A Parallax Reality

Shaping the Present in Paul Auster's Moon Palace *and* In the Country of Last Things

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Abstract

Engaging with the US author Paul Auster's fiction, the article explores how the stories his characters tell, in order to survive traumatic experiences, move them across their urban landscapes. Focusing on Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989) and *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), the article shows how the mobility of the main characters' stories opens a parallax view, which reveals the past as an integral part of the experience of the present moment and the negotiation of trauma.

Keywords

Auster, embodiment, movement, parallax, spacetime

The fictional characters of the US author Paul Auster often tell stories to survive traumatic experiences. These stories create alternative spaces, which the characters can enter, often quite literally.[1] They also function as a "coping strategy,"[2] as proposed by Harriet Bell, when the characters move in their urban and other environments. In this article, I examine how Anna Blume in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*[3] and Marco Fogg in *Moon Palace*[4] use urban spaces as the foundation for their storytelling. Inspired by the different places in which these characters move—Anna in an unnamed dystopian city on the verge of collapse and Fogg in New York City—they create stories that rework their past experiences into something more manageable. For Anna, the city itself, which she has entered in search of her lost journalist brother, is constantly threatening her life. Having lost all hope, she begins to write her story in a letter because otherwise her "head will burst."[5] Fogg, then, mourns the death of his beloved uncle, which triggers the traumatic memory of Fogg's mother dying when he was seven. Furthermore, towards the end of the novel, Fogg discovers and then almost immediately loses his long-lost father. Fogg's inability to deal with his grief makes him self-destructively relinquish all thoughts of a future and write his life in the immediacy of the steps he takes on the streets of New York. He declares that "if life was a story . . . and each man

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doi:10.3167/TRANS.2022.120205 ISSN: 2045-4813 (print) 2045-4821 (online)

was the author of his own story, then I was making it up as I went along."[6] Both characters' stories are enacted in movement, whether walking on the streets or putting pen on paper, and this becomes an act of storying the past into the present and thereby shaping that present and also the future.

Auster is a prolific writer: in addition to poetry, autobiography, and film scripts, he has published seventeen novels and novellas since the appearance of *City of Glass* in 1985.[7] Much Auster research, especially within a postmodern framework, in which his earlier work has often been studied, has seen the above-mentioned liberating storytelling as a disembodied means for the characters to escape their situations and themselves.[8] The characters are seen to throw themselves on the mercies of their bodies and their urban environments, out of reach of the rational mind. Here, I choose two novels from Auster's early career to show what other types of readings might be possible when the framework changes.

Following Tim Ingold,[9] I argue that stories and storytelling are spatial and temporal practices that *bring* the characters *into* the world rather than transport them outside of it. Moreover, I propose that Anna and Fogg's stories are helpful for them not because they allow them to escape their past but because their stories help them maintain a connection with it. I thus illustrate how Auster's fiction can contribute to investigating mobility that, as Kevin Hannam et al. suggest, "undermines existing linear assumptions about temporality and timing, which often assume that actors are able to do only one thing at a time, and that events follow each other in a linear order."[10] With this view in mind, I argue that stories have the ability to conjoin the past and the present in a parallax reality, where, while remaining structurally incompatible, they unite as the two sides of a Möbius strip in the characters' embodied, lived experience.

A parallax refers to a change in angle that occurs when the position between an object and the perceiver changes. The different perspectives are spatiotemporally specific; they are impossible to experience at the same time. The cultural critic Slavoj Žižek applies the concept to discuss the supposedly insurmountable gap that emerges between, for example, socio-cultural, political, and philosophical views that cannot be mediated.[11] The different views are, however, linked via the parallax view, in an "*impossible short circuit*"[12] where they can be understood through endlessly changing perspectives.

