The current of chance: Developments in the authorship of Paul Auster

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Introduction

Paul Auster is a contemporary author. He has produced a wide array of works for which he has received international acclaim. As Auster himself notes, “all my books seem to revolve around the same set of questions, the same human dilemmas,”¹ yet his writings differ greatly in content and contour. The novel Moon Palace (1989) revolves around the young Marco Stanley Fogg, an orphan in search for his own identity and roots. The Music of Chance (1991) depicts the tragic fate of the fireman Nashe, who winds up erecting a wall for two eccentric millionaires. In some of his newer books, such as Man in the Dark (2008), a dystopian scenario of the present-day USA told within the narrative frame of an aging journalist, Auster remains faithful to many of his classic themes of “solitude, chance and paternity”², yet there are also many considerable changes in the thematic focus and underlying structures. From concentrating meticulously on the individual and its existential predicament in the postmodern society, Man in the Dark unfolds a theory of parallel universes, a philosophically alluring mind-game that in turn becomes a social critique. These different stories, that despite their distinctiveness share some qualities, inevitably render one question urgent: What common denominator is there to describe Auster’s works, and what other factors set them apart?

The above mentioned developments and changes constitute a gap in the field of research on Auster literature, and may thus be of quintessential importance to the understanding of Auster’s authorship. Simultaneously, these developments may be subtle indicators that reflect changes in the present society and the cultural Zeitgeist, for as Warren Oberman notes, “Auster bridges the perceived gap between postmodern thought and existentialism.”³

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Focus of the project

This project aims to investigate the thematic developments in the authorship of Paul Auster from *City of Glass* (1987) to *Invisible* (2009). The means to this end are first and foremost Auster’s fictional works. Secondly, the nonfictional prose by Auster is also important in presenting a thorough account of Auster. This includes *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), *The Art of Hunger* (1992), and *Hand to Mouth* (1997).

In this synopsis, the three novels *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Man in the Dark* will be analyzed comparatively in order to outline the project. The former two works exemplify Auster’s early authorship whereas the latter exemplifies his newer writings. The use of a comparative analysis to expound differences demands a thematic frame. The thesis of this project is that the core phenomenon of Auster’s literature is the concept of chance and its impact on reality. Auster admits of this preoccupation with chance: “*Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives.*”

Methodological considerations

The hermeneutic method will be the method deployed in interpreting and relating Auster’s works to one another. Through close reading, the concept of chance and its importance in Auster’s literature is to be elucidated. Treating chance in literature, however, is a problematic endeavor to which several problems are attached. Steven E. Alford reflects on this problem: “… *Auster’s texts offer examples of the operation of chance that seem to contradict one another.*” The following paragraphs will provide a deliberation on these problems and how to solve them.

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Methodological caveats

Chance is a term that can be conceived of in many different ways. Our cultural conception of chance associates chance with unpredictability and haphazardness – concepts that relate to risk and randomness. On the other hand, chance can also be coupled with fate and coincidence – Ilanah Shiloh remarks that “[chance] embraces the interplay between indeterminacy and inevitability, between fortuity and fate.”

The concept of chance thus unifies the two contradictory concepts randomness and fate.

In addition to this ambiguity, the particular use of chance in literature is an apparently impossible undertaking: by exploiting chance as a thematic device, chance ceases to be ‘chancy’ – it becomes premeditated, as it is always deployed with an intention. Auster addresses this concern in an interview: “When I talk about coincidence, I’m not referring to a desire to manipulate... No, what I’m talking about is the presence of the unpredictable...” As the quote suggests, Auster wishes to give a realistic account of the world, one which transcends the limits of a narrative. That it is possible to do this seems dubious, but Alford offers an elegant solution to both this and the apparent contradiction inherent in the concept of chance, proposing that “The origin of the seeming problem, both for Auster and his narrators and characters, is their collective assumption that the random, meaningless world is somehow available to us outside narrativity.”

Treating the theme of chance in Auster then requires a distinction: The experienced world is the one in which we ascribe meaning to events – what might be called the phenomenal world in Kantian terms – whereas the meaningless world is the one outside our language, time and apprehension, Kant’s noumenal world.

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Outline of the comparative analysis

To indicate the primary developments in Auster’s authorship, this exemplary analysis of *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Man in the Dark* will focus on a key aspect, namely the protagonists of the novels and the different forces of chance that ‘drive’ them.

