally plotted: whether one lives in a world of hermetic containment in complete meaning, or in a world undifferentiation and pure randomness.

(Barone 149)

The loss, whether by fair or foul play, spells the end of freedom for Nashe, and Pozzi as well, for not only do they lose all their money, but also Nashe's car and, literally, their freedom. Nashe and Pozzi are sentenced to repay their debt by working for ten dollars an hour each building a wall in a meadow near Stone and Flower's estate. Nashe agrees to the terms set out by Flower and Stone because, "...he shares in its implicit logic – money signifies freedom and lack of money entails slavery, until you manage to make enough money to set you free. But he also accepts the suggestion because he wishes to redeem himself through brutal labor, to expiate for his act of shame" (173). The shame here refers both to how Nashe abandoned his daughter and how he sought freedom through the reckless use of money. Following this is Nashe's epic fall due to chance, choice and, if the Beethoven's Fifth door chime is to be believed, destiny.

As they settle into their new house - a trailer in the meadow - Nashe reflects upon the nature of the proposed placement of the wall in the meadow, "...it pleased him that no other solution was possible" (117). As for his own condition, Nashe, "...in those first

moments after climbing from the jeep, began to sense that he had already won back a measure of his freedom” (116). The relation of money to freedom suddenly becomes much clearer. Money is a liberator for Nashe until he understood that his freedom will be taken away the moment it is gone. Therefore, when he finally has no more money, true freedom is available; he does not have to consider what to do next, everything is taken care of for him. Nashe gives himself up to pure chance by losing at a game of chance. Without any control over his life, he now exists as a prisoner of those with money just as one must imagine Stone and Flower are prisoners of their wealth. Nevertheless, for Nashe, life in the meadow, building the wall was much like being in prison, but he felt useful each day and believed he was working toward a new life. Yet as Shiloh points out:

Nashe’s optimism sweeps up even the rebellious Pozzi. They start feeling that ‘as long as they kept working, the work was going to make them free’ (147), the wording here ironically evoking the Nazi slogan of *Arbeit macht frei* inscribed on the entrance gate to Auschwitz. (171-172)

Work frees or work liberates read the slogan. Yet freedom was certainly not found by those entering Auschwitz, nor by Nashe and Pozzi in the millionaire’s meadow. Much like a prison or work camp, Nashe and Pozzi are shut off from the outside world entirely. A man with a gun watches over them to make certain they do not try to escape, and when Nashe asks if he can call his sister to let her know where he is he is told:

“There’s no phone here” Murks said. “You can see that for yourself.”

“Maybe you could drive me back to the house, then.”

“What do you want to make a phone call for?”

“I doubt that’s any of your business, Calvin.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is. But I can’t just take you to the house without knowing why.”

“I want to call my sister. She’s expecting me in a few days, and I don’t want her to worry when I don’t show up.”

Murks thought about it for a moment and then shook his head. “Sorry. I’m not allowed to take you there. They gave me special instructions. (121)

With no contact to the outside world, Nashe and Pozzi have, in many ways, ceased to exist. Though the reader is not given an outside perspective, it is easy to imagine the thoughts which would go through Nashe’s sister’s head when he did not arrive for a planned visit. Although Murks allows Nashe to send a letter to his sister it must be delivered through him to the mailbox. In this way Nashe has no idea if his sister will ever receive the letter. Though it would be expected that Nashe would, at the very least, fall into despair having lost his freedom, instead he accepts his fate with a kind of blindness, “Nashe was not nearly as restless as he had thought he would be. Once he accepted the fact that the car was gone, he felt little or no desire to be back on the road, and the ease with which he adjusted to his new circumstances left him somewhat bewildered” (*Music of Chance* 125). As Woods explains, “With their change in status from guests to debtors, Pozzi and Nashe ‘had been relegated to the category of non-persons’ (*Music of Chance* 113). Nevertheless, despite this non-identity, or *because* of it, Nashe now regards his new situation “...as if it were precisely this sort of crisis that he had been searching for all along” (98). This sense of relief is short-lived though, as it becomes clear that they are living in what amounts to a prison.

The meadow becomes like Flower's 'City of the World', the model town he keeps in a room of the house. The feeling here is one of an experiment; Pozzi and Nashe are being watched by the rich poker players in order to see what men will do in such a situation. Again, this watching and being watched can be related to Black and Blue in *Ghosts*. While Nashe sinks into a sense of inevitability regarding the situation, Pozzi looks to blame someone, or something, for the loss. During the poker game Nashe disappears and steals two small figures from the model 'City of the World'. Pozzi regards the theft as the impetus for his loss and, in turn, their subsequent confinement:

It's like committing a sin to do a thing like that, it's like violating a fundamental law. We had everything in harmony. We'd come to the point where everything was turning into music for us, and then you have to go upstairs and smash all the instruments. You tampered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does that, he's got to pay the price. I'm just sorry I have to pay it with you (138).

This dialogue comes during an investigation into the workings of power. As Woods states, "In Pozzi's metaphysical construction, the world is a delicate, ordered harmony, which needs to be maintained carefully in balance for the wheels to be kept turning beautifully" (155). Pozzi needs to believe that for every action there is a reaction. Without this, his belief system will be shattered which, in many ways, it is when Nashe burns the figures in a frying pan. Nashe states:

You want to believe in some hidden purpose. You're trying to persuade yourself there's a reason for what happens in the world. I don't care what you call it –God or luck or harmony – it all comes down to the same bullshit. It's a way of avoiding facts, of refusing to look at how things really work (139).

However Nashe cannot say how things *really do* work. He believes in the randomness of the world, yet by giving himself up to chance is he not, in some ways, giving power to a system? Even if this system appears to be pure randomness, it is still a system in that there are beliefs associated with it.

Eventually Murks comes to Nashe and Pozzi with a list of expenses which they will have to work off before they can leave. At this point Nashe understands that his life is truly being ruled by others. Pozzi attempts to escape only to be severely beaten and left in the meadow the next morning. Nashe then contemplates taking Murks grandson (who accompanies Murks to the meadow each day) hostage to demand the truth of what happened to Pozzi.

All he had to do was snatch the boy, he thought, and everything would change for him: he would suddenly know what he had to know. The boy for the truth, he would say to Murks, and at that point Calvin would have to talk, he would have to tell him what he had done with Pozzi. There wouldn't be any choice. If he didn't talk his grandson would be dead. Nashe would make sure of that. He would strangle the kid right in front of his eyes. (184)

Nashe, however, does nothing to discover what happened to Pozzi. This shows how helpless he feels and how any level of control has been taken from him. Even when he has a desire to do something to claim back some level of choice, he cannot. He is impotent in the face of a ruled existence.

The final examination of chance comes at the very end of the novel when Nashe compares the lives of Mozart and Haydn.

At a certain point, the music of both men seemed to touch, and it was no longer possible to tell them apart. And yet Haydn had lived to a ripe old age, honoured with commissions and court appointments and every advantage the world of that time could offer. And Mozart had died young and poor, and his body had been thrown into a common grave (216).

This discussion of Mozart and Haydn examines how one man can live with such great luck, while another, equally talented, dies a young pauper. What difference existed between these two men? Why would one prosper and the other not? Such a conundrum finally leaves Nashe with no belief system, no sense that anything he does matters and, therefore, the only thing he can control, he understands, is his own death.

The Music of Chance when examined from the perspective of the Flitcraft tale investigates the possible avenues of choice, chance and destiny. The end result, it seems, is that the only choice humans have is to live or die (though not always) and the rest of our lives are controlled either by forces we cannot see (chance) or those we can (people, money). In *The Music of Chance*, Auster fully examines Hammett's idea of adjusting one's life to beams falling and finds this concept, in the end, impossible.