In mobilities research, the parallax is often applied in a more literal sense to discuss, for instance, the *motion parallax* in self–landscape relations that are actualized in movement.[13] *Motion parallax* refers to the phenomenon of perceiving objects nearer to the perceiver to move faster than those further away, while driving, for instance.[14] Here I use the concept to join the seemingly incompatible spatiotemporal planes of past and present. Elsewhere[15] I have elaborated on how the past can emerge in the present moment as a body memory. I have argued that memories are spatiotemporal, both in terms of

their encoding and recollection, and, for example, Cécile Juin in Auster's *Invisible*[16] re-experiences past events as bodily reactions when she enters the places where the memories were created.[17] The framework is an embodied one. Embodiment investigates the myriad ways in which the human body with its emotions, sensations, and operations as well as its entanglement with the surrounding spaces also gives rise to the higher levels of cognitive functions.[18] As I suggest, embodiment fits well as a framework for mobility research, for while it can disclose our everyday movements in spaces, it can also be applied to "reveal the more subtle ways we are connected to our literal, remembered and imagined surroundings."[19]

Robert Kilroy[20] argues that Žižek's short circuit altogether effaces the dichotomies between incompatible categories. In terms of temporalities, then, the parallax can be used to consider the types of spaces and places that time can create and how the belief that the past and present cannot exist simultaneously can be short circuited. The concept of the parallax highlights the impossibility of determining where the present moment becomes the past. Such an attempt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, would result in an infinite number of now-moments and, eventually, time would collapse on itself.[21] Moreover, the parallax leads to asking when and where one place on Anna and Fogg's walks changes into another; what happens *within* the places where they are moving? This question echoes Ingold's notion of how life is created in what happens between two immobile points on a journey. In that space, the traveler "is his movement."[22] Moreover, Anna and Fogg are not variables in a static environment. Their surroundings move with them because their perspectives change. These movements connect the before and the after on a Möbius strip of embodied experience. As Toni Ahlqvist explains, the Möbius strip gives rise to a homogeneous entity through the union of two or more inherently different aspects.[23] While for Žižek the elements connected in this way do not "share space,"[24] David and Richard Gunderman[25] illustrate that the Möbius strip has no separate sides and thus one can never tell where one side begins and the other ends.

In what follows, I begin by examining how Marco Fogg is moved across New York City by the stories he tells with his footsteps. I then continue, in the third section, by discussing how Anna Blume's letter home is a way of anchoring herself in a past that gives her hope amidst a city that promises very little. Ultimately, Anna and Fogg's survival hinges on their ability to understand and, to borrow the words of Archie Ferguson from Auster's novel *4 3 2 1*, "experience the world, the past, the future, and the present [as] one."[26] In this parallax reality, appropriating Nigel Thrift's observation, "spacetime is seen as arising out of multiple encounters which, though structured, do not have to add up: as myriad adjustments and improvisations are made, so new lines of flight can emerge."[27] This becomes possible because of an in-built ability to turn the parallax into a stereoscopic vision. As Nick Sousanis suggests, our

ability to "perceive depth," resulting from assimilating two different perspectives, can aid in "seeking new approaches for opening expansive spaces and awakening possibilities."[28] Ultimately, Anna and Fogg's stories rework their past into a form that allows them to come to terms with the emotions their traumas generate. Here lies the profound possibility for managing trauma—the past can change when it is recontextualized within the present moment;[29] Anna and Fogg achieve this via bringing the spatiotemporal and narrative processes together as they move in their urban landscapes.

