Three Sides of a Wall
– Obstacles and Border States in Paul Auster’s Novels –
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. **FIRST STONES – AN INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................ 2

2. **THIS SIDE AND THAT SIDE – THE BEAUTY AND TERROR OF A WALL** ................................. 8
   2.1. **WALL, TIME, AND MONUMENTALITY: THE MUSIC OF CHANCE** .................................................. 10
   2.2. **LANGUAGE OF MOVING: THE NEW YORK TRILOGY** ............................................................. 19
   2.3. **CHANGING BARRICADES: IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS** ........................................... 23
   2.4. **MUTE SURFACES: MOON PALACE** ....................................................................................... 25

3. **WHEN WALLS WEAKEN OR NOSTALGIA FOR UNITY** ............................................................ 27
   3.1. **NEW ADAMS AND NEW WORLDS: THE NEW YORK TRILOGY** .............................................. 29
   3.2. **FRONTIER CITY: IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS** ........................................................... 35
   3.3. **WALKING ON THE MOON: MOON PALACE** ........................................................................... 37
   3.4. **TAMPERING WITH THE UNIVERSE: THE MUSIC OF CHANCE** ........................................... 43

4. **STAYING IN-BETWEEN** ..................................................................................................................... 50
   4.1. **NOWHERE: THE NEW YORK TRILOGY** ................................................................................. 51
   4.2. **PERIOD OF TRANSITION: IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS** ........................................ 59
   4.3. **TOUCHING THE SKY: MOON PALACE** ................................................................................ 61
   4.4. **A PIECE BY TWO COMPOSERS OR ROLLING THE ROCK: THE MUSIC OF CHANCE** .......... 65

5. **FIRST STONES: A CONCLUSION** .................................................................................................. 71

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ................................................................................................................................. 74
1. First Stones – An Introduction

The day Paul Auster finished working on his novel The Music of Chance, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down (Auster 1995: 122). What makes it all so eerie is the fact that The Music of Chance is a story about building (and breaking) walls. Thus this anecdote brings together two seemingly opposite worlds: that of connections and that of limitations. The world is rhyming, bridging things ‘across time and place’ (The Invention of Solitude 1988: 161) – to stretch it a bit farther: walls can sometimes make connections possible.

Walls can make connections possible – that may sound absurd but it is a claim that is in all its absurdity very important for this work. When I began studying the way Auster uses barriers (and frontiers) in his books, I noticed that his characters are often torn between a desire to unite things and a desire to keep things neatly separated. This tension seems to create an interesting space where barriers are not always separating but sometimes even linking things together, where we encounter ‘[t]he infinite possibilities of a limited space’ (Invention: 89). How and why this happens is something I want to explore in my thesis. This work is very much a process through which I try and describe the way Auster and his characters’ relationship to barriers changes within single books and between the books. Because of the nature of my discussion, the structure of this work is such that I repeatedly get back to certain scenes and every time reveal different things about them. One drawback of this is that my descriptions may first appear simple
and one-eyed when their purpose is in fact to follow a certain process and thus in
the end create a more complex picture.

What comes to terminology, I will mainly be talking about “barriers” or “walls”
but I will also later on discuss frontiers and other border states. There is a clear
difference between a wall and a frontier but there is also something that links the
two: they both create two sides and thus break (or at least seem to break) the unity
of space. I would claim that barriers/walls, frontiers and borders are
improvisations on one and same theme, or different phases of the same process.
Auster uses all these improvisations and, as I will try to show in my thesis, the
way he switches between them is not accidental.

I would also claim that instead of having two sides, a wall in fact has three: this
side, the other side, and the side in between facing both the former and the latter.
They are all parts of the process I mentioned above, parts of something that can be
called the idea of a wall. People (in Auster’s books but in general as well) might be
living quite comfortably on this side until suddenly one day ‘the ‘why’ arises’
(Camus 1990: 19), and the rhythm and routine of the everyday life is broken. At
that moment they have to decide whether to be content with the Camusian feeling
that all they have is ‘the knowledge of the walls surrounding [them]’ (ibid.: 31), the
side in between, or whether they will try and cross the barrier(s) to go to the other
side (in other words, expand this side). Choosing to start the quest, they might even
find out if the barrier they are about to confront is similar to that in Kafka’s
parable about the door of the law; built of the doorkeeper’s discourse and the
man’s obedience (Derrida 1992: 203), not of any ‘real’ material.

A quest of some kind is often an integral part of crossing barriers – especially so
in the American literature. In order to find barriers and boundaries, we have to
travel to the margins of our world. Travelling itself might become a part of
crossing; if we travel fast, the speed creates ‘a space of initiation’ and even brings
us close to that final frontier; death (Baudrillard 1993: 6). Travelling is, however,
only an in-between stage, and ‘the trouble starts when the journeying stops’ (Jarvis
1998: 180) – at that moment we have to face the barriers both inside and outside of
us. If we want to change our lives, we have to change space (Lefebvre 1992: 190),
not just drive through it.

The idea of a barrier is strongly linked to that of spatiality. Spatiality has become
a popular term and object of research in literary studies during the last few years.
We have Lefebvre, de Certeau, Bachelard, and Bakhtin (namely his chronotope), to
mention only a few writers who are frequently quoted nowadays. In this thesis, it
is not my purpose to try and follow only one theory or theorist, and neither do I
want to restrict my sources to those published within last ten or so years (which
seems to be the ideal of some literary scholars): I find it only useful to bring
various times, people and places together.

Even though there has been plenty of writing about space in general, the amount
of material on barriers, walls, and such is relatively small. One exception is Gary
K. Wolfe’s book The Known and the Unknown from the late 1970s. The book
concentrates on science fiction but also has a lot to offer for those who are
interested in barriers in general. Despite the lack of research on barriers, I would agree with Wolfe (1979: 30) when he says that

> [a]t some elementary level, the notion of barrier is really an essential feature of most narrative plot constructions: suspense is generated by the presence of some obstacle that must be overcome in order for a narrative to be brought to a satisfactory solution. Furthermore, in twentieth century literature in particular, specifically in the literature of the existentialism, we find the barrier brought into focus as not merely a narrative device, but as a recurring image of alienation and isolation.

Talking about isolation, I must add that there are quite a few books and articles about closed space but that even though I might use some of them, they are not really what I am looking for: I want to concentrate on the idea of a barrier rather than on the space it may or may not isolate. I will not, however, try to avoid the fact that the notions of restriction and limitation are always part of a wall.

Like with barriers, the lack of research used to be a problem with Paul Auster as well – during the 1990s, however, the situation has changed radically as Dennis Barone predicted in his introduction to Beyond the Red Notebook (1995: 1), the only book to date dedicated solely to Auster's work. Among the writers there are some who have noticed Auster's fascination of place/spatiality, and more often than not they link this tendency to postmodernity. It is true that Auster can be seen as a postmodern writer, but it is also true that his work is so versatile that I would not be too eager to pigeonhole him. It might be useful to make a distinction between Auster and some high postmodernists by saying that Auster 'sees that to explore world as a labyrinthine and confused text is still to explore it in some fashion' (Bradbury 1992: 260). In Auster's books we find both the realisation of the fragmented state of our world and something of the belief in the possibility of
putting things together again. Needless to say that his duality makes it especially interesting to study his use of walls and frontiers. Auster’s relationship to his home country and to the idea(l)s that have traditionally been associated with it is similarly complicated. Woods (1995: 145) points out the way Auster criticises American society in his books and says that Auster’s ‘exploration of myths and archetypes attached to the American dream centers specifically on the thematic of freedom.’ Auster often criticises his country but at the same time he cherishes many of the so-called American beliefs and ideas. Auster’s books are thus not books in which one can find black and white stereotypes. Quite the contrary: they are books full of walls and openings, books that make one ask what freedom means not just for an American but for everyone.

Auster started his career as a poet and essayist moving into the novel form in the 1980s. Till today he has written many books, eight of which can be regarded as novels. These eight books are the ones I will be studying in my work. They share some characteristics\(^1\), but they are also quite different from one another: books that form The New York Trilogy could be described as anti-detective novels, In the Country of Last Things is a kind of dystopia, Mr Vertigo a story about the boy who learns to fly, and so on. Not all of them have very much to say about walls but some of them have plenty. Consequently, I will concentrate on certain books (especially Moon Palace and The Music of Chance) and only mention the others

(Leviathan, Mr Vertigo). I will also occasionally use other material by Auster, most notably the autobiographical work The Invention of Solitude.

My thesis will be divided into three main sections (excluding introduction and conclusion) according to certain subject matters; a particular book can and will thus be dealt with in more than one section. In the first section, I will consider instances where there is a clear contrast between two sides - in other words, where the barrier is strong. A strong barrier may fascinate people (if they see it as an almost natural symptom of the dualism that governs the world) or it might terrify them (if it is perceived as something that breaks the familiar unity of things) - the question is what does it do to Auster's characters?

In the second section of my work, the barrier weakens (to some extent at least), when I start discussing the “hunger for unity”, the yearn to cross or break barriers or borders. The American frontier is an important part of this chapter because of the way it unites the idea of a barrier to that of crossing. And in the last section, I will consider the possibility of staying in-between, i.e. not choosing one side over the other.

My discussion takes us from Thoreau’s Walden to Melville’s Bartleby, from the streets of Manhattan to the uttermost edge of the East Coast, from imprisonment to freedom. Despite the ever so tempting richness of Auster’s writing I will try my best not to follow all the possible paths these books offer. My main path will be the one that leads me to different kinds of barriers, walls and frontiers. There are many ideas and possible interpretations behind every one of them, but I will try and bring into focus those that I find most intriguing and characteristic of Auster.
Some of the questions I will be dealing with in the course of my discussion are: How does a barrier affect the lives of those who encounter/build it? How does the ‘barrier situation’ develop? Is it possible to cross/break the barrier and how? And finally, which one wins: desire for distinctions or yearn for unity – or neither?

2. This Side and That Side – the Beauty and Terror of a Wall

‘There’s nothing more mysterious or beautiful than a wall,’ says Flower, one of the two millionaires in Auster’s The Music of Chance (86). He is right: there is something very fascinating in a wall; it prevents us from getting somewhere or it protects us from something. A wall can be seen in various ways but never altogether ignored, because it creates space – something has to have limits in order for us to see and realise its existence. ‘An absolute, absolutely pure singularity if there were one would not even show up or at least would not be available for reading. To become readable, it has to be divided, to participate and belong’ (Derrida 1992: 68).

If a wall is strong, it separates two spaces that are – or believe themselves to be – very different from one another. Having this wall between them does not, however, mean that they would not know about each other; in fact they are both all the time very much aware of the other side behind the wall. That other side makes them what they are, defines them by defining what they are not.

Walls are thus born out of the human fascination for dualism: for human beings it is so much easier to live in a world where everything is (at least seemingly) neatly divided. According to Lefebvre, ‘[a] homogeneous and utterly
simultaneous space would be strictly imperceptible’ (1992: 200) – there have to be differences for there to be life and space.

But not too many differences. Not all the barriers are for good; not all of them are necessary. Different barriers have different functions, and it is important that we do not take all barriers and borders for granted without asking why they exist, without questioning their power and the source of it. Barriers have power to be fascinating and terrifying – they can be both at the same time. Auster shows this in his novels not just by making the same character’s view on a wall change but also by creating characters whose opinions about walls differ from those of other characters (the case of Nash and Pozzi is a good example of this).

Auster’s unique view on barriers is also partly based on the American history. America is without doubt an interesting continent when thinking about barriers, and every book of Auster’s somehow deals with not just space in general but with American space in particular. One example of this is that Auster several times brings Columbus, the (allegedly) first settler of America, into his books. What separates Columbus from those who came and conquered the new paradise after him is the obvious but very often forgotten fact that Columbus’ original goal was to try and find India not America (Banta 1978: 222). This fact implies that America itself was initially an obstacle, a barrier between Columbus and India. Following this train of thought, America can be seen as the obstacle of obstacles turning into the land of opportunity – and its settlers as inhabitants of a place in-between. This

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2 Banta is here echoing the thoughts of an American psychologist William James and especially his essay “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” first presented in 1898.
interpretation should be borne in mind when discussing the way Auster describes the American scene (especially New York) in all of his books.