After writing *The Music of Chance* Auster switched to a different narrative form writing in first person in *Leviathan*, *Mr. Vertigo*, *The Book of Illusions*, and *Oracle Night*, the narrator is an observer of another character's interaction with choice and chance. Although these books closely examine the ramifications of choice and chance, they rarely come to the kind of complete conclusion presented so clearly in *The Music of Chance*.

3. To Leave and Return

When Wakefield Comes Home

The Locked Room

Of the three novels which make up *The New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room* is most akin to Hawthorne's short story *Wakefield*. A first person narrator tells the story of his friend, Fanshawe, who one day suddenly disappears. "One day in April (Fanshawe) told (his wife) that he was going to New Jersey for the afternoon to see his mother, and then he did not come back" (*The Locked Room* 238). Fanshawe's wife attempts to track her husband down, first by calling his mother and then the police. When all else fails she calls a detective named Quinn^{xi} who "worked doggedly on the case for five or six weeks, but in the end he begged off, not wanting to take any more of their money" (239). Resigned to her husband's fate, Sophie contacts the narrator, a famous author, because her husband had often spoken of how fond he was of his writing and how proud he was that his friend's successful career. Fanshawe, who had harboured similar literary aspirations, came to Sophie three or four months before his disappearance with the promise that he would attempt to publish some of his own works:

He gave her his word that he would do something about it within a year, and to prove that he meant it, he told her that if for any reason he failed to keep up his end of the bargain, she was to take all his manuscripts to me (the narrator) and put them in my hands. I was to be the guardian of his work, he said, and it was up to me to decide what should happen to it (242-243).

At the beginning of this story, then, an unnamed narrator has been given control over another man's complete body of work. As the narrator explains, "In the end, each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose" (256). It takes some days before the narrator is able to look at Fanshawe's work, a task which places the narrator in a peculiar position:

If I did not want Fanshawe's work to be bad, I discovered, I also did not want it to be good. This is a difficult feeling for me to explain. Old rivalries no doubt had something to do with it, a desire not to be humbled by Fanshawe's brilliance – but there was also a feeling of being trapped. I had given my word. Once I opened the suitcases, I would become Fanshawe's spokesman – and I would go on speaking for him, whether I liked it or not (262).

Being Fanshawe's spokesman became only the first step for the narrator in assuming the vanished man's life. Eventually he marries Fanshawe's wife and legally adopts Fanshawe's son. A direct link can be seen here between *The Locked Room* and *Wakefield*:

By belonging to Sophie, I began to feel as though I belonged to everyone else as well. My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable. This was the tiny hole between self and not-self, and for the first time in my life I saw this nowhere as the exact center of the world (274-275).

As Richard Swope suggests:

Although the center is unlocatable, a non-place where lost positions are not replaced by certain positions, he (the narrator) realizes that his only chance at any semblance of survival lies in his acceptance, or even active embrace, of this lack at the center, regardless of the frightening indeterminacy involved. The narrator's acceptance does not mean that the mystery at the center no longer creates terror. Rather, Auster's trilogy suggests that the dread of not knowing becomes part of the business of living (www.reconstruction.ws)

Wakefield is a man who makes a decision to look at his life from a distance, by stepping out of it, Wakefield not only leaves a life behind, he starts a new one. It is impossible to look at one's life from afar, though - like Wakefield - Fanshawe attempts to do just this. However, by having his wife contact the narrator, Fanshawe has put a facsimile of himself in his place. After some time, Fanshawe makes contact with the narrator in the form of a letter:

I'm not going to explain myself here. In spite of this letter, I want you to go on thinking of me as dead. Nothing is more important than that, and you must not tell anyone that you've heard from me... Seven years from the day of my disappearance will be the day of my death. I have passed judgment on myself, and no appeals will be heard... Threats are repugnant to me – but I have no choice but to give you this warning: If by some miracle you manage to track me down, I will kill you (280-281).

The narrator's one main question for this letter is "Did this mean Fanshawe had become someone else?" (282). Unquestionably this is exactly what he has done. In much of

Auster's fiction this exact situation occurs: a man assumes a new name, takes a new job, and moves to a new city. What Auster questions here, specifically, however, is if Fanshawe really becomes a *different* man or does he simply exist as the same man in a new place? Which then begs the question: what is the basis of a human being? Does a person's history make up more of who they are than the choices they make?

To answer this question, the narrator speaks of a job he once had as a census taker. No one in the Harlem neighbourhood assigned to him had any interest in being involved in a census. Eventually the narrator's supervisor informs him that he is expected to simply fabricate households full of people. This, then, is exactly what he does. Through this process, purely fictional people walk the earth, yet as far as the government is concerned these people are real, living at the addresses given on the census form. Consequently, in one of the most 'official' ways available to modern man, figments of a man's imagination exist: their histories created, their choices imagined. In the same vein, the narrator finds himself forced to create a death for a living man, Fanshawe. "All this came back to me when I sat down to write about Fanshawe. Once, I had given birth to a thousand imaginary souls. Now, eight years later, I was going to take a living man and put him in his grave" (295). The life of this narrator then is one akin to a god. He creates and destroys simply by placing words upon a page.

The narrator finds Fanshawe in an almost abandoned house in Boston on April first. When asked if the man he is speaking with is Fanshawe the man in the house replies, "Don't use that name... I won't allow you to use that name" (359). Fanshawe then explains that he followed the narrator around New York.

I watched you. I watched you and Sophie and the baby. There was even a time when I camped outside your apartment building. For two or three weeks, maybe a month. I followed you everywhere you went. Once or twice, I even bumped into you on the street, looked you straight in the eye. But you never noticed. It was fantastic the way you didn't see me (365).

In doing so, like Wakefield, Fanshawe had been examining his old life. With the narrator in his former place he was capable of, in many ways, watching himself. The final, most compelling, question in *The Locked Room*, however, is never answered. Why would Fanshawe step out of his life? Why would he leave a wife and family? Why would he watch another man live his old life? Fanshawe gives the narrator a notebook within which he suggests all of his actions are explained. Yet, like in *Wakefield*, this notebook - and along with it any explanation of why a man would do what Fanshawe did - is never presented in the text. The narrator simply reads it to himself and states, "If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I understood very little" (370).

All three of the novels which comprise *The New York Trilogy*, are, at their base, an investigation into the protagonist's identity crisis. For Quinn and Blue, nothing anchors them to the real world as they lose (or have already lost, in the case of Quinn) any social contact. While the narrator of *The Locked Room* manages to hold onto the rest of society by way of his wife and his child. This demonstrates a crucial divide between Auster's earlier and later works. In *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night* these social contacts become more crucial and begin to shape the novels and the narrator's quest.

Passing Along Redemption

The Book Of Illusions

Following the publication of *The Music of Chance*, Auster moved away from the theme of disappearances. In *Leviathan* (1992) a writer does disappear but the story here focuses on what happens before the disappearance and what the character inevitably leaves behind. After *Leviathan*, Auster wrote the scripts for two films by famed director Wayne Wang: *Smoke* and *Blue in The Face*. *Smoke* held onto the theme of disappearing people, in this case a father, but the action centred more on what occurs when someone finds the person who has decided to leave (in this case a father walking out on his son). This was a much more traditional look at one of Auster's major themes. In 1994 Auster published *Mr. Vertigo*, the story of an orphan who becomes "Walt the Wonder Boy" a young man who has learned the art of levitation. Neither the Flitcraft nor Wakefield structures can be applied to this novel or the films. It seems that Auster was, for a time, examining other obsessions.^{xii} In the wake of *Mr. Vertigo* came *Timbuktu*, the story of a dog, named Mr. Bones, who thinks, acts and, in a way, writes the narrative. Mr. Bones is the sidekick of a homeless man named Willy G. Christmas. When Willy dies Mr. Bones is left to wander Baltimore on his own. *Timbuktu* was as much a departure for Auster as *Mr. Vertigo* or the sexually charged film *Lulu on the Bridge* which he wrote and directed during this period as well.