The main character of *Moon Palace*, Marco Stanley Fogg, is raised by his uncle Victor. As Victor dies, Fogg is without any relatives. This lack of identity alienates him from himself, driving him into resignation as he watches his financial situation stagger slowly but steadily: “*From that point on, in fact, I did nothing to help myself... it probably boiled down to despair.*”9 The self-tormenting behavior that is beyond Fogg’s control reduces him and his life to a quest for survival, a confrontation with existence at its crudest. Later on Fogg’s former best friend and a girl with whom Fogg has met once before find Fogg homeless in Central Park. This coincidental encounter propels Fogg’s life from indifferent contingency to a search for identity and meaning. He eventually ponders the subject of coincidences, commenting “*in the end I put it to the side, telling myself that I would return to it at some later date. As chance would have it, I never did.*”10 Chance thus remains the hidden, operating realm, pervading our experiences yet also eluding these as we necessarily attribute meaning to them through language.

Much like Fogg, Jim Nashe in *The Music of Chance* is in an intricate relationship with money. Shortly after Nashe leaves his daughter with his sister because he cannot provide for her, Nashe inherits nearly two hundred thousand dollars from his dead and previously unknown father. The money that suddenly is at his disposal turns into an obsession, a privilege of freedom that ultimately becomes everything but freedom: “*The money was responsible for his freedom, but each time he used it to buy another*”

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portion of that freedom, he was denying himself an equal portion of it as well.”

Nashe’s predicament has clear parallels to that of Fogg as they both commit themselves to money in a fanatic way. Shiloh suggests that Nashe “...seeks to re-create himself through the freedom of the open road... His autonomy has social and metaphysical implications... It is the freedom of a man who has embraced chance.”

As the road theme suggests, Nashe leaps into the arms of chance in search for identity. At the same time, the title of the novel displays the ambiguity of chance by pairing it with music, a discipline or subject associated with harmony and symmetry.

In contrast to the protagonists of the two previous novels, *Man in the Dark* is centered on the old book critic August Brill who is suffering from insomnia. He is living at home with his daughter Miriam and granddaughter Katya, and as he is lying in bed, he is trying to endure the night and avoid “thinking about the things I would prefer to forget.”

Brill attempts to do so by making up stories, but random memories interrupt his stream of thought. As the protagonist of Brill’s meta-narrative named Owen Brick is given an order – to kill Brill, his very creator – the parallel universes entwine, hereby becoming equally real: “There’s no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities.” In the end Brill deserts this plot and begins dwelling on his own past instead. As he recounts the story of his life to his daughter who is also awake, he realizes his own situation and the need for change: “You’ve been stuck for nine months now [Katya], and it isn’t doing you any good.”

It is not only Katya’s life which is stagnant; it is the whole family that is in need of drastic change, opposed to the solitary quests of the protagonists of the other novels.

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12 A Place both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*. U Wisconsin P., *Contemporary Literature* vol. 43 no. 3(Autumn, 2002), p. 492
In the ending line of the book Brill poignantly states: “the weird world rolls on.”16 This metaphorical and aphoristic comment is one that Brill indirectly shares with the protagonist of *Moon Palace*. The line hints at the underlying change that constantly permeates the world as we live on in it. Fogg equally enunciates: “*reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant.*”17 In this way, *Man in the Dark* does resemble *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* as they deal with chance and its influence on our lives. At the same time, however, it differs fundamentally from the other two novels in the way chance is operating on the individual. In the early two works, chance is a way of living life forward and attaining freedom, a way of embracing the unknown that is a part of the protagonists’ searches for identity. By contrast, *Man in the Dark* views chance in hindsight, understanding life backwards. This retrospection interacts with the present, thereby giving rise to change. The difference between these two views can be described symbolically through the use of the dice – a symbol that is intimately connected to chance: On the former view, chance equals throwing the dice, not knowing what the outcome will be. On the latter view, chance equals looking at the outcome of the dice and acting in accordance herewith.

**Execution of the project**

The economic requirements for completing this project are few. The only sizeable expenses are the costs of buying approximately twenty books as well as gaining access to relevant article databases. The magnitude of these investments can be reduced by obtaining an academic environment where papers on Auster are accessible for free. This academic environment needs no specification; any university or equivalent will do. As regards time, the project is more demanding. Reading and

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analyzing almost Auster’s entire authorship is an arduous process, wherefore a modest estimate of the time required to finish this project would be half a year. The design of the project would take the shape of a series of articles each focusing on different aspects and parts of Auster’s literature and will appeal to an academically oriented audience.

Works cited


- Shiloh, Ilana. A Place both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance*. U Wisconsin P., Contemporary Literature vol. 43 no. 3(Autumn, 2002).