According to Wolfe (1979: 34) there are roughly two options for dealing with barriers in literature: either the wall itself is the important thing, the strange and unknown thing in a story, or then the important thing is that something that can be found behind the barrier. In the former case, the mystery is the barrier itself whereas in the latter, the barrier is only there to show a contrast between two worlds/ cultures. We have to remember, however, that we are here only talking about emphasis, about aspects that are emphasised more than others in a particular book: it goes without saying that all the stories with walls and barriers have instances of both ideas mentioned above, but that they concentrate on either the wall or the idea of what might lie behind it.

I would argue that Auster is talking more about the walls themselves than about the worlds that might or might not be found beyond. Auster seems to be studying the idea of a wall as such: it does matter to him that a wall separates wor(l)ds but it does not really matter what these worlds are. What matters is the fact that people will always build walls, that there will always be two worlds opposing one another. This is one of the things Auster wants to say, but is it the final one, is it the one he will end with?

2.1. Wall, Time, and Monumentality: *The Music of Chance*

In Thoreau’s *Walden*, a man builds a small log cabin in the middle of nowhere to be able to live alone and think in peace. His life in the woods becomes one of the
most famous interpretations of the American dream. It has all the necessary building materials: a man who yearns for freedom and independence, unspoiled woodland around him, a strong will, and the spirit of a pioneer.

His log cabin is a modest home but a home all the same. It is a building with four walls, the inside that protects him from the outside. It might be a small and closed space but in Walden it is still a space of freedom. Those golden years are long gone – now one encounters figures like Nashe and Pozzi in The Music of Chance who instead of building a house of independence are forced to build a wall. The dream of freedom might not have died but it has certainly changed its form. The way in which the American space and space in general is perceived has altered – there are no tempting white spaces in the map any more. But something has remained: people still want to express themselves through space, through building.

This becomes evident in The Music of Chance, ‘a book about walls and slavery and freedom’ (Auster 1995: 122), a book that sums up most of the ideas I want to deal with in this thesis. It is the wall book of Auster’s. In The Music of Chance, the characters really build a wall – that is the main action of the book. The idea of two men building a wall was originally used by Auster in his 1977 play Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven in which two ‘builders of walls’ are lifting stones between themselves and the audience until the builders/actors cannot be seen any more. In the play, Hardy gives a fascinating analysis of a wall by saying that

> When I think of the wall, it’s as if I were going beyond what I can think. It’s so big, so much bigger than anything else. (Pause.) And yet, in itself...in itself...it’s just a wall. A

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3 The connection between the play and the novel is made clear by Auster comparing the two millionaires of The Music of Chance with Laurel and Hardy.
wall can be many things, can’t it? It can keep in or keep out. It can protect or destroy. It can help things...or make them worse. It can be part of something greater...or only what it is. Do you see what I mean? It all depends on how you look at it. (1997: 144.)

Before Nashe is condemned to build a wall, Auster gives him a bit of freedom. In the beginning of The Music of Chance, he leaves his home after getting an inheritance and starts driving aimlessly around the American continent. The narrator describes Nashe as a man who is ‘treating his past as if it were so much junk to be carted away’ (10). Nashe, like so many other characters in Auster’s novels, is trying to leave his past behind by putting himself into a kind of vacuum, losing himself in space. But Nashe, like all those others, has sooner or later to face a wall that stops the movement. And in fact walls seem to fascinate Nashe: before leaving home and his piano he gives ‘a long farewell recital to the bare walls’ (11).

When Nashe then finds a young poker player Pozzi and decides to use his last money on the poker game with two eccentric millionaires, he again chooses limits instead of limitlessness. And if Nashe and Pozzi do not already enter the world of walls and closed spaces when they reach the locked gate of the millionaires’ vast property and are admitted in, they enter it when they start playing. A game of poker – people sitting opposite each other, taking sides – is in itself a foretaste of wall building. Like Baudrillard (1993: 128) says, gambling is ‘a desert form,’ it ‘has a strict limit and stops abruptly,’ its space is ‘finite and concentric’. And this game of clear distinctions leads to Nashe and Pozzi’s imprisonment. ‘The stake is similar to a crisis: a person feels himself on the threshold. And the time of gambling is a special time: here, too, a minute is equal to years’ (Bakhtin 1987: 171).

Ready for the fateful card game, standing in front of the millionaires’ locked gate in the middle of the woods, Nashe surprisingly enough feels himself happy. After
months of driving through the American dream (mobility, freedom to leave the past behind, independence), Nashe finds his happiness in a locked gate and a fenced property (immobility, imprisonment). The world he and Pozzi are about to enter is the world of strict and organised language, the language of names and distinctions: “Don’t let nobody in without a name,” echoes gatekeeper Murks his masters’ commands (67). When Nashe and Pozzi enter this peculiar world, they lose something of themselves – what could better describe this than the fact that they give their names away⁴.

The two millionaires share the house but they both also have their own separate worlds inside the house. The east wing where these worlds are situated is hidden behind a door that is ‘almost invisible [...], so skillfully camouflaged that it seemed to melt into the wall’ (77). This description of a door that is almost a wall – or vice versa – suggests that the house of the millionaires is not just a world of walls but also a world of hidden doors. Again how you see it is a question of how you look at it.

Flower’s hobby is to collect old things: his room is full of memorabilia, things that used to belong to someone important but are now important in themselves and only because of their uselessness. ‘The fascination was simply for the objects as material things, and the way they had been wrenched out of any possible context […]. It was the isolation that haunted Nashe, the image of irreducible

⁴ They lie about their relationship, though, saying that they are brothers. This lie can be linked to the situation in the end when Nashe does not tell Murks and his son-in-law about his birthday. See Chapter 4.
There is something similar in Stone's dream world as well. He is building a miniature world where everything 'happens at once' (79). The "happening at once" of this world is a frozen moment, a moment of utter separateness: the moment of everything that is inevitably also the moment of nothing – everything and nothing happening at the same, frightening moment. Stone's City of the World is an attempt to conquer time, to beat death. When Nashe later on takes a closer look at the model, he notices that it is far from being a beautiful world Stone himself has earlier depicted; it is in fact 'a city at war with itself,' waiting for 'the arrival of a murderous, avenging God' (96), a world of 'a blindfolded prisoner standing against the wall' (ibid.).

These two little worlds are not enough for the millionaires, however: they are too little. That is why Flower and Stone have decided to build a wall, '[a] monument in the shape of a wall' (86). Their building material is a heap of stones they have brought all the way from Ireland. Woods (1995: 153) links the wall with Stone's city by saying that

\[
\text{constructing the physical wall becomes a reconstruction of the model of the City of the World. [...]} \\
\text{This alliance of the City of the World and the wall in the meadow finds another analogy, in that the stones are those of an old Irish castle transported to the United States. The erection of the wall thus also signifies the nostalgia for the Old World, the yearning for the "possession" of a "true" history. The displaced history is "rebuilt" so that Old and New Worlds come together, another fantasy secured through the use of the millionaires' money. What the money actually creates is the semblance of antiquity; it is "postmodern" in that the ruins of the old castle appear to become something new even if possessing a non-usable [sic] function.}
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When Nashe and Pozzi start building the wall after losing all their money in the card game, they become part of Stone and Flower's insane world. It is a world where money is not an obstacle but a means to build obstacles. The wall means different things to the millionaires than to Nashe or Pozzi, but they all see it in
of time. It is a ‘barrier against time,’ as the millionaires say (86); it is a wall that brings Europe (old) and America (new) together and at the same time symbolises the separation of the two continents; and Nashe and Pozzi know that they have to spend a certain amount of time building it in order to pay off their debts.

Furthermore, the millionaires call their wall a monument. Their choice of words is significant since monumental beauty stems from the fact that a thing ‘seems eternal, because it seems to have escaped time’ (Lefebvre 1992: 221). A monument stops, and maybe at the same time captures, time because it seems to belong to a sphere altogether different from that of everyday life. A monument has something very grand in it – ‘it transmutes the fear of the passage of time, and anxiety about death, into splendour’ (ibid.).

When thinking about the time aspect it is also important to consider the building material of the wall. Flower and Stone, the two millionaires who “employ” the main characters to build the wall after Nashe and Pozzi have lost the card game and all their money (=freedom)5, have shipped the stones all the way from Ireland to USA. The stones used to be a castle and then ruins of a castle – now they will become a wall. Flower wants the wall to be a ‘barrier against time’ (86) but it will inevitably be part of the past, the European past, though in a wrong place and in a wrong form.

5 For a Marxist analysis of the novel, see Woods 1995.
Flower makes the tension between Europe and America more explicit by bringing language into focus:

The stones of the castle were loaded onto trucks – lorries, as they call them over there – and transported to a ship in Cork. Then they were sent across the ocean, once again loaded onto lorries – or trucks, as we call them over here, ha! – and brought to our little spot in the Pennsylvania woods. Amazing, isn't it? (85.)

It is not to be overlooked that Flower continues to refer to the stones as ‘the stones of the castle’, a bit later he even talks about ‘the castle’ (ibid.). When and how does something become a wall? Is it possible for these European stones to become American – to get rid of their past, to beat time?

The millionaires want a protective castle to become a useless barrier (it does not protect against anything, it just halves a meadow). It seems to be their mission to unite separate pieces of time/history: Flower’s memorabilia; Stone’s city that contains all those moments that in reality were separate; stones of a castle getting a new life as a wall. Maybe this is their own private version of the melting pot of the United States. Their ideas furthermore suggest that to them unity is built of space instead of time. Through space they think they can rearrange time as it were: bring separate instances of time together and thus create a sort of continuous space – a wall against the unpredictable time.

As I said, it is difficult to tell when the stones cease to be a castle and become a wall. Same way it is difficult to say when Nashe and Pozzi become prisoners and lose their freedom. For Pozzi, their time in the meadow is from the very start a prisoning sentence. Nashe, on the other hand, hovers between different states: at first he feels happy in this world of distinctions and limits, and the wall is ‘the
only solution’ (108), ‘a one-way journey back to earth’ (110), then he starts to suspect that he and Pozzi are victims of a conspiracy. In the end his attitude changes again: especially after Pozzi’s disappearance/death, Nashe feels satisfied when the wall finally starts to look like a wall, when he can ‘no longer see past it’ and ‘it block[s] his view to the other side’ (202). As such, the wall fills an important function: it halves the meadow, makes distinctions a bit easier. The meadow seems now to have become something Lefebvre (1992: 165) calls dominated space, ‘the realization of a master’s project.’ Nashe still needs distinctions and limits in order to cope with the world whereas on the other hand his happiness is more related to the fact that he now sees the wall as his wall, his project.

Pozzi’s happiness does not stem from limits: instead of wanting to complete the monumental wall he dreams of escape. His dreams turn into cruel reality – the morning after Pozzi has escaped and left the fence and wall behind, Nashe finds him back in the meadow, almost beaten to death. When Murks takes the boy (or what is left of him) away, Nashe momentarily changes his mind about escape and tries to run away only to notice that the hole he and Pozzi have dug together does not exist any more. The wall is still too strong: it keeps the builders in – one way or another. There are some interesting conclusions to be drawn from the way the two attempted escapes differ from one another, and I will get back to them in Chapter 3.

The wall is not the only wall or barrier in The Music of Chance. I have already mentioned that the whole world of the millionaires is characterised by walls and locked gates. The east wing of the house and later on the house itself become
forbidden places, places behind walls. The area around the house and the meadow are separated from the “real” world by a fence topped with barbed wire. And Nashe loses his car, the American symbol of free movement, in the card game – ironically enough, the millionaires give it to their gatekeeper Murks. Nashe’s satisfaction in front of the wall shows, however, that walls are not always images of unhappiness and limited life – they can also be stopping places where the fact that one is forced to stop can bring a sort of freedom with it. Maybe it is not pure freedom when one drives across the vast empty spaces without stopping – it might as well be that the only lasting freedom is found when one faces a barrier and is forced to see one’s own reflection in the stony surface of a wall.

In The Music of Chance the wall is strong as long as Nashe and the millionaires believe in it. It bears the grandeur of a monument and thus has a unique relationship to time. Instead of a castle or a heap of stones the millionaires want a wall, a terrifying monument that is in many ways more ambiguous than a house or a castle would be.

We may ask why Nashe is quite often happy when building the wall. One answer would be to see Nashe as a kind of writer working on his text (the wall):

a man of universe, which itself only exists on paper, and, a prisoner or a poor man, he endures his condition stoically because he can write and because the one minute of freedom in which he writes is enough to make him powerful and free, is enough to give him not his own freedom, which he derides, but universal freedom (Blanchot 1981: 37).