Following this extended phase in the 1990s during which film drew him away from his novelistic pursuits, Auster began work on *The Book of Illusions*; the clearest example of the Flitcraft theme at the time. As he explains in a recent interview, "Hector Mann (the protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*) is a pure invention. He appeared in my

head one day about ten or twelve years ago, and I've been walking around with him ever since" (www.failbetter.com).

The narrator of *The Book of Illusions* is a literature professor named David Zimmer who has recently lost his wife and two sons in an airplane crash. Zimmer responds to this immense tragedy by sinking into an alcoholic wasteland. He spends his days drinking, watching television and wallowing in his tremendous sorrow. Yet, in the midst of this depression he sees a silent film starring an obscure actor named Hector Mann. The slapstick and comedic styling of Mann make Zimmer laugh and, with this, snap ever so slightly out of his depression. Zimmer decides to look for more information about Mann and discovers that the actor's films have been archived in a number of different museums around the world. On a mission to see all the available films, Hector Mann becomes Zimmer's obsession; and with this his life takes a very distinct turn.

In the initial pages of *The Book of Illusions* a series of chance events are presented and examined. First, the deaths of Zimmer's family members beginning with his father-in-law who, "...had just been operated on for a tumor in his leg and the family consensus was that she (Zimmer's wife) and the boys should leave as quickly as possible" (6).

Zimmer considers this event and all the events which followed it:

... I never seem to tire of walking down those same dead-end roads. Everything was part of it, every link in the chain of cause and effect was an essential piece of the horror – from the cancer in my father-in-law's leg to the weather in the Midwest that week to the telephone number of the travel agent who had booked the airline tickets. Worst of all, there was my own insistence on driving them down to Boston so they could be on a direct flight. I hadn't wanted them to leave

from Burlington. That would have meant going to New York on an eighteen-seat prop plane to catch a connecting flight to Milwaukee, and I told Helen that I didn't like those small planes. They were too dangerous, I said, and I couldn't stand the idea of letting her and the boys go on one of them without me. So they didn't in order to appease my worries. They went on a bigger one, and the terrible thing about it was that I rushed to get them there (6-7).

This is the first time in Auster's fiction in which a character feels pulled by the weight of fate yet, at the same time, examines his own actions or reactions to the chain of events. Now not only did chance play a major part in the destruction of a man's world, but his own insistence and actions contributed to the outcome.

With this understanding comes a certain amount of guilt. Zimmer could have done things differently. He could have let his family fly on a smaller plane to New York. He could have driven slower and his family would have missed the fateful flight. For Zimmer, then, it seems that he had control and lost it. Chance stole everything that mattered to him and left him to look back at what might have been. When he turns to alcohol he states, "It kept me from feeling too much, but at the same time it deprived me of any sense of the future, and when a man has nothing to look forward to, he might as well be dead" (9). This sense of requiring hope to live informs much of the rest of the narrative as both David Zimmer and Hector Mann search for something to give their life meaning, something to look forward to each day. Zimmer contemplates suicide and it is at this moment that Hector Mann "...unexpectedly walked into (his) life"(9).

Hector is explained as being unique. "...he was considered to have been the last of the significant two-reel comedians"(11), yet what spark's Zimmer's interest is not

Mann's significance but rather his mysterious exit not only from the screen but the world in general. Having finished a number of well-received films, Mann simply disappeared one day. Though he states, "I wasn't attracted to mysteries or enigmas" (13), Zimmer has previously written a non-fiction work on writers who had stopped writing:

The Road to Abyssinia, was a book about writers who had given up writing, a meditation on silence. Rimbaud, Dashiell Hammett, Layra Riding, J.D. Salinger, and others – poets and novelists of uncommon brilliance who, for one reason or another had stopped (14).

With this admittance a new concept invades the Flitcraft motif. Never before in Auster's work has the search to fill a silence been so clearly displayed. In *The New York Trilogy* there are mysteries involved, yet the 'detectives' do not seek to fill a void, they simply wish to answer a question. In *The Music of Chance* Jim Nashe seeks his own past and attempts to make a future for himself. In *The Book of Illusions*, however, a complete and utter silence has engulfed a character. This concept of silence, of no longer having a voice, plays a major roll in *The Book of Illusions*.

Zimmer discusses the silent films of Hector Mann and their timeless nature:

They had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis, and except for the costumes and the cars and the quaint furniture in the background, none of it could possibly grow old... They were like poems, like the renderings of dreams, like some intricate choreography of the spirit, and because they were dead, they probably spoke more deeply to us now than they had to the audiences of their time (15).

These films, for Zimmer, were pure invention, the actors performing in them like ghosts. Because they no longer lived in the 'real world' they could no longer be influenced by chance or fate. In Hector Mann, Zimmer can see an infinite number of possibilities. Because he was there, on the screen, in the world, and then gone, and no one ever knew what happened to him, his possible futures were open for interpretation. For Zimmer, Hector's life represented a work waiting to be written. It was a silent work, whereas the lives of his wife and children were finished pieces. Yet, like the actors in these silent films, his family's influence now spoke more deeply to him.

As in *The Music of Chance*, Zimmer finds himself capable of doing as he wishes because of an inheritance; though this theme has certainly developed:

Such were the ironies of my absurd and miserable life. The moment Helen and the boys were killed, I had been turned into a rich man. The first bit came from a life insurance policy that Helen and I had been talked into buying not long after I started teaching at Hampton – *for peace of mind*, the man said – and because it was attached to the college health plan and didn't cost much, we had been paying a small amount every month without bothering to think about it... I wound up winning the compensation jackpot, the giant booby prize for random death and unforeseen acts of God (16).

From the death of his family, however, a new life unfolds for Zimmer. "But one cold night in early November, I got it into my head to do some traveling of my own, and without the resources to pay for it, I never could have followed through on such an impulsive scheme" (17). Like Nashe, Zimmer has found freedom in the wake of tragedy. Yet unlike Nashe, Zimmer decides to do something productive. Hector Mann, or at the

very least Hector Mann's art, benefits from this. "Until then, the money had been nothing but a torment to me. Now I saw it as a cure, a balm to ward off a terminal collapse of the spirit" (17). It is easy to read this statement as a kind of Phoenix rising from the flames analogy. Prior to *The Book of Illusions* chance events brought nothing but pain and sadness. Yet here, new relationships are created by Zimmer's defiance to let chance rule his life.

What is it, though, about Hector Mann that is so attractive to David Zimmer?

While watching the films Zimmer explains:

Hector wears the same suit in every film, and in every film there is at least one long gag that revolves around the perils of trying to keep it clean... He climbs into it every morning the way a knight climbs into his armor, girding himself for whatever battles society has in store for him that day, and not once does he stop to consider that he is achieving the opposite of what he has intended. He isn't protecting himself against potential blows, he is turning himself into a target, the focal point of every mishap that can possibly occur within a hundred yards of his person. The white suit is a sign of Hector's vulnerability, and it lends a certain pathos to the jokes the world plays on him (31).

This sense of vulnerability appeals to Zimmer as he sees in Hector Mann a person who does everything he can to save himself from blind chance yet consistently falls prey to ridiculous situations. As well, in his disappearance, Zimmer sees something of what Mann portrayed in his films; a man consistently attempting to avoid accidents and chance events. He believes that something would have to have gone completely wrong for someone to simply leave the known world so cleanly. This, again, is exactly what

Zimmer desires for himself; to find a new life, a new place, to abandon his past because, in the wake of the death of his family, that existence is not really worth the effort.