Finding a Place in the Darkness in Moon Palace

In a different literary context, two of Eowyn Ivey's characters from *To the Bright Edge of the World* engage in correspondence and write:

> It fascinates me how an object so small and everyday [as a brass button] can be transporting, the way it brings you into direct contact with the past. . . . [I]t's true what you say about the way a person comes into history. There's nothing like a textbook to bleed all the life out of the past.[30]

This passage echoes the reasons Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce give for why mobilities research often sees literary texts as unreliable and insufficient research material in terms of relaying real experiences and gathering data on real people, things, and ideas on the move.[31] The notion of a textbook as fatal bloodletting suggests that written texts, including narrative prose, are fixed and sedentary, rather than, as Merriman and Pearce propose, something actively creating and molding the contexts in which they are practiced, that is, as something on the move themselves.[32] Moreover, viewing texts as unable to *bring a person to history* entails, first, that literary texts are viewed as something disembodied that flatly represent the events of the plot and, second, that texts merely serve the purpose of transporting the reader outside of themselves.[33] However, the way in which Fogg and Anna make sense of their urban environments—Fogg by walking and Anna by writing—is not so different, on a processual level, from what can happen when the reader engages with these encounters and landscapes through the pages of the novel. Here, as Kilroy suggests, the dichotomy between word and image is erased in "a moment of excessive materiality" where the text "[takes] place" and turns into "a visually organized spatial structure . . . implicating the viewer/reader in the work."[34] This means that literary fiction does not merely describe two-dimensionally the events and the characters' embodied response that is *taking place* but actively contributes to producing an embodied experience also in the reader. Literary texts are embedded in the sphere of human experience,[35] and the city that emerges from the page is mingled with the reader's own memories, experiences, and imaginations of urban spaces.[36]

As I mentioned above, the stories Auster's characters tell to survive traumatic experiences have often been interpreted on disembodied lines, as what Matti Hyvärinen calls "living out a narrative and living without a narrative."[37] The characters might even actively state that this is what they wish to achieve. For example, in *The Book of Illusions*, David Zimmer, who has just lost his wife and son in a plane crash, writes a book about the comedian Hector Mann "on the off chance that it would dull the pain inside [him]."[38] Moreover, Tom Wood, the nephew of the protagonist Nathan Glass in *The Brooklyn Follies*, retells the story of Kafka's doll and declares that "when a person is lucky enough to live inside a story, to live inside an imaginary world, the pains of this world disappear. For as long as the story goes on, reality no longer exists."[39]

For Hyvärinen, such examples illustrate that "there is not much left of a temporal structure of life, there is only passive acceptance of any moment as it comes."[40] He is here specifically referring to Marco Fogg in *Moon Palace*, who, as I mentioned above, struggles with his grief. Fogg's story begins when, one day, having lost his apartment and nearly everything he owns, he steps out onto the street and begins walking, "going wherever my steps decided to take me. If I had any thoughts at all, it was to let chance determine what happened. . . . My first steps went south, and so I continued to go south."[41] Hyvärinen suggests that with such storytelling, Fogg seems to relinquish his temporality and, as a consequence, cannot make sense of his self or his position in the world. The implication is that some such time exists, which would place past events into an orderly sequence that organizes thought and creates direction.[42]

However, I argue that Fogg's steps that tell the story as he goes along, to return to the passage from the introduction, is an event that contributes to his sense-making by tapping into language that is, as Lisa Muszynski argues, "necessarily contingent on the human body moving and acting in an environment."[43] Fogg's first steps take him to a "Greek coffee shop . . . north of Columbus Circle, [. . . and to a] triple-feature movie [theater] on Forty-second Street near Times Square."[44] With no home to return to, he spends the night in Central Park, and rejoicing in the fact that he "had made it through the first night,"[45] his venture becomes a self-annihilating attempt to "[separate himself] from the rest of the world."[46] At first, Central Park is a place where Fogg can "pretend that [he] was not as bad off as [he] really was. The grass and the trees were democratic. . . . [He] felt that [he] was blending into the environment."[47] This union with the park provides Fogg "a chance to return to [his] inner life,"[48] something which the streets do not allow; in the park "[he] was quickly shamed into an awareness of [him]self" whereas "the streets forced [him] to see [him]self as others saw [him]."[49]

This awareness emerges from Fogg's direct and unmediated connection with his environment, which ultimately pushes him to the brink of extinction. He is sick and starving living in the park, and the only way to survive is to return from the *infinite series of now-moments* and reconnect with the past.