This interpretation is backed up by Flower’s words, ‘Rather than try to reconstruct the castle, we’re going to turn it into a work of art’ (86; emphasis added).
The wall and the closed world of the millionaires do not, however, only bring happiness to Nashe or (especially not to) Pozzi’s mind. The City of the World is a frightening world that shows the dark side of the power people can gain over things and other people. The Music of Chance is after all a book about power relations, and thus the nature of the limited spaces it portrays is intrinsically threatening.

2.2. Language of Moving: *The New York Trilogy*

‘At some level, the city is always a trap’ (Wolfe 1979: 90). This bleak statement and others like it bring into mind images of tall buildings with people at the same time too close and too far away from one another, of nature almost smothered by grey walls and of many, many streets - so many that walking on them equals getting lost. In a way, ‘the urban postmodern landscape [of Auster’s] is defined as an immense social experience of lacking a place’ (Jarvis 1998: 86). In a city like this, people are both trapped and lacking a place. They suffer either from being limited or being lost – or both.

Auster’s city dwellers try to avoid these confusing feelings by walking a lot. They roam the streets of Manhattan forming their own language, language of space and walking in which ‘traffic lights, signs and bricks [...] act like full stops’ (Jarvis 1998: 86). This interpretation gives new meaning to walls and barriers: they are part of this new language of moving and act as full stops or commas. They are also examples of ‘the code of enigma’ that according to Jarvis (ibid: 89) governs the urban text. On the one hand, the sentence (moving/walking) would not be complete or comprehensible without them and, on the other hand, these barriers
are the enigmas of the city: ‘reflecting glass windows and blank concrete walls prevent the pedestrian from knowing what is taking place within most buildings’ (ibid.). In City of Glass, Peter Stillman’s new Tower of Babel is in fact built of his walks in the streets of New York – he is not trying to reach the skies, he is trying to expand the territory we already have down here; cities, streets, limited areas of our everyday existence. ‘You see, I’ve understood the need to limit myself. To work within a terrain small enough to make all results conclusive’ (City of Glass: 92). Instead of being the tower that makes one language become many, Stillman’s new Tower of Babel is in itself a language, the urban text of moving.

When Quinn who is tailing Stillman loses the old man, Stillman becomes in his thoughts a ‘part of the city. [...] a brick in an endless wall of bricks’ (109). By comparing Stillman to bricks, Quinn gives the old man a new role in the text of the city: after his disappearance, Stillman is not any more just a pen writing words on the streets but himself part of language, one of those full stops. A writer figure who is inevitably himself part of the language he uses, who exists only in it. The city/text itself is a dream, a city made of glass, made of surfaces that seem to let one through but do not – occasionally they can just reflect one’s own image.

There is another clear link to writing when we realise that the move from The Music of Chance to City of Glass brings us from the log cabin of Walden and its new interpretation in the millionaires’ woods to Melville’s Bartleby. When Quinn walks around New York and ponders Melville, Auster once again puts side by side the earlier idyll and the later reality of the American dream: Quinn first remembers whales and expeditions and then sees ‘Bartleby’s window and the
blank brick wall before him’ (63). This short passage sums up the story of Quinn’s: when Quinn assumes another identity, that of a private eye, he sees himself in terms of an adventurous captain when in fact he could compare himself to Bartleby who gradually stops working and acting only to remain in his little corner and stare at the brick wall behind the window. What is more important, though, is the fact that Bartleby is a scrivener, a kind of writer. His isolation and inability to really communicate with other people can be seen as part of the dark side of writer’s work. Even though Auster’s characters are more mobile than Bartleby who stubbornly stays in his little corner, they share the same lonely world in which the language of literature is born.

In addition to finding these “double texts”, the whole New York Trilogy plays with the idea of double characters, the possibility or impossibility of telling the difference between you and I. The main characters are trying their best to be traditional private eyes, following their suspects and attempting to construct coherent stories about them – stories with a beginning and an end, stories with clear distinctions. Like Quinn says, ‘There could not be two answers. It was either this or that’ (133). Blue begins his story as the embodiment of this idea: he sits in his room watching the suspect Black sitting in another room opposite, across the street. ‘Each thing is separate from every other thing, wholly separate and defined,

6 “Bartleby the Scrivener” is a short story by Melville, first published in 1853. This peculiar story also takes place in New York.
7 Clarke (1988: 38) makes an interesting comparison between Whitman’s poem “Mannahatta” and Melville’s “Bartleby” by saying that Whitman sees New York in terms of vertical growth whereas Melville’s city is a horizontal city. What is true of Melville is true of Auster as well: his characters very rarely climb up the tall buildings of Manhattan. And when they do, that usually leads into some kind of trouble. (See for example Leviathan, where the Statue of Liberty is portrayed as a scene of terror.)
and the geometric simplicity of the pattern impresses Blue with its force’ (Ghosts: 189), describes the narrator Blue’s satisfaction when watching a baseball game. And in The Locked Room, the closest the narrator and Fanshawe get to encountering each other is by having a conversation with a locked double door in between.

Chénetier (1995: 40) compares these “detectives” with Melville’s Bartleby ‘because of the obstinate walls on which characters more than a little reminiscent of Bartleby attempt, as full-fledged scriveners themselves, to read or inscribe signs of their identity or their obscure desire.’ Later on (ibid.), he refers to these walls as ‘the white walls of consciousness’ implying that in The New York Trilogy the most important walls are the walls between people, walls that prevent us from really understanding others and, consequently, ourselves. There is no new language if people just lock themselves in separate rooms of a new Tower of Babel. There is no language without interpretation, no speaker without a listener and observer.

In The New York Trilogy walls are more than anything else images of writing and reading. As full stops or commas in the language of moving I described above they play an important and rather positive role. They can, however, also illustrate the isolation and loneliness of a writer who can only truly exist through writing. In a way In the Country of Last Things and Moon Palace tell the same story – city life is in its paradoxical combination of limitations and infinite possibilities very similar to that of writing and reading.
2.3. Changing Barricades: *In the Country of Last Things*

Anna Blume of *In the Country of Last Things* resembles the anti-detectives\(^8\) of *The New York Trilogy*. She is trying to find her brother in an unknown and frightening world and walking in the streets of the city is an important part of her life. She, too, has to find the right way to move in order to survive (see also Woods 1995: 115). The language of the city changes everyday, new barricades materialise as if out of thin air, and danger lurks everywhere. This city of unpredictable barricades is ‘a space without history: her [Anna's] life is a spatial rather than temporal experience’ (Woods: 120).

Barone (1995: 8) praises Anna's ability ‘to make distinctions,’ to ‘[draw] limits to herself,’ whereas Woods (1995: 116) sees this in a different light saying that ‘[a]ny sense of totality of representation or comprehension is constantly undercut, as Blume recognizes that the selective nature of words and the artifice of boundaries prevents totalization.’ The city is a place where making distinctions might be for good but where there are at the same time too many limits and barriers.

In this book, America has changed from the world of freedom into a closed city where people are building a huge wall and various smaller ones to prevent everybody from both coming and going. And still the dream of freedom lives on: Auster's city people stubbornly believe in the existence of agricultural zones in the

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\(^8\) A term used by for example Stefano Tani in his book *The Doomed Detective. The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction* (1984). The novels of Auster's *New York Trilogy* can be seen as anti-detective novels because of the way they undermine and parody the traditional, end-oriented detective genre. Auster's way to deal with detective tradition is not, however, so much parodying as reinterpreting. For more about this, see for example Russell's essay “Deconstructing The New York Trilogy: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction” in *Critique* (1990).
west. Even Anna, who is first very doubtful (28), gradually joins her fellow citizens’ collective dream.

Despite the hope some are able to find in this desolate world, people suffer from hunger and cold and have started to degenerate into an almost primitive level. The fact that they are spontaneously building barricades to gain power can also be seen as a sign of some kind of primitive instinct⁹.

Men build these barricades whenever the materials are at hand, and then they mount them, with clubs, or rifles, or bricks, and wait on their perches for people to pass by. They are in control of the street. If you want to get through, you must give the guards whatever they demand. Sometimes it is money; sometimes it is food; sometimes it is sex. (6.)

Barricades are people’s way to try and govern space that has betrayed them. They feel that barriers are their only chance to get even momentary power over something. They do not want to build traditional shelters, they build walls instead. The barricades of the city are not permanent, however: they can disappear overnight and be replaced by others in altogether different places. The idea of a barrier remains but takes on new forms. Because of the changing nature of the barricades, ‘you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse’ (6). In this new city, barricades create language that is different from that limited by traditional, stationary walls and obstacles (cf. “the language of moving” I discussed on page 19). The nature of this barricade language is more fleeting and obscure and thus more frightening.

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⁹ Auster is, of course, here trying to make us think and realise that these so-called primitive instincts have anything but died out in our everyday world. In a collection of Auster’s essays and interviews called The Red Notebook, Auster describes In the Country of Last Things as ‘a novel about the present and the immediate past’ (1995: 148).
2.4. Mute Surfaces: *Moon Palace*

All of Auster’s characters are rather solitary figures who get themselves into situations where their own limits and the limits of the world around them are being tested. Fogg in *Moon Palace* is no exception to this: his world is ‘the world of fragments, [...] the world of hunger and bare white walls’ (33) but he yearns for something more, something different.

Fogg can only start dreaming by first almost starving himself to death in Central Park. He is rescued by his friends and, eventually, by a man called Thomas Effing (who later on turns out to be his grandfather). Fogg describes Effing by saying that ‘[e]verything about him was walled off, remote, sphinxlike in its impenetrability’ (99). Effing hires Fogg to be his companion, a sort of helpmate, and Effing being blind, part of Fogg’s job is to describe things to the old man when he is wheeling him through the streets of Manhattan. Fogg, who has ‘always had a penchant for generalizing’ (121) is now ‘plunged into the world of particulars’ (ibid.) and differences. Some time later he moves to Chinatown with his girlfriend Kitty Wu and notices that Chinatown is full of ‘mute surfaces’ past of which he cannot ‘gain entrance’ (230). In some paradoxical way the white walls of Fogg’s story make it possible for him to go on, to start his search for connections and new frontiers over and over again. Like Walt in *Mr Vertigo*, he only learns to fly when he jumps into the wall (see p. 81 in *Mr Vertigo*).

This same paradox comes up in *The Invention of Solitude* when Auster repeatedly shows us rooms where writers sit, think and write. It is in the solitude of these closed, walled off spaces that thoughts spread their wings. Walls make those who
sit inside think; they make them face themselves and the real and imaginary boundaries of their lives. And in these rooms words become walls as well: ‘they have […] stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me’ (65). Words are both walls and gates. And even though these closed spaces and limitations might in the end be fruitful, the price writers have to pay is the feeling of ‘entering another dimension, taking up residence inside the black hole’ (77).

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Auster’s walls are never simple to understand: they are both threatening and beautiful; too fascinating to be left alone, too frightening to be touched. Characters’ feelings in front of them are as confused as those of the reader.

There are, however, some clear themes that recur in every book I have discussed so far. When Auster builds his walls, the problematic of time, writing and language in general as well as allusions to American history and literature are always there. All these themes teach us the same lesson: we cannot live without barriers. Fogg’s narration does not catch fire until he has learnt the art of limiting himself, and the wall of the millionaires in The Music of Chance shows how ambiguous a wall can be, how many interpretations it can carry in its stones. Even though there is a builder, the wall outlives him. Stillman and Quinn, on the other hand, write their lives on the streets and air of Manhattan; walls are a necessary part of this language. And Anna Blume with the walls and barricades of her dystopian city shows the changing nature of barriers, maybe even suggests that the line between utopia and dystopia is a very thin one.
If we cannot live without barriers, we still have to be able to choose the right ones and use them in a right way. Nashe, Fogg, Stillman, Anna and all those others show various ways to cope with various kinds of walls. Walls do prevent them from getting somewhere but they also let them form language, find something new, learn something about time.

Bakhtin (1981: 84) has given the name “chronotope” to ‘the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.’ He lists many different chronotopes and chronotopic motifs one of which is the motif of meeting. This motif occurs when certain people happen to be in the same place at the same time (ibid. 97). Obstacles have an interesting relationship to this motif. People can be (almost) in the same place at the same time but have an obstacle in between. It might even be possible for them to communicate (by shouting, through a crack on the wall) and still remain spatially isolated from one another. In a way, then, even an obstacle can make meeting possible or at least allow it to take place.