“Hector always has a plan in mind, a purpose for doing what he does, and yet something always seems to come up to thwart him from realizing his goal” (33). Like Hector, Zimmer had a goal, to live a simple life with his family; and yet something ‘came up’ and ‘thwarted him from realizing his goal.’ This concept is finalized, in many ways, with a single statement, “What matters is not how well you can avoid tragedy, but how you cope with trouble when it comes” (34). This, then, is the true theme of the *Book of Illusions*; how does David Zimmer cope with the trouble he has been unable to avoid? By examining the way in which Hector Mann copes with his troubles, Zimmer finds a way to cope with his own, and though this novel follows, in turn, both the Flitcraft and Wakefield models, the answer to this question is very unique.

Unfortunately for Mann, just as he entered the prime of his movie production the world of silent pictures was coming to an end with the advent of sound in film, “Sound was coming. It was an inevitable fact of life, a certainty that would destroy everything that had come before it, and the art that Hector had worked so hard to master would no longer exist” (39). Again, a situation utterly beyond anyone’s control is set to ruin an otherwise brilliant man. Of course Hector could have stepped into the world of sound in his films but, “Even if he could reconfigure his ideas to accommodate the new form, it wouldn’t do him any good. Hector spoke with a heavy Spanish accent, and the moment he opened his mouth on-screen, American audiences would reject him” (39). Hector’s last film *Mr. Nobody* is literally about a man who disappears, a man who becomes a ghost. “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” (52).

Zimmer sees this film as a representation of what Hector intends to do himself; disappear:

He allows himself to be born again... but he is no longer the same person, no

longer the Hector Mann who has amused us and entertained us for the past year.

We see him transformed into someone we no longer recognize, and before we can

absorb who this new Hector might be, he is gone... the words THE END are

written out across the screen, and that is the last anyone ever sees of him (54).

The Flitcraft tale is certainly taken up at this point in the novel. The concept of *deciding* to disappear and, in disappearing, becoming someone new is thick in these pages. The situation vividly recalls a real-life occurrence for Auster. In *Hand to Mouth* Auster relates the story of a forgotten novelist named H.L. Humes:

He had been one of the founders of the *Paris Review* back in the fifties, had

published two successful early books (*The Underground City* and *Men Die*), and

then, just as he was beginning to make a name for himself, had vanished from

sight. He just dropped off the literary map and was never heard from again (*Hand to Mouth* 39).

Humes ends up living with Auster for a time and this story, of a man who ‘just dropped off the literary map and was never heard from again’, seems to have stuck with Auster, for Hector Mann completes much the same kind of act. Hume’s life was less than idyllic as, prior to meeting Auster, he had lived in a number of mental hospitals. In *The Book of Illusions* a similar idea is presented as Zimmer moves into a chalet in a small Vermont town “It was a hospital for the living dead, a way station for the mentally afflicted, and to inhabit those blank, depersonalized interiors was to understand that the world was an

illusion that had to be reinvented every day” (57). This situation relates directly back to both the Flitcraft and Wakefield tales. Flitcraft saw the world as an illusion yet it only had to be reinvented once. For Wakefield the world also represented an illusion, and he felt the only way to understand this was to leave what he had grown to see as ‘the real world’ in order to discover that:

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever (36).

Being ‘nicely adjusted to a system’ is the root of ‘the trouble’ for both Zimmer and Mann. Zimmer’s life was staid and predictable. His system was an enviable one, and he was so deeply entrenched in it that when the system was exposed as an illusion he was unable to cope. Mann, on the other hand, sees the end of his predictable system with the introduction of sound into films and decides to step out of the system before he is forced out. Like Flitcraft, however, Zimmer replaces one system (professor, husband, father) with another (non-fiction writer, translator). This new system, however, will be easily destroyed by yet another chance event.

David Zimmer and Hector Mann’s worlds collide one evening when Zimmer returns home from an evening out to find a woman waiting for him. Alma Grund, a close friend of Hector Mann’s, insists that Zimmer accompany her to Mann’s ranch to meet with him before he dies. Prior to this, Zimmer had received a number of letters from a woman claiming to be Hector Mann’s wife. Again a mystery unravels in an Auster novel, and an unsuspecting middle-aged man is to become an unwitting detective.

Zimmer does not believe this woman's claim that Hector Mann could possibly still be alive after so many years. How, after all, could someone hide themselves so cleanly for so long? It is not until Alma brings out a gun that he decides to go with her to the ranch. At this point a life affirming moment occurs for Zimmer:

It was the first time a gun had ever been pointed at me, and I marveled at how comfortable I felt, at how naturally I accepted the possibilities of the moment. One wrong move, one wrong word, and I could die for no reason at all. That thought should have frightened me. It should have made me want to run, but I felt no urge to do that, no inclination to stop what was happening. An immense and horrifying beauty had opened up before me, and all I wanted was to go on looking at it (108).

This reads like something directly out of a Dashiell Hammett novel, yet in a twist to the predictable detective novel, once Zimmer gets the gun away from Alma Grund he, "...backed off a few feet, and then pointed it at (his) head" (111). Though he does not believe the gun is loaded yet, he soon discovers that in fact it is, and when he places it to his head and pulls the trigger, "...the trigger didn't go anywhere" (111). He then looks at the gun and finds the safety on and "If not for that mistake, one of those bullets would have been in my head" (111). Like Flitcraft and his falling beam, Zimmer cheats death and quickly steps into an entirely different life:

If there was no hole in that skull now, it was only because I was stupid and lucky, because for once in my life my luck had won out over my stupidity. I had come within an inch of killing myself. A series of accidents had stolen my life from me

and then given it back, and in the interval, in the tiny gap between those two moments, my life had become a different life (112).

Yet the past is still ever present for Zimmer. The text, at this point, severs into two distinct parts: Zimmer's life with his family and his life after their deaths. This distinction is mirrored with Mann's own tragedy slightly later in the text. While enroute to the airport, Zimmer contemplates this situation:

The last time I had driven to Logan Airport, I had been in the car with Helen, Todd, and Marco. The last morning of their lives had been spent on the same roads that Alma and I were traveling now... A part of me welcomed this grotesque reenactment. It felt like some cunningly devised form of punishment, as if the gods had decided that I wouldn't be allowed to have a future until I returned to the past. Justice therefore dictated that I should spend my first morning with Alma in the same way I had spent my last morning with Helen (118).

Zimmer has a reasonable fear of flying and it is with trepidation that he considers the flight ahead of him. Auster takes this opportunity to examine the concept of choice again. "I understood that I no longer had a choice. We had been driving for more than three hours, and we still hadn't talked about Hector" (123). He has an emotional breakdown on the plane admitting, "I had always wished that I had died with Helen and the boys, but I had never let myself fully imagine what they had lived through in the last moments before the plane went down" (125). Zimmer then goes on to imagine that he had become his son in those moments before the plane went down:

I imagined that I had slipped into the body of Todd, my own son, and that it was Helen who was comforting me and not Alma. That feeling lasted for only a few

seconds, but it was extremely powerful, not a thing of the imagination so much as a real thing, an actual transformation that turned me into someone else, and the moment it started to go away, the worst of what had happened to me was suddenly over (125).

Bruce Bower contends that at the heart of Auster's work lies, "...a complex and powerful obsession – an obsession, namely, with the theme of fathers and sons, with the notion of family as an indispensable means of connection with the world beyond oneself" (188). Yet there is more here than this obsession, one which many writers share. Auster, as Bower furthers, is concerned with "... the sense of alienation and directionlessness that can be the lot of the solitary and fatherless" (188). Zimmer has slipped from one kind of family to another moving from being connected with the world to disconnected and back again. Immediately following this section Alma begins to speak about Hector Mann and the mystery that surrounded his disappearance and the theme of becoming someone different is more thoroughly investigated.