When his friends finally find him, Fogg understands that he "cannot live without establishing an equilibrium between the inner and outer,"[50] between the before and the after. Fogg's story thus manifests, in the words of Merriman and Pearce, "the ways in which events in the past (recent or otherwise) are perpetually informing experiences—including movement(s) of every kind—in the present."[51]

The novel ends with Fogg embarking on a journey across the United States, first by car, then by foot. Spending months on the road and moving *with* the landscape gradually, returning to Hannam et al., "recenter[s his] corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which [he] sense[s] place and movement, and construct[s] emotional geographies."[52] Fogg's journey ends by the ocean in Laguna Beach, California. There, when he listens to the "familiar late-century American noises" of the city behind him, his "life begins" at the same time as the rising moon "[finds] its place in the darkness."[53] This darkness will undoubtedly always follow Fogg, but instead of embracing his grief by running away, he now experiences a glimmer of hope as he realizes that he is loved. This love, in Fogg's words again, "does not lessen the terror of the fall, but it gives a new perspective on what that terror means."[54] The landscape now opening in front of him, in stereoscopic view, is full of possibilities and presents a clearer sense of where he belongs. Ultimately, Fogg's story is not an example of disembodying narrative but *enacting* it. He fails in the attempt to create footsteps that would take him away from his past; they rather strengthen his connection with it and as a result with himself. By becoming aware of this, his story becomes, in Auster's own words, "a way to live, a way of making life possible for oneself."[55]

The Country of Last Things Coming into Parallax View

Why Anna cannot return home, after realizing she cannot find her brother, remains unclear to the reader. References are made to "travel permits," "Exit Supervisor," and "investigating the situation along the ramparts, watching carefully to see if troops are massing or not,"[56] which repeat dystopian imagery. However, especially if one considers the novel's setting to represent twentieth-century history, as Auster has suggested,[57] the outside where Anna came from and the inside where she seems stuck connect more to a *before* and an *after* than concrete locations. The society's true colors are uncovered, according to Antony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman,[58] and here translated into the unimaginable conditions of the city. For Anna, the city "robs [her] of certainty"[59] by constantly disrupting her sense of self and security. "What happens when you find yourself looking at a dead child,"[60] she asks. Such events push her, first, to try and harden herself, but she gradually understands that she cannot disentangle herself from what she sees and experiences, "for each

thing somehow belongs to you, is part of the story unfolding inside you."[61] Anna's identity is now entwined with the devastating landscape.[62] She cannot leave.

As in most of Auster's novels, the intricate connections between moving and storytelling are also present in *In the Country of Last Things.* Hasine Sen Karadeniz suggests that Anna's perspective as she walks the streets of her city is "more active and more life sustaining because of being affiliated to the impulse to create."[63] Karadeniz founds this assertion on Michel de Certeau's juxtaposing of the all-encompassing solar view of the immobile city from atop a skyscraper with the fragmented and blind perspective of the city-writing street walker.[64] Elsewhere[65] I have argued that, first, the view from high up is not so different from the view at street level and, second, that the movement of the street walker rather gives them the ability to see—to experience—the wholeness of the city even if from a limited perspective: limited does not mean that the view is not stereoscopic.