3. When Walls Weaken or Nostalgia for Unity

In Auster’s books, barriers that were supposed to be strong can suddenly weaken and sometimes even break up altogether. Some of these barriers only exist in mind, which does not, however, make them any less real. Many of the attempts to cross barriers are connected to certain ideals: characters (consciously or
unconsciously) try to achieve something better by breaking walls or fleeing to frontiers. But do they succeed in this?

In his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus talks about the ‘nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute’ (1990: 23), implying that unity is something we miss but do not have any more. Earlier on I quoted Derrida, who said that an ‘absolutely pure singularity if there were one would not even show up or at least would not be available for reading’ (1992: 68). These two quotations state the problem I am about to discuss in the following chapter: to what extent it is possible for Auster’s characters to cross barriers and/or unite two worlds and what implications do these crossings have?

When discussing ways of crossing barriers in Auster’s books, the American frontiers cannot be ignored. A frontier is a zone that unites the idea of an obstacle to that of crossing. It is ‘a constantly moving zone rather than a fixed line’ (Rezé and Bowen 1979: 64), ‘a gate of escape from the bondage of the past’ (Turner 1976: 38) but also ‘the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization’ (ibid: 3). There are no traditional frontiers with Indians and gold diggers any more, but frontiers as ideas still live on. What is left is a belief that there exists more space to be conquered; a belief that new opportunities can be found by expanding one’s space, by crossing barriers. Freedom thus becomes to mean unity, united space(s).

According to Turner’s Frontier Thesis, the frontier was an opportunity: it represented the future (even though being at the same time a primitive space) and
was regarded better than the settled areas which represented the past (ibid: 156). This thinking finally led Turner to believe that in order to be a true American, one should not just get rid of his/her European past but also of the American one (171). In a way, then, Turner’s thesis suggests that Americans should substitute time and history with space. This is not possible, of course, but is it something Auster’s characters nevertheless try to do?

Frontiers are also one example of people’s desire for coherence. People are not just fascinated by dualism, at the same time they yearn for unity. Crossing or breaking barriers may begin as curiosity but all curiosities is in the end same as desire to own things, to make them part of one’s own world. It is an attempt to build a bridge instead of a barrier. Lefebvre even goes so far as to say that ‘[v]isible boundaries, such as walls or enclosures in general, give rise for their part to an appearance of separation between spaces where in fact what exists is an ambiguous continuity’ (1992: 87; emphasis mine). The continuous, limitless space is quite often believed to equal freedom.


One of the key figures in Auster’s *City of Glass* is Peter Stillman, a professor who believes in the possibility of recreating the innocent world that existed before the Tower of Babel. His belief makes Stillman very much a soul mate of the Puritan settlers of America. For him, however, the way into the promised land can be found through language. This old-new language of Eden can undo the fall and bring paradise to earth once again. According to Stillman (and his fictitious
mouthpiece Henry Dark), one part of Genesis commands people to move westwards to fill the earth. Consequently he sees America as ‘the last step in the process’ (58). In Stillman’s thoughts, America, the place in-between, becomes the place where mankind finally unites again; it becomes the endpoint. The people of America will build again the Tower of Babel, but this tower will instead of becoming a barrier between heaven and earth become a bridge between the two.

What is this new language of Stillman’s like then? He collects rubbish from the streets of New York and names the broken objects again. Stillman seems to believe that language can mend things. This is not the only way of his to use language, however: when observed and mapped out by someone else, his routes through the streets form letters. Language is created by walking in space – not writing in the usual sense of the word but moving and almost as if by accident (see also p. 19 above). The letters spell ‘the Tower of Babel’ – for Stillman, New York and his language on its streets have become the new Tower, a kind of gate through which people can pass to a new paradise. As Stillman writes in his thesis, people will each have their own room in this new Tower which they will enter and there forget all they know and then be ready for the new world (59).

Stillman’s walking/writing connects the inner and the outer, it ‘bring[s] the outside in’ (74), whereas Quinn feels that his part as an observer/reader has made connections between the inner and the outer impossible for him. This situation gradually changes. According to Rowen (1991: 229-30) there are several signs that indicate that Quinn unconsciously begins to follow the old man’s quest for the
prelapsarian language. He is obsessively trying to find the right way to hold his notebook while tailing Stillman so that he could see and write at the same time. Rowen (ibid. 229) sees this as ‘unimpeded melding of subject and object [which is] characteristic of language in prelapsarian world.’¹⁰ She also points out (ibid. 230) that Quinn’s residence in the garbage bin can be seen as an attempt to make his outward state reflect the inward one, to link up word with thing. [...] Deeper motives are also involved. The language of innocence can issue only from the mouth of innocence. Such innocence requires rebirth, and to be reborn one first must die.

The idea of rebirth is also presented by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous Frontier Thesis (in fact a series of writings/speeches from the late 1800s): Turner sees the process that immigrants went through in the new continent as equivalent to rebirth (1976: 3). This process often meant returning to primitive conditions and then entering from this womb of hardship as new Adams. Lewis describes this new man in his book The American Adam as ‘an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry [...] the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him’ (1955: 5). Unlike Lewis’ Adam, Stillman is not unquestionably a heroic figure – he is a figure who makes us confused: a terrible man who must nevertheless be admired for his idealism, his belief in the possibility of a new world. Stillman has a dream; he is like the Puritans who travelled to the New World thinking that ‘God had given them a world mission’ (Rezé and Bowen 1979: 20). Maybe Stillman with his new

¹⁰ In The Locked Room, the narrator presents a similar kind of idea when describing Fanshawe’s letters: ‘one senses a new availability of words inside him, as though the distance between seeing and writing had been narrowed, the two acts now almost identical, part of a single, unbroken gesture’ (326).
language and those earlier Adams ‘display the typical American desire for a new coherence and wholeness’ that Bradbury talks about when describing the American novel (1992: 82).

Auster gives us a glimpse of this coherence in the end of City of Glass by covering the glass city in snow. Instead of transparent surfaces and letters in the streets, the last page of the book is full of papery white snow. ‘The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end’ (158). Paper remains there for new language, for new worlds to appear.

The books of the trilogy play with the idea of dreaming of other kinds of worlds, new worlds, frontiers. As Quinn writes in his red notebook echoing Baudelaire: ‘It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. [...] Anywhere out of the world’ (132). In City of Glass this anywhere was Stillman’s new paradise, in Ghosts it is at first a traditional frontier, then China. Blue’s traditional dream is inspired by Thoreau’s Walden. After reading the book, he imagines himself ‘walking through the woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder. [...] He would build his life from the bottom up, an exile, a pioneer, a pilgrim in the new world’ (222). This idyllic frontier landscape is soon shattered, however, when Black (the man Blue, a private eye as he is, is following) sneaks into Blue’s dream and brings with him a vision of death. Even though there has at first been a very clear distinction between Blue and Black, these two characters gradually start to resemble each other more and more until one day Blue enters Black’s room and ‘suddenly there is no more distance, the thing and the thought
of the thing are one and the same’ (218) and ‘Black will be inside of him forever’ (ibid.).

In addition to this more traditional frontier there is another frontier – China. When Blue, like his predecessor in *City of Glass*, disappears in the end of the novel, the narrator toys with the image of Blue sailing to China (232). But this is only the narrator’s guesswork: in both the first and second parts of the trilogy the only frontier we can be sure of the characters having reached, is the empty page in the end.

The final part of the trilogy, *The Locked Room*, is even more focused on crossing the barriers to escape and find America than the first two parts. The nameless narrator of the book is trying to find his friend Fanshawe¹¹ and this quest takes him to Europe (France) and back again. The narrator’s journey to the old world is a kind of death (in France he lives in a state of drunken and nightmarish dream, forgetting his normal life, forgetting time and place) – a displacement that makes it possible for him to return and be born again to find new frontiers inside America.

During his stay in Europe, the narrator feels that he is no longer able to make distinctions: ‘Apples are not oranges, peaches are not plums. You feel the difference on your tongue, and then you know, as if inside yourself. But everything was beginning to have the same taste to me’ (342). After returning to New York, he gets a message from Fanshawe and goes to meet him at Columbus

¹¹ This is an allusion to Hawthorne’s first novel *Fanshawe* in which a young student instead of accepting the love of a woman whom he loves, lets her marry his friend and then literally studies himself to death. Similarly Fanshawe in *The Locked Room* leaves his wife who then marries the narrator, Fanshawe’s best friend.
Square\textsuperscript{12}, Boston. Before leaving for Boston, the narrator amuses his son by telling that he is going to moon, ‘They have regular flights from Boston’ (357). He is thus linking his journey to a frontier-like experience and maybe also implying that the world without distinctions does not have to be frightening or dull but that it can be full of new possibilities.

The narrator is in the end left behind the closed (double) door, but Fanshawe is so near behind the door that it feels ‘as if the words were being poured into [the narrator’s] head’ (359). The narrator and Fanshawe are too close to be utterly separated – the narrator has earlier on described their childhood by saying that their ‘fenceless backyards merged into an unbroken stretch of lawn, gravel, and dirt’ (251-2), and now, in the end, their thoughts merge so powerfully that the narrator blacks out.

Like many scholars have noted, the books of The New York Trilogy are more than anything else books about language. Russell (1990: 72) describes them as a ‘quest for correspondence between signifier and signified’ thus linking Auster’s books to the deconstructive ideas of Derrida. To Russell, these three books are ‘an incessant play of “différance” (ibid.) in which “[b]inary opposition is deconstructed’ (79). These certainly are books about relations and differences that seem to escape the character, writer and reader’s interpretative gaze. Even ‘the textual boundary of each volume of the trilogy disintegrates: characters in one book dream of

\textsuperscript{12} This is only one example of the instances where the name of Columbus comes up in the trilogy – it is obviously no mistake and seems to suggest the importance of an “American reading” of these books.
characters in another or reappear in different disguises’ (72). Someone is always trying, however, like the old Stillman who ‘wanders through the city, trying to find the right names for the broken things he finds there and thus making whole again the fragmented Tower of Babel of the late-twentieth-century cosmos’ (Rowen 1991: 228-9).

The characters in the Trilogy try to reach unity not just through language in general but also through the world of literature. They find themselves doubles from the earlier books thus trying to see some kind of continuity in the otherwise confusing and chaotic world. City of Glass is full of Don Quixote figures who all base their worlds in more or less insane and fake missions (the question is, of course, do we not all?); in Ghosts Blue does not find his counterpart in Walden but in Hawthorne’s short story “Wakefield” in which the main character is in the end doomed ‘the Outcast of the Universe’ because of ‘stepping aside for a moment’ (1995: 598, 597); and the nameless narrator in The Locked Room gains a sort of coherence by following the footsteps of Poe’s William Wilson.

3.2. Frontier City: In the Country of Last Things

When America/USA developed, the small and crowded spaces became more common than the vast and empty ones. This led to a new notion of frontier also adopted by Auster – cities were now places waiting to be conquered, new frontiers (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 189). Auster’s tendency to treat city as a kind of frontier is already very much apparent in The New York Trilogy but in In the Country of Last Things the description of “a frontier city” reaches its perfection.
Anna Blume\textsuperscript{13} travels to a nameless but still clearly recognisable (as New York) city to find her brother. The heroine of the twentieth century does not enter the new, paradisical world of the heroes of the seventeenth century but a chaotic, dystopian world – ‘an invisible world, a place where only blind people lived’ (18).

Since the names of Anna’s friend and her husband – Isabella and Ferdinand – remind one of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon who funded Columbus’ expeditions, they enhance Anna’s role as a new Columbus (Wesseling, 498.). The difference between these two Columbuses is that the first one (accidentally) found the beginning of the world, the second one the end of it. The difference is not so clear-cut, however: in the end of the world Anna is still dreaming of a new beginning, a new crossing behind the walls of the city.

Anna can be compared to Columbus also because of the way she sees the world anew. In order to survive, Anna has to work as a garbage collector and thus ‘look at the world in a new fashion, to think metonymically, where the part forms a new yet different whole’ (Woods 1995: 113). This notion gets us back to the earlier (see section 2.3) implied paradox: Anna needs to draw limits, make distinctions, but she also needs to find connections and form new wholes – and retain a hope that there really still exist ‘agricultural zones in the hinterlands to the west’ (28), ‘a road that takes you into open country’ (185), the gate that is ‘not [so] strictly guarded’ (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{13} The name Anna Blume can be seen as both an allusion to a Dadaist poem “An Anna Blume” (1919) by Kurt Schwitters (Wesseling 1991: 498) and, since the novel is built on the wanderings of Anna through the city, as an echo of Joyce’s Leopold Bloom. When Anna is mentioned in Moon Palace, Fogg cannot remember if her last name was Blume or Bloom (88).
In the end of the book Anna’s attempts to beat the imprisoning city get unexpected support from nature. When Anna observes her surroundings during their (supposedly) last night in the Woburn house, she notices that ‘the wind is blowing through the cracks in the house’ (187). A bit earlier she has stated that they will leave the next day ‘if the sky looks promising’ (ibid.), also noting that ‘[t]he thaw seems imminent’ (ibid.). Anna is now clearly putting her hope in nature instead of the city. She and her friends are ready for the new (or in fact old) frontiers after losing their old identities in the frightening city. They believe in the possibility of finding the way out, through one kind of gate or another. The wall of the house has cracks in it.