Zimmer goes through a number of transformations through the text. At first he was a father, a husband, but the death of his wife and sons squashed that identity. This change certainly makes him a different person; yet he remains, in name, David Zimmer. He sinks into an alcoholic wasteland and becomes someone he never suspected he would be. But is he 'a different person'? This question plagues *The Book of Illusions* and until Hector Mann's story begins there is little advancement of this idea. Here the Flitcraft tale plays out not only in slow motion but over and over again. When Alma enters the picture a view of Zimmer is presented through her: Zimmer suddenly morphs into a man who would put a loaded gun to his head, grin, and pull the trigger. Each new situation

presents itself as the impetus for further change. This chain of events rolls on until “...the worst of what had happened to me was suddenly over” (125), and the text moves to Hector Mann’s story. Though David Zimmer is an interesting character and a faithful chronicler of events, he is not the main concern of this text. The first third of *The Book of Illusions* is part character study, part believable narrator set-up. With the understanding of what David Zimmer has been through, it is possible to appreciate exactly how tragic Hector Mann’s story is and, ultimately, to comprehend the Flitcraft tale in a different light.

Hector Mann’s story, as told by Alma Grund and related by David Zimmer, appears a mess of contradictions. “Hector was born Chaim Mandelbaum – on a Dutch steamship in the middle of the Atlantic,” (127). The recounting of his birth seems to be the beginning of Hector’s story, yet even this seemingly innocuous detail becomes suspect and reinvented throughout the remainder of the novel as do many other aspects of his story. Alma speaks of Hector’s roles in silent films then moves onto his personal life and tells specifically of a time during which Hector dated two women. One evening, as Hector drove to his girlfriend’s house, his car developed a flat tire.

If not for that flat tire, the event that altered the course of his life might never have happened, for it was precisely then, as he crouched down in the darkness just off La Cienega Boulevard and began jacking up the front end of his car, that Brigid O’Fallon knocked on the door of Dolores Saint John’s house, and by the time Hector had completed his little task and was back behind the wheel of the car, Saint John had accidentally fired a thirty-two-caliber bullet into O’Fallon’s left eye. (138)

When Hector comes through the door, Dolores states that, “She hadn’t known the gun was loaded” (138). The link here to Zimmer is quite plain: a gun is present, an accident occurs, and a man’s life is forever altered. The two decide to take care of the body themselves after which Hector vanishes. “That was when he disappeared. Except for the clothes on his back and the cash in his wallet, he left everything behind, and by ten o’clock the next morning he was heading north on a train to Seattle” (141). An event entirely outside of his control has forced Hector to leave the life he had been living. However, Hector’s involvement with two lovers at the same time, lead to the tragic event, he was complicit in the death of O’Fallon, despite not being present at the actual moment. Zimmer, likewise, did all he could to get his family to the airport on time only to lose them because of this effort. In a recent interview, Auster speaks about *The Book of Illusions*, “Where it (*The Book of Illusions*) differs somewhat from those earlier books, I think, is in the mournful, grief-stricken tone of the narration. David Zimmer is a man literally fighting for his life, looking for a way to go on living” (www.Failbetter.com). Hector becomes the personification of this quest as he searches for some reason to live. The silent film world has shifted him out of its ranks, he has complicated his love life to the point that he is somewhat responsible for a woman’s death and suddenly he is thrust out into the world as a man on the run. Hector Mann can certainly be viewed as “grief-stricken” and “looking for a way to go on living”.

Hector takes a new name; Herman Loesser:

There was nothing he wanted more than to be in his house on North Orange Drive, sitting on the sun porch with Blaustein as they drank their iced tea and put the finishing touches on *Dot and Dash*. Making movies was like living in a

delirium [...] That was all he had ever wanted for himself: to be good at that one thing. He had wanted only that, and therefore that was the one thing he would never allow himself to do again. You don't drive an innocent girl insane, and you don't make her pregnant, and you don't bury her dead body eight feet under the ground and expect to go on with your life as before. A man who had done what he had done deserved to be punished. If the world wouldn't do it for him, then he would have to do it himself (145-146).

Not only will Hector disappear but he will punish himself for what he has done. Not only will he give up everything that ever meant anything to him, but he will swear to never again do anything which could make him happy. This idea fully comes to fruition at the conclusion of the novel when Frieda Spelling, Hector's wife, burns all the movies Hector made in seclusion so that they will never be seen by the public and, therefore, Hector will go on – even in death – paying his debt to society and himself.

Hector keeps a journal through these days and his connection with Zimmer is further solidified through these writings. Such statements as “If I mean to save my life, then I have to come within an inch of destroying it” (154) and “I talk only to the dead now. They are the only ones I trust, the only ones who understand me. Like them, I live without a future” (148) could have been attributed to Zimmer as well. Yet one can see more to this relation than a simple mirroring effect. Hector Mann and David Zimmer live something of the same life. A tragic death has driven them both into different lives, has taken from them all they understood to be real and true. Though unlike Zimmer, Hector does not fall into alcoholism. Instead he lives his life as though he was still in the movies, changing characters every few years to accommodate a complicated existence.

Mann goes to Spokane and begins to work for his deceased girl-friend's father and falls in love with this man's other daughter. The Wakefield story comes more clearly into play in this section of the novel as Mann is consistently confronted with how Red O'Fallon (Brigid O'Fallon's father) attempts to find his lost daughter. By being in the middle of this, Hector is, in a sense, forced to watch the life denied to Brigid because of his actions. He is the observer of what might have been. Yet when the O'Fallon family accepts him into their household, offers him a managerial position at their hardware store, he flees. Wakefield was able to return, it is assumed, because of his kind wife, but Mann cannot accept any form of kindness. He has divorced himself from a world in which kind acts exist and therefore cannot become part of a family which he assisted in destroying; no matter how much it might help them all. Seeing what he had done to this family, however, triggers deeper set feelings of guilt:

He tried to kill himself in Montana the next day, Alma said, and three days after that he tried again in Chicago. The first time, he stuck the revolver in his mouth; the second time, he pressed the barrel against his left eye – but in neither instance was he able to go through with it (176).

Death would be too easy for Hector, it would grant him a way out; killing himself could, therefore, not be an option:

...he stumbled onto something better than death, better than the simple damnation he'd been looking for. Her name was Sylvia Meers, and under her guidance Hector learned that he could go on killing himself without having to finish the job. She was the one who taught him how to drink his own blood, who instructed him in the pleasures of devouring his own heart. (176-177)

Through Sylvia, Hector becomes a kind of everyman. He and Sylvia work together as a live sex act, booked by individuals and bachelor parties alike. What is of interest here is that Hector wears a mask whenever performing:

Put a mask on him and he would have no personality, no distinguishing characteristics, nothing to interfere with the fantasies of the men who were watching them. Make him anonymous, and he would be turned into an engine of male desire, the representative of every man in the audience... Every man, and therefore any man (180).

By becoming an everyman, Hector is able to erase his personality completely. He lives a life void of anything but work and reading. He no longer engages with real society. It is in this way that he finally reaches a psychological bottom. As he stands on a street corner watching a three-legged dog, he has a vision of his own death:

It was a picture of his own death, he later realized, the portrait of a soul in ruins, and long after he had pulled himself together and moved on, a part of him was still there, standing on that empty street in Sandusky, Ohio, grasping for breath as his existence dribbled out of him (192).

The next day Hector's life changes again. By leaving a sliver of himself in Sandusky he is able to truly live again. He meets Frieda Spelling and saves her life during a bank robbery. "Hector didn't die from his encounter with death. He simply went to sleep, and when he woke up after his long slumber, he forgot that he had ever wanted to kill himself (197). Another life begins. Again a chance event (a bank robbery) and an action (saving the life of a woman) are interlinked. Hector feels as though he has achieved some kind of cosmic balance. At this time the novel is placed back in the hands of David Zimmer.