The view that opens in front of Anna, whether from atop a high-rise or within the complicated network of streets, is spattered with imagining what life used to be. Similarly to Fogg, she initially wants no part in this act of remembering. For her, "memory is the great trap, [. . . and] by confining [her] thoughts to the present, [she is] better able to manage."[66] Gradually, however, she realizes that the past is the thing that "perhaps . . . prevented us from harming each other."[67] Those that came to the city from elsewhere or who still remember the world as it used to be have a chance of survival because they refuse to "[kill] off all those things that once made [them] think of [themselves] as human."[68] Anna's letter home, then, becomes an act of incorporating her new identity, which balances between doing what is necessary to survive and not becoming a "monster."[69] Each day she encounters "the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then not to forget. . . . The story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself."[70] But then "the words come only when I think I won't be able to find them anymore."[71] She finds them "never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write."[72] In other words, her writing emerges in movement, which is grounded in the city that she experiences in a flurry of emotions, sensations, and thoughts through an entanglement of memory, imagination, and lived experience. With her story, according to Karadeniz, Anna is "reshaping [the city's] litter into letters,"[73] also quite literally, as she attempts to record in words the *last things* that are slowly vanishing from the world. This act not only "keeps the city alive,"[74] as Karadeniz states, but also helps Anna deal with the experiences of being unable and unwilling to leave a place that constantly seeks to destroy her.

Like Fogg's, Anna's story hinges on bringing back the past; that is the only way she can understand herself and the society around her. Her writing exemplifies how, as suggested by Hayley Saul, "the role of memory and memorialization becomes important in negotiating a new identity, [. . . and] weav[ing]

a narrative of origins and belonging."[75] Although Anna performs what Modell calls a "value-driven selection" of what to include and what to leave out,[76] and realizes that she cannot remember everything, this act is not an exercise in externalizing or removing herself from her spatiotemporal conditions; it is rather an attempt to make sense of what she sees as the "the greatest problem of all":[77] how to negotiate the disaster landscape where she now dwells.

Anna's storytelling navigates the parallax of experiencing—at the same time—her *then* and *now*, her being there and being here, being a human and being a monster. This is the recipe for survival. Anna's story becomes, applying Ian Davidson, "an event [. . . and] a material presentation that causes change in the subject and . . . that occurs in moments."[78] Her words unveil an urban landscape, torn by disaster, as equally transformative as it is devastating.

Conclusion

Storytelling allows Marco Fogg and Anna Blume to (re)connect with the world and create a place where they can explore, from an alternative perspective, what has happened and the feelings their past and present generate. Their stories are an imaginative exercise, but one that is inherently a lived experience that emerges from the way they interact with their urban environments. Moreover, their stories are objects created in language derived from the experience of the moving body as well as their embodied response. The parallax reality, suddenly disclosed as a function of narrative, reveals a wider perspective, where the past and the present are negotiable and on the move. This contributes to a deeper self-understanding of the process of spatiotemporal unfolding that is contingent on movement. Ultimately, this process makes Fogg and Anna understand their past and present conditions as well as understanding themselves in ways they have not thought or processed before. The experience of the parallax reality, then, in an instant of perception, brings to awareness a new realization of the world and self.

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Notes

1. See Ira Hansen, "Entangled Lines of the Embodied Self: Archie Ferguson's Urban Experience in Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1*," *Literary Geographies* 7, no. 1 (2021): 40–58, https://www.literarygeographies.net/index.php/LitGeogs/article/view/179; Ira