3.3. Walking on the Moon: *Moon Palace*

‘It was the summer that men first walked on the moon.’ Thus begins *Moon Palace*, the book of Auster’s that most powerfully talks about frontiers old and new. Lives of three men, Thomas Effing, Sol Barber, and Marco Stanley Fogg, all tell us something different about American frontiers and thoughts behind them. From Indians to moon, it is all there. ‘First there’s Columbus, then there was the discovery of the West, then finally there is outer space: the moon as the last frontier,’ Auster himself describes the ideas behind *Moon Palace* in *The Red Notebook* (151).

Like in *In the Country of Last Things*, Columbus is an important figure in *Moon Palace* as well. Steven Weisenburger (1995: 129) describes *Moon Palace* as a ‘novel saturated with references to 1492 and Cristoforo Columbo, to the systematic westwarding domination of the Outside after Columbus, and the crisis of that...
progressive, modern imperialistic ethos during the sixties.’ The main character of
the book is called Marco Stanley Fogg14, which in itself shows us that we are
dealing with the spirit of exploration. There are many instances in the book where
Fogg is one way or another ‘on the brink of discovering a new continent’ (52).
Fogg’s quest for his own and his country’s origins takes him from the deserts of
New York to the deserts of the West and finally to the farthest edge of the
continent where he is left staring at the latest frontier of the American people, the
moon. Unlike Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, the new American hero is again facing west
instead of east.

As was already mentioned, Fogg’s name is full of innuendoes to adventurers,
and, furthermore, the name Fogg – since it according to Fogg’s uncle originally
comes from the name Fogelman – brings into its bearer’s mind ‘a giant bird flying
across the ocean, not stopping until it reached America’ (4). America is hence the
book’s first frontier. Other frontiers are Effing’s and Sol’s different but at the same
time very similar images of the great West. Fogg’s world is thus a mixture of old
and new frontiers: he can only find solid building materials for his own frontiers
by first encountering those of his father and grandfather. And a frontier inevitably
has everything to do with those worlds that one can and must find inside oneself.
Often these trips to one’s inner regions can best be narrated by setting characters
in motion.

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14 Marco for Marco Polo, Stanley for the journalist who found Dr. Livingstone and Fogg for Verne’s
Phileas Fogg.
Consequently, many American writers base their stories on the sense of motion, and with Fogg and other of his mobile characters Auster is no exception to this. Journeying always creates old worlds (those left behind) and new worlds (those waiting ahead), and between these worlds there are ‘real and figurative transactions’ (Hassan 1990: 26). Between these worlds there are also barriers and walls – there is no travelling without them, is there? Since the times of the first settlers, the unity of American culture has been based on movement. (Bonazzi 1993: 154). To go even farther, we could claim that the Americans ‘were brought together by distances between them’ (Jarvis 1998: 3).

Already in the beginning of the novel, Fogg describes his living as ‘vanish[ing] into another world’ (3). His yearn to vanish manifests itself in all kinds of peculiar ways: when he cannot pay the rent, he instead of lodging with a friend spends his nights in Central Park almost starving himself to death. The way Fogg sees the Park shares some characteristics of a frontier experience:

I found myself walking down Fifth Avenue, absently running my hand along the stone wall that divides the park from the street. I looked over the wall, saw the immense, uninhabited park, and realized that nothing better was going to present itself to me at that hour. At the very worst, the ground would be soft in there, and I welcomed the thought of lying down on the grass, of being able to make my bed in a place where no one could see me. (55.)

Central Park becomes a world where Fogg feels himself free, where he sees the strict rules of the streets disappear and be replaced by feeling of ‘blending into the environment’ (57).

Later on Fogg experiences something similar in front of the painting by an artist called Blakelock. Blakelock’s Moonlight has been painted in 1885 and it shows
Indians under the very bright and large moon. Fogg first wonders at the fact that the sky and the earth are of the same colour when they in reality ‘[e]xcept in the blackness of the blackest night […] are always different’ (138). Soon he begins to realise, however, that what Blakelock has painted is ‘an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it’ (139). The sky and the earth sharing the same colour are there to emphasise the harmony that existed between the Indians and their surroundings. ‘If men […] can learn to feel themselves a part of the things around them, then perhaps life on earth becomes imbued with the feeling of holiness’ (ibid.). As Weisenburger (1995: 138) astutely notes, the description of the painting occurs in ‘the ideological center’ of the novel and is thus important in the way it makes one think what possibilities must have been lost when the white men were not able to live peacefully with the Indians but instead destroyed the harmony and built barriers between the two worlds. The circle becomes full when Fogg finds out that apart from the desert scenes Blakelock also used to paint Central Park landscapes.

Central Park, West, moon, and other frontiers in the book differ clearly from the “reality” in which the main characters live their lives. It is the end of 1960s: Vietnam, Paris, Prague. Amidst of all this, young Fogg realises that ‘the inner and the outer could not be separated except by doing great damage to the truth’ (25). His search for a new unity echoes those of his father (Sol Barber) and grandfather.

15 Weisenburger (1995: 139) also sees that Auster brings Blakelock in focus in order to criticise canons that govern art history and history in general, those canons according to which is decided what is important and what is not – canons that have left Blakelock almost without notice.
(Effing) who have both travelled west (either literally or in imagination) to find a
t better world – or at least something different.

Effing’s description of the West is a description of a world that is both beautiful
and terrifying; the world where there is ‘[n]othing but whiteness, cracked earth
stretching into the distance on all sides’ (154). Effing feels the urge to draw, painter
as he is, but at the same time he feels that he cannot draw.

The mountains, the snow on top of the mountains, the clouds hovering around the
snow. After a while, they began to merge together and I couldn’t tell them apart.
Whiteness, and then more whiteness. How can you draw something if you don’t
know it’s there. [...] It didn’t feel human anymore. [...] the dimensions are too
monstrous, and eventually, I don’t know how else to put it, eventually it just stops
being there. There’s no world, no land, no nothing. (155-6.)

Effing’s creativity gets new force from this vast, empty unity of space, but at the
same time he feels himself lost as a human being. This new world strips him off
his language and understanding, and the only way to cope with it is to draw it
and thus give it limits.

Sol, on the other hand, starts his relationship with the West already as a child by
writing a novel about an imaginary Indian tribe and even inventing a new
language for its members (more about this in Chapter 4). As adult, he becomes a
historian doing research on the American West. After the death of his father – and
Fogg’s grandfather, though Fogg does not know it at that stage – Sol wants to go
and find the cave where Effing spent some time years ago after getting lost in the
desert. For Fogg, this journey is a kind of quest for a frontier that does not in fact.exist, ‘[o]nly the going itself would matter, and in the end we would be left with
nothing but the futility of our own ambitions. This was a metaphor I could live
with, the leap into emptiness I had always dreamed of’ (288).
When Sol dies, Fogg’s indifferent attitude seems to change, however. Left alone in his grim motel room, he furiously attacks the wall as well as the furniture. Having done this, he feels that he has ‘done something logical’ (302). Fogg continues the quest they started with Sol, only to find out that where the cave used to be there is now a lake. Fogg’s problematic relationship to his own and his country’s history begins to resolve when he is forced to realise that instead of searching for a frontier of his father or grandfather’s, he has to start a quest of his own; in his own terms.

History/time and space are in Fogg’s West strongly linked to each other. On the last pages of the book he describes how the vast desert changes his sense of time, how it makes him see the minuteness of the earth. ‘Minutes and hours were too small to be measured in this place, [...] you were forced to think in terms of centuries’ (303). Fogg’s own quest can begin only when he realises this – and loses the money he got as an inheritance from Sol. Only then is he free to find his own frontiers, to move on. But the important thing is that he has had to confront his history before he can find something new. Standing in the end of the American continent, he sees a full moon rising above the roofs of tiny houses. It can only be a full moon after having gone through the other phases first.

In Moon Palace, the moon and the desert are both (even though in different ways) images of wholeness. After his fragmented life in New York, Fogg searches for the feeling of unity in the West, a stretch of land where some say God, man, and nature ‘become one in cosmic unity’ (Simonson 1985: 23), and ‘knowledge of the
original’ (Westbrook 1985: 16) can be achieved. What is interesting in the way Auster sees this mythical land is the fact that for him and his characters the Indians are very much part of its power. This idea is most clearly demonstrated in Blakelock’s moonlight painting.

The frustration Fogg feels when watching the state of his country makes him escape. Paradoxically he escapes his country by remaining there and in a way becoming part of its ideology – like so many others before him, he believes that it is possible to go even farther; to go on and on and on. ‘Each generation repeats the mistakes of the previous generation,’ has Auster (1995: 152) himself described the novel. Fogg’s story makes us understand not just Fogg in whom there lives the spirit of pioneers but also his landlord Fernandez who analyses the situation of his country by saying, ‘You send people to the moon, something’s gotta give. You know, what I mean? It makes people do strange things. You can’t fuck with the sky and expect nothing to happen’ (46)16.

3.4. Tampering with the Universe: The Music of Chance

In The Music of Chance, the characters build walls but they also break and cross them. Even though Nashe feels a sort of happiness in the limited world of the millionaire’s meadow, he and Pozzi eventually try to escape in different ways. The way in which the two millionaires almost vanish into thin air after winning the card game suggests that building of the wall does not in the end have very much

16 These words are very strongly echoed in The Music of Chance, when Pozzi and Nashe discuss the fact that Nashe has stolen the wooden figure representing the two millionaires from the City of the World.
to do with Flower and Stone, only with those who do the actual work and have to face the wall every day.

As Auster himself has noted (1995: 153), the story of The Music of Chance resembles a fairy tale where a hero ‘can win his freedom only by performing a series of absurd tasks that the ogre invents for him.’ I would go even further and claim that this struggle for freedom can be seen as a kind of universal, mythical struggle between man and God(s), in which the attempt to cross the barrier between two worlds gets a very important meaning. But always more to man himself than to those (supposedly) living somewhere above.

I have earlier on offered one possible explanation for Nashe's feelings of happiness in a closed space or in front of the wall. I still want to stick to that idea, the idea of Nashe being a sort of artist, but I also want to discuss the options that open up when The Music of Chance is seen as having the same structure as a fairy tale.

Lotman (1977: 230) argues that ‘[i]n the world of the fairy tale [...] evil, destruction and danger come from the outside, open world,’ continuing by saying that an opposite situation is also possible for a hero of the outside world. It is very difficult to say if Nashe belongs to the former group or the latter group. In fact he seems to be oscillating between the two, which inevitably makes his attitude towards walls and fences quite complicated. At first he leaves the traditional everyday life in order to be able to drive around the vast continent but then quite
happily rejects this mobile existence in order to live on a fenced meadow and
build a wall.

Lotman furthermore draws a difference between mobile and immobile
characters: the immobile ‘are not permitted to cross the border’ (238) whereas the
mobile have that right. Nashe again seems to possess characteristics of both
groups, but one important crossing makes him in Lotman’s terms look very
mobile: while Pozzi is playing cards with the millionaires (playing by their rules,
one might add), Nashe goes to the millionaire’s sacred wing all by himself. He
crosses the border to another world, steps behind the carefully camouflaged door
and steals the wooden pair of Flower and Stone from the City of the World. ‘[A]
man crosses a border (a forest, the sea), visits the gods (or beasts, or the dead) and
returns with something he has taken from there’ (Lotman: 238).

When Nashe later on proudly produces the wooden figure from his pocket,
Pozzi is devastated for what he has done. ‘It’s like committing a sin to do a thing
like that, it’s like violating the fundamental law. You tampered with the universe,
my friend, and once man does that, he’s got to pay the price’ (138). Pozzi’s choice
of words further enhances the fairy tale aspect of the situation: in his eyes Nashe
has broken the unspoken rules of the universe by stepping to the other side.