Zimmer wants to unravel this story for his own benefit and poses the questions regarding Mann that he cannot answer for himself.

Chaim Mandelbaum becomes Hector Mann, Hector Mann becomes Herman Loesser, and then what? Who does Herman Loesser become? Did he even know who he was anymore? He went back to being Hector. That's what Frieda called him. After they were married, Hector became Hector again (202).

It appears possible for Hector to become himself again but is the same possible for David Zimmer? The story of Hector Mann can be read as an examination of redemption. A redemption which Zimmer seeks as well. Yet Hector's redemption is not over.

During the years of his absence, Hector Mann made a number of movies with the clear intention of destroying them once they were completed. If no one ever saw the films he made then they would not truly exist. By the time Zimmer gets to Hector's ranch the films have only one day left before they will all be destroyed. There is enough time for Zimmer to view only one of the films. Through this viewing, Zimmer takes on Mann's penance and is left to live out the redemption sequence for Hector. Through this act it seems Zimmer can find his own redemption. This kind of legacy motif is not new in Auster's fiction. Since *City of Glass* characters pass their troubles and problems off to one another, but in *The Book of Illusions* it is redemption that is offered. Redemption, for most of Auster's characters, is never an option.

Through a series of chance events, Alma and Spelling are killed. Zimmer feels as though he could have saved Alma (with whom he had fallen in love) yet he quickly understands that his actions played no part in what happened to her. In accepting this he finds his own redemption. "In eight short days, she had brought me back from the dead"

(316). The world, Zimmer discovers, is not so set in stone that one action so purely reflects another. Alma did not truly give David anything, she simply told him a story about a man who had been part of a terrible accident for which he felt responsible.

The Book of Illusions is, as previously stated, an examination of the Flitcraft tale, in which Auster explains what Flitcraft sees when he “[took] the lid off life and... look(ed) at the works” (Hammett 60). Unlike most of Auster’s fiction, *The Book of Illusions* appears to come to a conclusion regarding the nature of chance and choice in the universe. Chance, Auster suggests here, controls everyone and though we will endlessly deliberate our own actions, redemption and forgiveness come in accepting that chance is uncontrollable. That one must simply live with this understanding and that to adjust one’s self to “beams falling” means, quite simply, to forget entirely the presence of ‘what if’. There are no ‘what ifs’ and no matter how many different lives someone attempts to create for themselves, they remain the person they always were. It is a bold statement from an author who has concluded most of his novels in ambiguity.

In his next work, *Oracle Night*, Auster again examines the Flitcraft tale; this time more directly than ever, and in the end presents a number of different conclusions.

Where Flitcraft Find a New Home

Oracle Night

Oracle Night reads very much like the ultimate and final expression of Auster's obsession with chance, fate, and the Flitcraft tale. As Michael Hale states in a *Books in Canada* review of *Oracle Night*, "Paul Auster can finally stop. After eight novels, three films, and over a dozen poetry collections and non-fiction books, the Jersey-born, Brooklyn-ensconced author has finally perfected the modern American cautionary tale" (7). In a recent interview with Auster for *The Financial Times* Sean O'Hagan introduced *Oracle Night* with the following:

Auster has been carrying Flitcraft around in his head since 1990, when the German film director, Wim Wenders, called him up out of the blue and suggested they should collaborate on a film that used Hammett's version as a jumping-off point. The funding fell through and the film was stillborn, but I slowly built up a biography around the Flitcraft character over about 10 years. Then I found a place for him in a new context, and renamed him. (February 11, 2005, *Financial Times*).

This 'building up a biography around the Flitcraft character' did not only occur in Auster's head. He had been, as this thesis has argued, writing and rewriting the Flitcraft story again and again. It is in *Oracle Night*, however, that Flitcraft finally fully exists. Michael Hale goes on to describe in general terms the basic story line of almost all of Auster's novels:

The author/main character pursues a trail towards an end that more often than not, leaves the reader and the character shattered. The driving force is a task or burden

of the main character's own making, and it will take him into alleys and along roads that call out for sinister soundtracks and blaring road music. And there will be jarring violence. It will break out in brutal and intensely personal ways. And it will signal a shift in the plot that cannot be undone and cannot be forgotten. (7)

Hale presents a rather clear summation of an Auster novel, his explanation of which fits even more so with *Oracle Night*. Though, as with any summary, this does not even begin to delve into the complexities of the novel and its exploration of chance and fate.

Oracle Night begins with confusion, "I had been sick for a long time. When the day came for me to leave the hospital, I barely knew how to walk anymore, could barely remember who I was supposed to be" (1). Here is a narrator, Sidney Orr, broken down to nothing but unlike Auster's previous protagonists, the narrator is physically broken rather than emotionally. Quinn, Blue, and the narrator of *The Locked Room* are all beaten down by the world, but show no physical ramifications. Both Nashe in *The Music of Chance* and Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions* live torn apart lives, but are physically capable of acting. The description of Orr continues, "They had given me up for dead, and now that I had confounded their predictions and mysteriously failed to die, what choice did I have but to live as though a future life were waiting for me?" (1) A sense of doubt has already been established here; 'As though a future life were waiting.' Nothing is the same as it once was. The accident, the details of which are never known, introduced chance to the novel and, again, the impetus occurs before the novel even begins. There is, however, quickly a second chance event.

The narrator had a career as a writer before the accident, but had abandoned his craft and had not even considered writing again until he saw a stationary store, "...the

Paper Palace looked too small to contain much of interest. If I decided to cross the street and go in, it must have been because I secretly wanted to start working again – without knowing it, without being aware of the urge that had been gathering inside me” (3). Orr decides on a blue Portuguese notebook:

I knew I was going to buy one the moment I picked it up and held it in my hands. There was nothing fancy or ostentatious about it. It was a practical piece of equipment – solid, homely, serviceable, not at all the kind of blank book you’d think of offering someone as a gift. But I liked the fact that it was cloth-bound, and I also liked the shape: nine and a quarter by seven and a quarter inches, which made it slightly shorter and wider than most notebooks. I can’t explain why it should have been so, but I found those dimensions deeply satisfying, and when I held the notebook in my hands for the first time, I felt something akin to physical pleasure, a rush of sudden, incomprehensible well-being. There were just four notebooks left on the pile and each one came in a different color: black, red, brown, and blue. I chose the blue, which happened to be the one lying on top (5).

The flow of an Auster story can be witnessed again in this excerpt. A chance event propels a man to do something that he cannot explain. In *The Book of Illusions* it was a silent film on late night television which drove Zimmer to seek out Mann; in *City of Glass* it was a late night telephone call which sent Quinn on a wild chase; in *Leviathan* it was a snowstorm which brought two men together. Now, in *Oracle Night*, a decision to cross the street and enter a new shop is followed by the purchase of a notebook. This notebook, however, is more than series of cloth-bound blank sheets. Within its pages Sidney Orr captures himself as his characters are created and destroyed. The function of

this notebook becomes a consistent initiator of chance events and occurrences which must be worked out. As Blake Morrison states in his review of *Oracle Night*;

Oracle Night has the quality of a fairy-tale. Like "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" or "The Magic Porridge Pot", it's the story of an object escaping its human agent and wreaking havoc. It's also an allegory about the danger of words - their capacity to tell the future and determine reality" (78)

The sense that words determine reality is ultra-evident in the sheer number of stories contained within *Oracle Night*. The surface story of Orr's life becomes the basis for the ideas of a novel Orr writes about a man reading a novel. In a sense, within this short novel there exists three complete novels which all interact and influence one another. The stories continue to spiral in a series of hefty (sometimes pages long) footnotes which more often than not contradict or, at the very least, question the primary narrative.