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3. Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987/1989).
4. Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (New York: Penguin, 1989).
5. Paul Auster, *In the Country*, 3.
6. Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*, 41.
7. Paul Auster, "City of Glass," in *The New York Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 1987).
8. See, e.g., Arkadius Misztal, ed., *Time, Narrative and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2015); Markku Salmela, "The Bliss of Being Lost: Revisiting Paul Auster's Nowhere," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49, no. 2 (2008): 131–148, doi:10.3200/CRIT.49.2.131-148; Debra Shostak, "Under the Sign of Moon Palace: Paul Auster and the Body in the Text," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49, no. 2 (2008): 149–168, doi:10.3200/CRIT.49.2.149-170; Maya Merlob, "Textuality, Self, and World: The Postmodern Narrative in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 49, no. 1 (2007): 25–45, doi:10.3200/CRIT.49.1.25-45.
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11. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 4.
12. Ibid., 3; original italics.
13. See, e.g., Lynne Pearce, *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). David Bissel uses the term to discuss the relationship between proximity and mobility: David Bissel, "Pointless Mobilities: Rethinking Proximity through the Loops of Neighbourhood," *Mobilities* 8, no. 3 (2013): 349–367, here 361, doi:10.1080/17450101.2012.696343.
14. E.g. Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 1. Noë writes: "Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of bodily skills. [. . . W]e *enact* our perceptual experience. To be a perceiver is to understand, implicitly, the effects of movements on sensory stimulation."
15. Hansen, "From Low Road to High Road."
16. Paul Auster, *Invisible* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2009).
17. Hansen, "From Low Road to High Road," 29; see also Michael Bond, *Wayfinding: The Art and Science of How We Find and Lose Our Way* (London: Picador, 2020).
18. E.g. Antonio Damasio, *Feeling & Knowing: Making Minds Conscious* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021); Mark Solms, *The Hidden Spring* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2021); Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Mark Johnson, *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason: How Our Bodies Give Rise to Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

19. Hansen, "From Low Road to High Road," 25.
20. Robert Kilroy, "The 'New' Beckett and the Word/Image Parallax: An Infra-Disciplinary Short-Circuit," *Sillages Critiques* 27 (2019): 1–21, here 8, doi:10.4000/sillagescritiques.8660.
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22. Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 78; see also Hansen, "Entangled Lines," 44–45; Noë, *Action in Perception*.
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28. Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 31.
29. See Hansen, "From Low Road to High Road"; Arnold H. Modell, *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
30. Eowyn Ivey, *To the Bright Edge of the World* (London: Tinder Press, 2016), 313, 341.
31. Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, "Mobility and the Humanities," *Mobilities* 12, no. 4 (2017): 493–508, here 498, doi:10.1080/17450101.2017.1330853.
32. Ibid., 500, 502; see also Ian C. Davidson, "Mobilities of Form," *Mobilities* 12, no. 4 (2017): 548–558, doi:10.1080/17450101.2017.1331004; Ruth Livesey, "On Writing Portable Place: George Eliot's Mobile Midlands," *Mobilities* 12, no. 4 (2017): 559–571, doi:10.1080/17450101.2017.1331005; Lynne Pearce, "'Text-as-Means' versus 'Text-as End-in-Itself': Some Reasons Why Literary Scholars Have Been Slow to Hop on the Mobilities Bus," *Transfers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 76–84, doi:10.3167/TRANS.2020.100109.
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35. E.g. Christian Tewes, Christoph Durt and Thomas Fuchs, "Introduction: The Interplay of Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture," in *Embodiment, Enaction, and*

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36. See Jason Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism: Imaginative Place in Literary Research and Teaching* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2016), 83; Hansen, "Entangled Lines," 44.
37. Matti Hyvärinen, "Life as a Sequence and Narrative: Hayden White Meets Paul Auster," in *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, ed. Kuisma Korhonen (Amsterdam: Brill, 2006), 83–94, here 84.
38. Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 5.
39. Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (Picador, Kindle Edition, 2005), 156.
40. Hyvärinen, "Life as a Sequence," 87; see also Rosemary Huisman, "How Do You Write about What Is Not There? How Do You Record What Is Absent? Scraping the Temporal Palimpsest in Auster's Fiction," in Misztal, *Time, Narrative and Imagination*, 271–291.
41. Auster, *Moon Palace*, 49; see also Hansen, "Entangled Lines."
42. See, e.g., Laura Mojica and Tom Froese, "On the Spatiotemporal Extensiveness of Sense-making: Ultrafast Cognition and the Historicity of Normativity," *Synthese*, 10 May 2019, doi:10.1007/s11229-019-02240-7.
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44. Auster, *Moon Palace*, 50–51.
45. Ibid., 55.
46. Ibid., 55.
47. Ibid., 56.
48. Ibid., 56.
49. Ibid., 56.
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