Pozzi’s own escape is a different kind of crossing: he wants to get back to his
own world after being kept in a kind of in-between world. Nashe helps him to dig
a hole under the fence, and while they go back to their trailer in order to eat
together one last time, it is already getting dark. Nashe and Pozzi’s walk from the
trailer to the fence in the dark becomes a bewitching description of the wall’s power over them.

They walked across the meadow carrying flashlights, moving along the length of the unfinished wall as a way to guide them in the darkness. When they came to the end and saw the immense pile of stones standing at the edge of the woods, they played their beams on the surface for a moment as they passed by. It produced a ghostly effect of weird shapes and darting shadows, and Nashe could not help feeling that the stones were alive, that the night had turned them into a colony of sleeping animals. He wanted to make a joke about it, but he couldn’t come up with anything fast enough [...]. (169.)

Nashe’s inability to come up with a joke suggests that the wall somehow defies language, especially a kind of language that might question its solemnity and monumentality.

The wall also denies Pozzi his escape: in the morning Nashe finds him in front of the trailer almost beaten to death. There are various different conclusions to be drawn from the outcome of this attempted escape. Pozzi might be deemed an immobile person who is not allowed to cross boundaries, or we may see him as part of Nashe and hence forced to stay as long as Nashe does.¹⁷ In my opinion, however, the most important obstacle in Pozzi’s way is the fact that the wall is still unfinished. Pozzi and Nashe realise this and the wall’s “demands” very clearly during their walk through the night: the stones are almost alive, it is the wall that guides them in the dark.

Nashe’s escape attempt the same day Pozzi is (according to Murks) taken to hospital is even less successful: when Nashe gets to the fence, he notices that the hole they have dug does not exist any more. Interestingly enough, this time Nashe

¹⁷ Woods (1995: 159) echoes Foucault and claims that the reason why the two men cannot escape is that there is no outside to the capitalist power of the millionaires. This might be true, but I would not consider it the right or at least not the only explanation.
has ignored the wall altogether when walking across the meadow towards the fence. Without the hard work and the slow and solemn, almost ritualistic walk to the hole, the escape cannot even be attempted. On the other hand, all the solemnity and work does not necessarily guarantee a new life beyond the barrier. Nashe carries on working getting his strength from the hatred he feels towards Murks and his masters. It is not just hatred that keeps him going, however; he also feels proud of his achievement, the wall that really starts to look like a wall. As time goes by, Nashe begins to observe nature around him, and on some mornings the fog is so thick that the wall almost vanishes: ‘he would have to scan the meadow a long time before he could tell the difference between the gray stones and the gray air around them’ (202).

The wall is slowly disappearing, and the time Nashe has to spend working on it is also coming to its end. The day Nashe has finally paid off his debt happens to be his birthday. He does not tell this to Murks, however – when he arrived with Pozzi, he more or less willingly gave his name to Murks but now he keeps his birthday all to himself. Murks and his son-in-law Floyd take Nashe to have a few drinks to celebrate his freedom. Only too late does Nashe realise that in order to have those drinks he has to sit on the backseat of his car, the car that is now Murks’. To overcome the sadness Nashe closes his eyes and does not open them.

Yes, this does sound quite religious, and I think that some aspects in the story could in fact be seen as forming a discussion on religious beliefs. Woods (1995: 150) talks about ‘ethical imperatives of Puritanism’ as something that is criticised in the book.
until they stop moving. During those blind moments, Nashe has lost his sense of (American) space. ‘They could still be in Pennsylvania, but then again, they could have crossed the river and gone into New Jersey. For a brief moment, he considered of asking Murks which state they were in, but then he decided that he didn’t care’ (208).

This statelessness as well as the fact that it is Nashe’s birthday (and almost Christmas) cast a sort of virginity over space and time. This virginity is emphasised even more when Nashe, Murks and Floyd step out of the bar and notice that it has begun to snow. Murks lets Nashe drive the car back. At that point Nashe has to ask where they are, and it turns out that they have crossed the border between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. When Nashe starts driving, he imagines what the meadow would look like under the snow,

The snow whirled down onto the windshield before him, and in his mind he saw the crows swooping down over the meadow, calling out with their mysterious cries as he watched them pass overhead. The meadow would look beautiful under the snow, he thought, and he hoped it would go on falling through the night so he could wake up to see it that way in the morning. He imagined the immensity of the white field, and the snow continuing to fall until even the mountains of stones were covered, until everything disappeared under an avalanche of whiteness. (215.)

The wall does not halve the meadow any more in Nashe’s mind; the meadow is now a beautiful unity of snow, and Nashe does not even mention the wall.

Another fascinating image of unity is at the same time offered in the music coming from the car radio. The piece sounds familiar to Nashe, but he is not able to decide if it is Mozart or Haydn. ‘At a certain point, the music of both men seemed to touch, and it was no longer possible to tell them apart’ (216). Nashe thinks that this similarity is odd, considering that the lives of the two composers were very different.
The thoughts of disappearing barriers make Nashe feel ‘in absolute control’ (ibid.) when he drives along the narrow road – and he drives even faster. What follows is an ambiguous ending that leaves Nashe in a sort of in-between state. The image of a snowy meadow and the music of the two composers have offered Nashe a fleeting moment of unity. What else happens on those last pages is a question I will return to in the next, final chapter of my work.

Lotman seems to think that there is only one important crossing in every plot construction. After crossing a border (according to Lotman ‘all kinds of barriers in the text are concentrated at the border and structurally always represent a part of the border’ (240)), the agent ‘enters another semantic field’ and has to ‘merge with the field’ (241), become immobile for a story to come to an end. The uniqueness of a crossing and a sort of immobility in the end may be true of many plots, but as I have tried to show above, despite its fairy tale aspects The Music of Chance offers a more complex picture. There are various crossings in the book (e.g. Nashe and Pozzi entering the millionaires’ world, Nashe stealing the wooden replica, Pozzi’s short escape), and the end is, as I will show in the next chapter, ambiguous to say the least.

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When people in Auster’s books cross barriers, it is a paradoxical experience: crossing the barrier does not necessarily bring them to the other side. When Blue finally encounters Black, he has only found himself – if even that. Nashe’s wall is in his head more than anywhere else; and Anna’s best crossings are those that
haven’t even come true yet. Crossing seems to be something that the characters do in order to learn and live with the side and situation they were/are supposed to leave behind. The inescapable fact is that even though they might cherish ‘a certain vision of freedom, the ability to abandon the space we’ve created for ourselves in the hope of encountering a new, virgin space’ (Alford 1995: 624), ‘home[…] is something we carry with us’ (ibid.).

When Auster’s characters cross barriers or find new frontiers, they do not unquestionably see it as a happy or liberating experience. One reason for this is that Auster wants to criticise the ideals linked to the American expansionism and people’s never-ending belief in progress in general. Some of his characters nevertheless seem to get a glimpse of unity when they first have enough courage to face their own inner wor(l)d(s) or encounter the hidden history of themselves and their country.

4. Staying In-between

The previous chapters have shown how Auster’s characters at the same time both hate and love barriers that limit their lives. They cannot always decide if they yearn for unity and freedom or want to keep on building walls. In this final chapter I will find out what happens to these indecisive people. Do they gradually choose one option over another or is there a third one available?

My argument is that there is a clear tendency in Auster’s novels to leave the characters in a sort of in-between state. Leaving them in that state does not,
however, mean that they would be ignorant of other options; quite the contrary, it often means that they are too aware of these options.

Part of my argument is that Auster’s characters usually arrive to this state(lessness) by first trying out other possibilities: building barriers and breaking them. Their decision (if it can be called that) to choose the third option seems accidental, born out of chance and inability to adapt to the so-called normal way of living. In the previous chapters, I have introduced circumstances that lead to this situation, but I will also bring some of them up again in this final chapter.

Before going on, I must add that I am by no means the only critic who has noticed the existence of this “in-between state” or third dimension in Auster’s work. Alford (1995: 629) calls it “neither-here-nor-there,” for Chenêtier (1995: 38) it is a “no-self-land” and Russell (1990: 83) refers to it as “both/ and.” These scholars have come up with their terms (some of which are direct quotations from Auster) by different ways and their discussions about Auster all have different subjects and aims – and still they and many others at some point mention something surprisingly similar. This shows that we are dealing with a thing/ state that is very characteristic of Auster’s work and thus without doubt earns its place in the final chapter of my thesis.


When Quinn in the beginning of City of Glass walks on the streets of New York, he considers best walks those on which he is ‘able to feel that he [is] nowhere’ (4). Quinn feels that the aimlessness of his walks and the movement itself make all
places equal. This is not the same thing, however, than the yearnings for unity I described in Chapter 3. Instead of trying to get from this side to that side or trying to make one a part of the other, Quinn just ignores the space around him by moving – and still his wanderings create a space: nowhere.

This first image of Quinn’s nowhere is a very positive one: he wants to have this feeling of being nowhere, it is ‘all he ever asked of things’ (4). After being hired to tail Stillman and then losing him, his feelings change radically. ‘Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far from the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine’ (124). This utter hopelessness becomes linked to walls: Quinn sits in his room and realises that even walls are changing – he cannot count on good old limits either.

According to Alford (1995: 625) Quinn’s nowhere ‘is not a physical space, but the space of textuality.’ Characters feel lost because of ‘their sense of the self being neither exactly at “home,” nor exactly “away”’ (626), and at the same time they dream of utopian places that are ‘neither-here-nor-there’ (629). Alford brings these ideas together by arguing that ‘the space of signification is what we have traditionally called utopia, which is not “nowhere” but a “neither-here-nor-there.”’ The characters just do not realise that it is exactly in this place where they feel lost that they can find their true selves. It is a space ‘between the pedestrian and the mapper’ (626). It is the space where the reader and the writer reside; their relationship creates the space in-between.
This is one reason why the main characters of the Trilogy have such ambiguous feelings for this space: they are all writer figures. These artists are always in an undecided situation: they exist only through their works, and their works only exist through someone who reads them. In a way, then, they are neither here nor there. Like Stillman, they die in mid-air (146). The boundary between the writer and the reader can become blurred, but it can never truly disappear.

Russell (1990: 83) shows that instead of seeing this in-between state (or placelessness) of the City of Glass in “negative” terms (neither/nor), it can also be seen as ‘a “both/and” oscillating movement’ (83). This way the writer could be both here and there. Even though her interpretation of City of Glass differs notably from Alford’s reading, she also talks about language/textuality saying that ‘[s]ince language is unstable and its meaning indeterminate, no place can be completely claimed or owned by its discoverer’ (84).

Rowen (1991: 302) gets us back to more pessimistic tones by stating that ‘[f]ragmented, fallen, the world at the end of Quinn’s quest remains in much the same plight than it was at the beginning.’ Her opinion is that a ‘partial, glimpsed achievement of truth is the only possible and genuine one’ (ibid.). In a way Rowen’s interpretation makes barriers the winners, but on the other hand she still talks about the possibility of the unifying truth – though in partial glimpses.

The narrator’s description of Quinn’s state can be found on page 152:

It was dark in the room when he woke up. Quinn could not be sure how much time had passed – whether it was the night of that day or the night of the next. It was even possible, he thought, that it was not night at all. Perhaps it was merely dark inside the room, and outside, beyond the window, the sun was shining. For several moments he considered getting up and going to the window to see, but then he decided it did not matter. If it was not night now, he thought, then night would come later. That was certain, and whether he looked out the window or not, the answer would be the same.
On the other hand, if it was in fact night here in New York, then surely the sun was shining somewhere else. In China, for example, it was no doubt mid-afternoon, and the rice farmers were mopping sweat from their brows. Night and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition. At any given moment, it was always both. The only reason we did not know it was because we could not be in two places at the same time. (152.)

What should one make of all these interpretations? They are attempts to analyse a situation in which the character has not chosen one (traditional) space/ state over another. Instead of building walls or breaking them, Quinn has acted like Humpty Dumpty: climbed up the wall. Now he sits there, seeing both sides at the same time, realising that walls and unity can exist simultaneously. But this situation is often a dangerous one; it is easy to fall.

Stillman describes Humpty Dumpty to Quinn as ‘the purest embodiment of human condition. [...] It is that which has not yet been born. A paradox, is it not?’ (97). He continues by extending his argument about the link between men and Humpty Dumpty: ‘For all men are eggs, in a manner of speaking. We exist, but we have not yet achieved the form that is our destiny. We are pure potential, an example of the not-yet-arrived’ (98).