The Flitcraft story itself is introduced early in *Oracle Night*.

...it didn't matter what I wrote, just so long as I wrote something. Anything would have served, any sentence would have been as valid as any other, but still, I didn't want to break in that notebook with something stupid, so I bided my time by looking at the little squares on the page, the rows of faint blue lines that crisscrossed the whiteness and turned it into a field of tiny identical boxes, and as I let my thoughts wander in and out of those lightly traced enclosures, I found myself remembering a conversation I'd had with my friend John Trause a couple of weeks earlier (10).

Trause^{xiii} relates to Orr the "Flitcraft episode in the seventh chapter of *The Maltese Falcon*, the curious parable that Sam Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy about the man

who walks away from his life and disappears” (11). Orr then goes on to explain his understanding of the Flitcraft tale:

Flitcraft realizes that the world isn't the sane and orderly place he thought it was, that he's had it all wrong from the beginning and never understood the first thing about it. The world is governed by chance. Randomness stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment – for no reason at all. By the time Flitcraft finishes his lunch, he concludes that he has no choice but to submit to this destructive power, to smash his life through some meaningless, wholly arbitrary act of self-negation. He will fight fire with fire, as it were, and without bothering to return home or say good-bye to his family, without even bothering to withdraw any money from the bank, he stands up from the table, goes to another city, and starts his life all over again (12).

This concept of performing a “wholly arbitrary act of self-negation” becomes the main thrust throughout the remainder of the novel. Orr begins to write a story about an editor at a New York publishing house who is given a manuscript (entitled *Oracle Night*) by the granddaughter of a deceased American writer. Nick, the editor, has a revelation that “...he would probably do anything to go to bed with this woman, even to the point of sacrificing his marriage”(20). After he has considered this, Nick leaves his house to mail some letters and never returns. In correlation to the falling beam of the Flitcraft tale, a close call with a gargoyle dropping from a height propels Nick off into another life. In a statement which mirrors Flitcraft's tale Orr relates how Nick felt:

The stone was meant to kill him. He left his apartment tonight for no other reason than to run into that stone, and if he's managed to escape with his life, it can only

mean that a new life has been given to him- that his old life is finished, that every moment of his past now belongs to someone else (22).

This novel is really a series of different novels which are intertwined and linked by the common thread of the Flitcraft tale. Consequently, as Nick disappears in the story Orr writes, Orr himself disappears.

Having spent a great deal of time writing, Orr is surprised to find that his wife had come home. She explains that she had knocked on the door of his office and even looked inside and not seen him in there writing. At play here Auster presents an intricate examination of the Flitcraft tale taken from all available angles. Not only does Orr write about a character who he refers to as “my Flitcraft” (12) but he, himself, metaphorically begins to disappear. The sense of being a part of the story he is working on grows stronger when he visits his friend’s apartment:

I had stolen John’s apartment for my story in the blue notebook, and when we got to Barrow Street and he opened the door to let us in, I had the strange, not altogether unpleasant feeling that I was entering an imaginary space, walking into a room that wasn’t there (25).

This theoretical absence becomes more apparent as Orr discovers that something appears to be different about his wife, Grace. She has become defensive about little things and seems to be keeping secrets of some description. This is all, of course, linked to the story Orr is writing. To have a better idea of the complexities and levels which this novel takes it would be worthwhile here to examine Orr’s explanation of the story he writes in his notebook. Nick, the protagonist of Orr’s novel, decides to leave his wife, his job, his entire life behind him and disappear:

Half an hour after the plane takes off from La Guardia, Nick opens his briefcase, slides out the manuscript of Sylvia Maxwell's novel, and begins to read. That was the third element of the narrative that was taking shape in my head, and I decided that it should be introduced as early as possible – even before the plane lands in Kansas City. First, Nick's story: then Eva's story (Nick's wife); and finally, the book that Nick reads and continues to read as their stories unfold: the story within the story (52).

To complicate things further, Orr places his author friend, John Trause, in the novel. Consequently, Auster not only presents the tale of Flitcraft here, but also the structure of *The Maltese Falcon* itself. In Hammett's work, Flitcraft is introduced into the novel through Spade, creating a story within a story. By taking this multi-layered story concept to an extreme, Auster is capable of examining the Flitcraft tale from all angles: Flitcraft (Nick Bowen), Mrs. Flitcraft (Eva) and finally the writer (Orr). What, in Hammett's tale, is never fully explained however, is how Flitcraft lives out his life. Of course, this is of no consequence to Spade, but for Auster there is little more interesting for the possibilities it presents.

In *Oracle Night* Nick Bowen, acting as Orr's Flitcraft, truly disappears. Once in Kansas City he meets up with a taxi driver (Ed) who has a collection of ancient phone books (many from Poland during WWII) stored in an underground shelter. Nick agrees to work with Ed and organize these testaments of history. Ed eventually falls ill, leaving Nick to work alone in the underground shelter, moving telephone books from one place to another. Then, one day, Nick makes a critical error:

Less than an hour after he returns to the underground archive on Wednesday, Bowen commits one of the great blunders of his life, and because he assumes Ed will live – and goes on assuming that even after his boss is dead – he has no idea how gigantic the calamity he has made for himself truly is (87).

Nick accidentally leaves the keys to a small, separate bedroom within the shelter out in the main library room and the self-locking door traps him inside. Now Nick finds himself locked underground, and no one, since Ed has died in hospital, knows he is there. There are obvious relations to Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*. Nick, like Fortunato in Poe's tale, "ha(s) a weak point" (231). Nick Bowen's weak point, or desire, is his disappearance and, like Fortunato seeking out his wine, he manages to get more than he expects. Here, Nick is pressed to consider his sudden decision to leave his old life and start a new one. In a sense he has performed a wholly arbitrary act of self-negation and the consequences of this action have caught up with him. Hammett's Flitcraft wanders around for a time and settles in Spokane, but once settled he lives a life much the same as the one he had left behind. In *Oracle Night*, Auster investigates what could possibly be the outcome of settling down. Orr does not write a finale for Bowen either, but his prospects are much more grim than Flitcraft's:

I opened the notebook, and when I glanced down at the page in front of me, I realized that I was lost, that I didn't know what I was doing anymore. I had put Bowen into the room. I had locked the door and turned out the light, and now I didn't have the faintest idea of how to get him out of there (92).

Orr admits, "The only thing I could see that morning was my hapless little man – sitting in the darkness of his underground room, waiting for someone to rescue him" (93).

Orr's admittance that he does not know what to do with his character can be seen in many ways as an examination of Hammett. As Brigid O'Shaughnessy says when Spade finishes telling the Flitcraft tale, "How perfectly fascinating" (61). The Flitcraft tale is fascinating but it is also perfect. There are no loose ends. Mrs. Flitcraft thought what her husband had done was "silly" (59). And, as Spade tells it, "She didn't want any scandal, and, after the trick he (Flitcraft) had played on her—the way she looked at it—she didn't want him. So they were divorced on the quiet and everything was swell" (60). But Mrs. Bowen (Eva) behaves differently than her Hammett counter-part. Eva believes that her husband is having an affair and that he has run off with another woman. Eva examines a credit card bill and finds that her husband has purchased a ticket to Kansas City. Her conviction of her husband's affair dissipates at this time:

She has no theories, no guesswork narratives to rely on anymore, and the anger that has been roiling inside her for the past week gradually dissipates, then vanishes altogether. From the emptiness and confusion that follow, a new emotion emerges to fill her thoughts: hope, or something akin to hope. Nick is alive, and considering that the credit card statement records the purchase of only one ticket, there's a good chance that he is alone (68).