Stillman sees human condition as a paradox: like eggs people are in an in-between state. He does not consider this as the only possibility, however. According to Stillman people should strive at putting the egg together again after its fall. Stillman’s mission, then, is to find a kind of unity after the in-between state and the fall of humankind. On the other hand, following the footsteps of the old man Quinn does not find unity but instead realises the possibilities of the in-between state, the beauty of both/ and.
In Ghosts, Auster alludes to “Wakefield”, a short story by Hawthorne. This story is a story about a man who one day decides to leave his home and wife. What is peculiar about this is that the man does not leave the town but stays only a few streets away and observes how his disappearance affects the wife. One cold and rainy evening he after twenty years of absence decides to step in the warmth of his wife’s house. The narrator does not directly tell us what happens when Wakefield enters the house; instead he ends his story with following words:

We will not follow our friend across the threshold. He has left us much food for thought, a portion of which shall lend its wisdom to a moral, and be shaped into a figure. 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. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (1995: 597-98.)

There is a good reason for having this story as an intertext in Ghosts (and in The New York Trilogy in general): what happened to Wakefield is just what happens to Blue; he loses his place. Like Wakefield, he chooses the role of an observer in his own life without realising that soon there is no him to observe in that life. Similarly to other characters in Auster’s fiction, Blue does not really know where he is any more. He has believed in the traditional detective work that is very much based on dualism (good guys and bad guys), clear distinctions and the possibility of an (happy) ending. When observing Black, he is faced with something completely different and ‘goes back and forth between extremes, not knowing which one is true and which one false’ (186).

Blue’s experiences of the in-between state are not very positive, but at the same time he just goes on working on the case. He is another example of an Austerian character who realises that he is ‘the man in the middle, thwarted in front and
hemmed in on the rear’ (200). Blue can be compared to a man called Roebling who according to Blue’s father designed the Brooklyn Bridge. Oddly enough, the only treatment this man accepted to his serious illness was hydrotherapy: ‘Blue was struck that a man who had spent his life building bridges over bodies of water so that people wouldn’t get wet should believe that the only true medicine consisted of immersing oneself in water’ (178). Same way Blue believes in the conventional detective work but gets more than involved in a case that undermines all his beliefs. He has to face himself, even if that means getting into danger of losing his place.

Hawthorne left us on the door of Wakefield’s home: he showed us how the man walked back in but ended his story there. Blue’s story ends in a similar way, but instead of going in, Blue is getting out (of Black’s room). We are not told where he goes, but the narrator ‘prefer[s] 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’ (232). Blue is left hanging in the air – we know that he has stepped out of the room but not where he has gone.

When the narrator of The Locked Room describes his love for Sophie, he feels that ‘[m]y 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

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19 This statement has a clearly metafictional innuendo: Ghosts is after all the second part of the Trilogy.
The most important human contact in the book is not, however, that between the narrator and Sophie but that between the narrator and his friend and double figure Fanshawe.

Every book in the Trilogy can be seen as a doppelgänger story where characters have to encounter their doubles. This is already quite evident in Ghosts, but in The Locked Room the idea comes up even stronger than in the first two books. This theme raises questions about the nature of reality: where does a subject end and an object begin? Chénetier (1995: 38) sees that Quinn, Blue, and the nameless narrator of The Locked Room have to have doubles because ‘[n]o one can face himself anywhere but outside of himself.’ I would add that doubles tailing each other are also a perfect example of the way people in Auster’s world (or world in general) at the same time miss unity and try to make distinctions being thus condemned to hover between the two options.

This hovering is well illustrated when the narrator and Fanshawe “meet” each other in the end of the novel – and the Trilogy. The narrator arrives at the house in Columbus Square and goes in. Just when he is about to leave the front hall and go further, he hears Fanshawe’s voice from behind the double door. These two men have a conversation through a crack in a double door and this happens in a front hall. Once again we have all the three elements there: an obstacle, a crack in it, an in-between state. This situation also reminds me of Bakhtin’s chronotope of threshold (the front hall is in fact one of the chronotopes related to it, see Bakhtin

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20 This nowhere resembles that of Quinn’s – Quinn’s nowhere is different only so far that it is produced through the contact between him and the space around him.
What Bakhtin (1987: 287) says about this chronotope is very interesting in terms of my discussion:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. [...] Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. This is the highest degree of sociality (not external, not material but internal).

This in-between space is the space of human contact (not just for an encounter between you and me but also between me and me); it is the space of being.

The New York Trilogy is a reworking of a traditional detective novel – in fact three of them. Instead of providing the reader with nicely wrapped stories with a clear ending, these books show that there is no such thing as a neat solution. Nothing is black and white, not even words on a page. Stillman refers to people as ‘the not-yet-arrived,’ Blue ‘goes back and forth between extremes,’ and the narrator of The Locked Room exists in ‘the tiny hole between self and not-self.’ These characters lack a traditional place; instead they live in an ‘unlocatable’ place. Because of the language-orientation of the books, I am tempted to follow Russell and Rowen (see above) and claim that one (non)location for this place could be language – language that is always there but never really there, language that the characters contain but that also contains the characters.
4.2. ‘Period of Transition’: *In the Country of Last Things*

The dystopian world of *In the Country of Last Things* is a city between worlds, a nightmare place where ‘life as we know it has ended, and yet no one is able to grasp what has taken its place’ (20). The only way people can survive is to dream of other worlds or die. Dying has become a work of art: it seems that people want to make the moment of dying as special as possible, to take all joy out of that last moment of hesitation. Death is something that limits and defines their lives; it gives lives their form and meaning – but everything changes at the moment of death: definitions and limitations disappear since people lose their death, the thing that made finitude and meanings possible. ‘[T]o die is to shatter the world’ (Blanchot 1981: 55). But that one moment they may be able to feel themselves free, that one moment between life and death they finally own their life.

Those who have decided to die have different ways to go about it: there are the Runners who run so long that they die; there are those who choose the Last Leap climbing to the highest places only to be able to jump; there are Euthanasia Clinics and Assassination Clubs... But there are also people who survive (usually because of deaths of others), who despite all do not kill themselves. These people are the absurd heroes Camus talks about in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” people who ‘at the last crossroad where thought hesitates’ (1990: 16) choose life. Like Camus says (ibid: 17), ‘[t]he real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions.’

These distant regions to Camus seem to be those of mind – and art. Anna certainly explores these regions by living her life in the prison-like city and writing
about it. The whole narrative in fact consists of the nameless narrator reading Anna’s letter. At one point Anna describes her feelings when writing, and that description interestingly becomes a description of an in-between space:

The words come only when I think I won’t be able to find them anymore, at the moment I despair of ever bringing them out again. Each day brings the same struggle, the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then not to forget. When it begins, it is never anywhere but here, never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write. The story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself, and between each word, what silences, what words escape and vanish, never to be seen again. (38.)

A similar difficulty is shared by Peter Aaron, the main character of *Leviathan*. When trying to write, he feels ‘trapped in a no-man’s-land between feeling and articulation’ (49).

On one of the last pages of the book, Anna writes about her realisation that no matter how much she writes, there is always more to say. ‘The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going’ (83), writes Anna, and her words seem to anticipate the open ending of the book she appears in.

Despite the bleakness and hopelessness of the world Anna lives in, *In the Country of Last Things* is nevertheless able to communicate certain “absurd” hope. The dystopian city is anything but a nice place, but in this frightening version of an in-between space Anna manages to create other in-between spaces, spaces of her own. In the end of the book she is planning an escape with her friends, but they do not yet know where and when they are leaving. Anna does nevertheless feel herself hopeful, and judging from her last words, she has through this hope found a new space of existence where she is at the same time something old and
something altogether new: ‘This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world’ (188).

In this unpredictable other world, things are changing rapidly all the time. As Wesseling (1991: 503) argues, there ‘the period of transition becomes the human condition.’ Some people learn to live with that, others do not.

4.3. Touching the Sky: *Moon Palace*

Travelling is Fogg’s destiny; it is written on the letters of his name. In *Moon Palace*, he travels in various different ways: in New York, in the mythical West, in language. All these trips have something in common – they give Fogg a possibility to test his inner limits by hovering in a sort of nowhere between worlds.

When staying in the park, Fogg describes the park as giving him a ‘threshold, a boundary, a way to distinguish between the inner and the outer’ (58). He does not want a wall between his inner and outer life but a threshold, a combination of a meeting point and a point of departure. Fogg feels that the city around the park is a world of the outside, whereas in the park he can concentrate solely on his own inner life. He does understand, however, that ‘the inner and the outer could not be separated except by doing great damage to the truth’ (25; see also p. 40 above).

Fogg talks about ‘an equilibrium between the inner and the outer’ (58), but he nevertheless tries to live all on his own. During his time in the park, he sees the outside in a rather negative light, without realising that the outside he has left behind (his friends) is also the sphere of the positive human contact, of love and friendship.
This outside fortunately enters the park uninvited in forms of Fogg’s friends Kitty and Zimmer. Fogg is ill and starving to death when his friends manage to find him in the wilderness of the Central Park. ‘I had jumped off the edge, and then, at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair. That something is what I define as love’ (50).

After being rescued, Fogg finds a new world in language, through communication. When he has to describe what he sees to blind Effing, he realises that everything is ‘constantly in flux, and though two bricks in a wall might strongly resemble each other, they could never be construed as identical’ (122). To find ways to paint in words, he has to see both the similarities and the differences around him. He finds the right way by first explaining too little and then too much until he finally learns to ‘exult in the gaps’ (Weisenburger 1995: 141). He ‘revels in the errancy of representational discourse rather than in its finality. There, amidst the acausal spaces between words and things, in the gaps that a determinist or genealogical metaphysics would seek to banish, are chances for innovation’ (ibid.).

The question of language comes up again when Sol tells Fogg about the novel he wrote when only a teenager. In this novel, an Indian tribe has a language in which ‘[c]ertain frequently used words have two diametrically opposed meanings – top and bottom, noon and midnight, childhood and old age’ (257). In one word, there are two – the situation implying that it is not always easy to tell the difference between two sides.

This language and maybe also the terrifying and beautiful whiteness of the desert (see p. 42 above) can be compared with the famous white whale in
Melville's *Moby Dick*. According to Walker (1983: 70), *Moby Dick* is frightening because of its 'ultimate ambiguity,' whiteness that can be seen as innocent and good but is at the same time the colour of this monstrous whale. Walker thus draws a conclusion that Melville has wanted to place 'at the core of his metaphor, [...] a symbol of the fusion of opposites' thus making the whale 'an amalgam of the heavenly and the infernal, the 'one portentous something' at the heart of the world and the book'. The point is that 'definition is [...] difficult because the line of demarcation between opposites is harder, if not impossible, to see' (ibid: 71).

The language of the Indians and *Moby Dick* are both examples of the thinking on which Russell (1990: 83) bases her both/ and interpretation (see p. 54 above). Like the frontier that Sol dreams of and Fogg tries to find first in Central Park and then in the West, these are paradoxical places of contact and separation. In *Moon Palace* different frontiers show Fogg that things are usually not what they look like, that instead of clear distinctions or pure unity his world is an ever-moving zone, a frontier between (or above) different illusions.

In Fogg's frontiers even time loses its linearity. In Central Park, he gets so delirious with fever that he loses 'all sense of where I was' (69) and dreams of God and Indians who used to live in Manhattan before the white men. When reading to Effing, he experiences something similar: 'I became so engrossed in what I was reading that I hardly knew where I was anymore' (112). Reading all those books (mainly dealing with travelling) makes it possible for Fogg to exist in a kind of nowhere, between worlds and times. And finally, the vast space he encounters in
the West affects his sense of time so that he feels that ‘[t]he present no longer seemed to bear any of the same consequences’ (303).

The feeling of having different times and places existing in simultaneity rather than in opposition is enforced in the final scene of the novel in which Fogg seems to realise that his present exists only in relation to the past and the future (see also p. 43 above). This interpretation can only be made by following Auster’s clear hint in the form of a slip of paper Fogg finds inside his Chinese fortune cookie. It says: ‘The sun is the past, the earth is the present, the moon is the future’ (97). This final scene of the novel also brings into mind the moonlight painting by Blakelock, especially an interesting remark Fogg makes about the painted horizon beneath the moon: ‘the farther back I went to the horizon, the brighter that glow became – as if it were daylight back there, and the mountains were illumined by the sun’ (138).

The idea of the connection between the past, present and future also comes up implicitly in the story Effing tells about his journey to the West. Effing’s guide says that ‘you can’t fix your exact position on the earth without referring to some point in the sky’ (153). Effing continues this thought making it even more interesting in terms of my discussion: ‘A here exists only in relation to a there, not the other way around. There’s this only because there’s that; if we don’t look up, we’ll never know what’s down. […] We find ourselves only by looking to what we’re not. You can’t put your feet on the ground until you’ve touched the sky’ (154).
In the end of *Moon Palace*, Fogg reaches the end of the American continent. He stands on the beach and watches the sun set, feeling that he has not reached an end but a beginning. He hears the ‘familiar late-century American noises’ (307) from the town behind him and follows the full moon with his eyes when it rises up into the sky. The moon is the image of the future, the sun the image of the past: Fogg has to find his own time, the present one, there in the middle. In a way he has to make this trip to the end of the continent, but on the other hand he cannot find there anything he did not know already.

Fogg’s name might have destined him to travel far and widely, but in the course of the book he does not leave USA. Maybe he has realised that the most important journeys are made in mind and that all the journeys paradoxically take one (like Fogg’s namesake Marco Polo in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*) home.

4.4. A Piece by Two Composers or Rolling the Rock: *The Music of Chance*

The *Music of Chance* – already the title of the book ‘suggests an oxymoronic state of affairs, wherein there is a harmony of discontinuities, a set of uncontrollable parameters that nevertheless provide a fine pattern of togetherness and interconnectedness’ (Woods 1995: 146). The novel itself is full of images of both freedom and imprisonment. I have in earlier chapters shown how Auster often challenges the traditional ideas of freedom by making characters ‘most free when confined’ (Barone 1995: 12). I would now like to take this idea a bit further and claim that in fact characters are most free when they find a momentary nowhere, a way to paradoxically escape both freedom and confinement.
In The Music of Chance, Nashe does feel himself to be in prison just like Pozzi does, he even starts to believe in Pozzi’s conspiracy theories. The difference between the two characters is, however, that Nashe is through his work able to find a new dimension; a meadow where he cannot see the millionaire’s house or the fence becomes a nowhere, an in-between state. A similar “in-betweenity” is experienced by him when driving: ‘Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment, and as one moment followed another, it was as though he only continued to exist’ (11). And during his and Pozzi’s drive towards the millionaire’s house, Nashe literally feels ‘in between, floating in a place that was neither here nor there’ (59).

At this point and when building the useless wall Nashe is more strongly than any other Austerian character a kind of Sisyphus-like absurd hero Camus writes about. At first Nashe knows the ‘freedom which consists in not feeling responsible’ (Camus 1990: 58), he rejoices because he feels ‘as if he finally had no part in what was about to happen to him’ (The Music of Chance: 59). But finally he learns that there are no masters/gods; that ‘[h]is fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing’ (Camus: 110). And even though Sisyphus is condemned to roll his rock without seeing any end to his movement, the fact that it is his rock makes him happy – and free.

All this is strongly linked to artistic creation. Nashe is like a writer who piles his words in order to create a story. When the wall finally starts to resemble a wall, Nashe feels proud of his achievement – after that the wall begins to disappear, however. First it is the fog that hides it (202); later on it is the avalanche of snow
The work is disappearing because what really matters is the process of writing, and also because it is about to become something that belongs to other people (see Blanchot 1981: 26). The language of literature is no more just a pile of stones, a material thing, it is also a wall and the disappearance of that wall; it is disappearance and existence brought together; it is ‘that life which supports death and maintains itself in it’ (Blanchot 1981: 61).

No matter how one interprets it, the wall remains mysterious. Maybe the best way to describe the range of feelings it raises is to listen to the thoughts of Nashe when he plays the piece called “The Mysterious Barricades”:

It was impossible for him to play this last piece without thinking about the wall, and he found himself returning to it more often than any of the others. It took just over two minutes to perform, and at no point in its slow, stately progress, with all its pauses, suspensions, and repetitions, did it require him to touch more than one note at a time. The music started and stopped, then started again, then stopped again, and yet through it all the piece continued to advance, pushing on toward a resolution that never came. Were those the mysterious barricades? Nashe remembered reading somewhere that no one was certain what Couperin had meant by that title. Some scholars interpreted it as a comical reference to women’s underclothing – the impenetrability of corsets – while others saw it as an allusion to the unresolved harmonies in the piece. Nashe had no way of knowing. As far as he was concerned, the barricades stood for the wall he was building on the meadow, but that was quite another thing from knowing what they meant. (181.)

The wall can be seen as the work of art as I have suggested above, or it can be seen as an example of all the useless barriers people build, or as something altogether different. Most importantly the wall in the middle of nowhere is an image of an in-between state. It is not really meant to create two sides but as a wall it inevitably belongs to the world of distinctions; the way it disappears under the snow in the end enhances its paradoxical nature.

This disappearance (in Nashe’s mind) happens only a few paragraphs before Nashe’s story ends as well. It is linked to a piece of classical music that Nashe
listens to while driving his old car (see also p. 48 above). He cannot remember if
the composer of the piece is Mozart or Haydn, and thus the piece paradoxically
becomes a composition of them both. There are two composers, but the music
itself seems in some mysterious way to be the same.

Some critics see the end of The Music of Chance as a strictly negative one. Woods
(1995: 160), for example, says that ‘[p]ower emerges as the victor, having forced
the two protagonists into situations where there is no way out;' and Mannes-
Abbot (1991: 45) finds there ‘a hint of respect for the ridiculous but purposive
Flower and Stone’ implying that the millionaires have indeed emerged as winners.
It is true that Nashe probably dies in the end
— we do not know that for sure, however. And I would argue that Nashe is by no means the one who loses in the
end. It is not even a question of winning or losing but of understanding something
of the nature of the world.

I myself want to represent two interpretations of this ambiguous ending, both of
which offer something new to my discussion on “in-betweenity.” First one
continues the idea of Nashe being an artist, a writer to be more precise. Nashe’s
difficulties to tell the composers apart can then be seen as ‘the passage from
nothing to everything’ (Blanchot 1981: 38) and thus representing action that
creates literature. The ending of The Music of Chance illustrates the nature of death:
it is something we cannot grasp, it is ‘the impossibility of dying’ (ibid. 52). This

21 And with this suicidal ending ceases to be an exemplary absurd hero à la Camus.
impossibility is enforced by the fact that we cannot know for sure if Nashe dies or not: he is condemned to hover between life and death on the last page of the book – forever. There is, however, something that makes this worthwhile: Nashe can now say for sure that he knows both life and death, and ‘[h]e who includes death among all that is in his control controls himself extremely’ (Blanchot 1982: 91). ‘Art is mastery of the supreme moment, supreme mastery’ (ibid.).

Another way to interpret the ending is to read it through Begam’s essay on Beckett’s Unnamable and Derrida. Bringing Beckett into this is not far-fetched since Auster has many times listed Beckett as one of his favourite writers. Begam (1992: 881) sees that Beckett’s text tries to avoid ‘the neatness of the différance. For if moving toward the “unnamable” what Beckett proposes to eliminate are precisely limits, borders, margins, then he will not want to mark out the passage beyond them in too insistent or decisive a fashion to indicate, for example, the frontier which transcends frontiers, or the outer-boundary of boundaries.’ Rather than doing this, Beckett almost without reader’s notice leads the story somewhere beyond the traditional distinctions (ibid.). Same way Auster ends his book by leaving Nashe in an in-between state where he is not really alive or dead, mobile or immobile.

For the millionaires, The Music of Chance’s monumental wall is a barrier against time. By building it, Nashe does not only have to reform his relationship with space but also with time. Flower and Stone’s weird projects as well as Nashe’s own life make him see that one cannot live eternal present any better than eternal
past. Nashe realises how difficult (or impossible) it is to neatly separate things, to totally isolate or imprison anything.

Nashe’s life can be easily compared to that of a writer because of the solitary and paradoxical nature of his task: his work makes him free and confined at the same time. He becomes a man in the middle but also a citizen of the mysterious and beautiful in-betweenity.

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Auster often creates in-between situations either through characters who feel themselves to be in some kind of nowhere, between worlds, or then by leaving the reader in a situation where s/he does not know what happens to the character. Both options show that because of the nature of the fictional world, its residents are always doomed to exist in in-between space. Auster does not leave it there, however – he suggests that this in-betweenity can be seen as human condition outside the fictional world as well.

In his famous book The Production of Space, Lefebvre touches upon this paradoxical condition. ‘Formal boundaries are gone [...]. And yet everything [...] is separated’ (97), and ‘duality is constitutive of the unity of the material living being’ (175). Amidst all this confusion, there exists an interstice, ‘a very specific space which is at once magical and real’ (202); the space ‘of poetry and art’ (203), the space where most of Auster’s characters at some point find themselves.

Auster’s in-between space is not a goal, it is a process one has to go through in order to achieve a goal – and yet no goal is ever really achieved. It would be wrong, however, to assume that staying in-between equals losing: in fact it is the
only way one can win in the worlds Auster depicts in (most of) his books. Or: it is something beyond winning and losing; something that is found when one looks for a thing altogether different or for nothing at all.

5. First Stones: A Conclusion

According to Barone (1995: 5-6), the reason why Auster is a major novelist is that ‘he has synthesized interrogations of postmodern subjectivities, explications of premodern moral causality, and a sufficient realism.’ This description implies that Auster’s world is a combination of various, seemingly contradictory ideas. By bringing different ideas and spaces together, he is able to say something not just about the literary, textual world his characters live in but also about the wor(l)d(s) we as readers and human beings live in.

The way Auster uses barricades, walls, and frontiers in his books helps him and us deal with questions of freedom, identity, language and death. His world is a world where there are no traditional gods or other grand narratives to keep people going; instead characters themselves have to create the walls and openings of their worlds. Auster shows different aspects of barrier: the way it limits space and at the same time creates it, how it often most strongly exists in mind. Like Wolfe says, ‘the notion of barrier is really an essential feature of most narrative plot constructions’ (1979: 30). The use of barriers in different books might in fact deserve a more extensive analysis.
Austerian characters are fascinated by walls but they also cherish a belief in unity. This belief is linked to the idea of American expansionism: there is space, one just has to go and conquer it, make it part of united states/ spaces of America. America can, however, also be seen as the promised land of in-betweenity: it is a continent that embodies the idea of obstacle (Columbus was after all trying to get to India or China) and still most strongly tries to conquer more space, cross more barriers.

This confusion is illustrated in the way Auster’s characters hover between an attempt to unite things and a yearn to keep them separated. Their fascination in front of a wall can in fact be seen as an escape from the American dream of freedom and mobility. Some of the characters also try to lose themselves in space and thus reject time as it were. Flower and Stone in The Music of Chance, for example, dream of ‘a barrier against time.’ They all nevertheless have to learn the Bakhtinian lesson that one should not separate time and space – there is no pure space that would be bereft of history; history and time are always somehow connected. This idea is most clearly presented in Moon Palace.

Image of a wall is in Auster’s books linked to the ideas of language and writing, and it would be fruitful to examine this link more thoroughly than I have been able to do in this thesis. Even my discussion does nevertheless show that to Auster a question of unity and connection versus limits and isolation is an important part of the act (reading and writing) that creates literature. Auster also seems to be saying that a neat story is in fact always a cluster of anecdotes (and different
people's interpretations) that only seems to create a whole. In a way there is a whole, in a way there is not — same with space. This situation of ‘various states existing in simultaneity’ (Klinkowitz 1992: 159) is one interpretation of the in-betweenity I have been talking about. In-betweenity is a space/state that realises the possibilities and demands of both barriers and limitless spaces. It could be described as the space of understanding: people/stories remaining there acknowledge the impossibility of choosing united space over limited space or vice versa.

Instead of choosing certain spaces and rejecting others, Auster’s world works more like music (music of chance, as one of the titles suggests) in which the ‘role of emphasis here, so far from being a homogenizing one, so far from serving to overwhelm all other possible aspects of the work, is simply to point up qualities and underscore differences. The result is movement instead of stagnation, as one moment always refers to the next, which it prepares for and informs’ (Lefebvre 1992: 370).

Auster says that things and events can rhyme (The Invention of Solitude: 161). When we listen to this rhyming of the world, we hear the music of chance, paradoxical music that creates rhythm out of chance events. Like the live and space of characters in Auster’s books, this music forms a whole full of differences – and its beauty and genius stems from the fact that the listener can hear both the sounds of unity and those of separation at the same time.
Bibliography