Eva flies to Kansas City armed with photographs of her husband. "All of Eva's hopes revolve around the photographs she's carrying in her bag. She will walk around the city and show Nick's picture to as many people as she can, beginning with hotels and restaurants..." (70). Eva discovers that her husband has stayed at the same hotel as she is in and, "...now that she's nearly certain he hasn't run off with another woman, Eva begins to feel like a wife again, a full-fledged wife battling to find her husband and save

her marriage” (72). In a sense, through Eva’s actions, Auster presents a scenario of what Mrs. Flitcraft would have done to find her own husband prior to hiring a private detective. Eva begins to wonder, “Has living with her made him that miserable? Is she the one who’s driven him to take such a drastic step, who’s pushed him to the point of desperation?” (72). This self-doubting is entirely human and rational. Though, in the end, Eva will not find her husband; for she, like Nick, is trapped within Orr’s notebook, the author unable to finish the tale. With this, then, one can see the third level of investigation into the Flitcraft tale in *Oracle Night*; the author.

The story of Nick Bowen is taken up by Orr. Orr is, in a way, the true Flitcraft of the novel. Like Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*, Orr has begun a new life yet has no idea how to live. Here Auster takes the concept of performing a wholly arbitrary act of self-negation to a different level. Orr, at a loss for what to work on, finds himself (through a past acquaintance) at an illegal brothel. Fellatio is performed on him by a beautiful black woman but by the completion of the act he is left with little more than regret, “Regret set in within a matter of seconds. By the time I’d pulled up my jeans and fastened my belt, regret had turned into shame and remorse” (130). Suddenly, Orr has a secret he must keep. By keeping a secret from a spouse, a man (or woman) lives a separate life. It was by chance that Orr found himself at the brothel (he had fallen asleep in his friend’s car). What happens at the brothel, then, lives within Sidney, and is therefore only as real as the stories he creates. As John Trause later tells Orr:

Thoughts are real. Words are real. Everything human is real, and sometimes we know things before they happen, even if we aren’t at every moment. Maybe

that's what writing is all about, Sid. Not recording events from the past, but making things happen in the future (189).

Immediately following this declaration, Orr states, "The story was just beginning – the true story started only *then*, after I destroyed the blue notebook – and everything I've written so far is little more than a prelude to the horrors I'm about to relate now" (189). The horrors which Orr relates at this time have to do with John Trause possibly having had an affair with Orr's wife, Grace, years before. Trause's son seeks revenge on Grace by visiting the Orr apartment and attacking the couple. As Orr states, "I simply opened the door, and once I did that, the world became a different world" (197). Grace is hospitalized but will survive the attack, however, it takes this horrible act of violence for Orr to examine his life. He was, in many ways, on the verge of disappearing, but is brought back from the brink as he suddenly understands what he would be leaving behind. The author, then, wrote his own future. Bowen's story is Orr's and where Bowen finds himself trapped in an underground library without any possibility of escape, Orr still has options available to him. For the first time in Auster's fiction, there is a touch of hope at the end of a novel. There exists the possibility that this new world Orr has stepped into may be one in which he can find happiness a world he will not feel the need to abandon.

Throughout Auster's oeuvre tragedy reigns through chance and fate, yet here in *Oracle Night* tragedy is overcome. Though nothing will be the same again for Sidney and Grace it seems that, at the very least, there are lives which can be picked up and put back together. The Flitcraft tale, then, can be seen in *Oracle Night* as having been fully viewed from every angle. There is a life prior to the chance event. There is the chance

event, effecting both the narrator (Orr and his hospitalization) and the narrator's creation, Nick Bowen. Then there is the woman left behind –both Orr's wife Grace and Bowen's wife Eva. And, finally, there is an investigation into the possible conclusions of the Flitcraft tale. In Hammett's tale, Flitcraft, "...settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma," (61) but for Auster this is a moral tale. A man cannot simply step out of his life and expect everything to be fine. Orr's Flitcraft ends up locked in an underground cavern waiting for his food supply to run out, while Orr himself has an act of unspeakable violence exacted on him. For Auster there is an effect for every cause, a ramification for every act; whether this act is generated by action itself or simple chance.

3. Conclusion

Where is There Left to Go?

Pascal Bruckner sums up Auster's characters in his essay 'Paul Auster, or The Heir Intestate', "The self must die, Auster seems to say, in order to live; there is a redemptive sense to annulment; hence Auster's heroes push themselves to the limit of hunger and physical deprivation... The only valid existence is that which has experienced extinction" (Bloom 44-45). This seems a fitting explanation of Auster's work. In a sense both the Flitcraft tale and Hawthorne's *Wakefield* speak to this exact aesthetic. Flitcraft leaves because the world ceases to make sense and, therefore, the only action he can take to save himself is to not make sense as well. Wakefield leaves in order to examine what it is he already has. In both these stories, and most of Auster's work, a character will perform a wholly arbitrary act of self-negation. At the heart of this theme lies the essence of what it means to be a writer. A novel is a creation of a number of stories, of people who do not exist, of places that exist only in imagination. Even when an author places him or herself in a text – something Paul Auster does often - that character remains nothing but a character. To write is to live different lives, to tell tales. To write, then, can be viewed as an act of self-negation.

Through his investigations into the Flitcraft and Wakefield stories, Auster examines what it means to be a writer, what it means to create something and set it off into the world, what it means to leave pieces of yourself here and there. In *The Book of Illusions* Hector Mann disappears leaving only his movies behind in each of which he

plays a part, and therefore transforms into a different person. Blue leaves a journal in *City of Glass*, Fanshawe in *The Locked Room* a collection of novels, Nashe in *The Music of Chance* a giant wall. All of Auster's characters leave something of themselves behind when they disappear; something which represents who they were at a specific point in time. It seems, in some simplistic way, that Auster is suggesting you cannot step into the same river twice. Certainly, the river has changed, but more importantly, you have changed.

With *Oracle Night* Auster has fully examined the Flitcraft tale from every available angle. It seems likely that he will continue to investigate the idea of disappearances, of what it means to create something, what it means to be human, but I doubt he will do it again in quite the same way. He has, in many ways, stepped back into that same river over and over again, always finding something new, always finding himself a different person, but evidently coming to the same conclusion: discuss them, debate them, dissect them, do as you please with the concepts of chance, destiny and fate, but you will never release yourself from their control.

ⁱ The only two times this is not the case occur in *In the Country of Last Things* in which the protagonist is a woman, and *Timbuktu* in which the protagonist is a dog.

ⁱⁱ For note, a number of characters in Auster's novels find themselves in Spokane as well. In *The Book of Illusions* Hector Mann creates a story of coming from Spokane and then actually finds himself living there almost completely by chance.

ⁱⁱⁱ "He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them,"(60),

^{iv} *The Book of Memories* is written in the third person regarding an author; Paul Auster.

^v From Genesis 11.

^{vi} Notebooks, another major theme within Auster's work, will be further investigated during the discussion of the novel *Oracle Night*.

^{vii} *William Wilson* is the title of an Edgar Allen Poe story. Poe is widely considered to be the inventor of the detective story.

^{viii} The story here is a mirror of the Flitcraft tale.

^{ix} At this point neither the narrator nor Nashe would lean to one side or the other in this debate. Chance and destiny are the same thing because in either case taking one route or another will make little difference on the final outcome.

^x Earlier in his career, Auster wrote a play titled *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven*, about the actual Laurel and Hardy being forced to build a wall for reasons they cannot understand.

^{xi} This harks back to *City of Glass*. In fact the entire *New York Trilogy*, is eventually revealed to have been written by the same person about the same story, or at least the same person; Quinn.

^{xii} In *Mr. Vertigo* Auster's main emphasis is on a system of corruption in modern America. The symbol of a boy capable of flying is seen as one man's ability to soar above the problems of modern life, yet only for a minute amount of time.

^{xiii} Trause is a rearrangement of the letters in Auster

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