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Money Talks

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Published in:
Lisa

DOI:
[10.4000/lisa.11676](https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.11676)

Publication date:
2020

Licence:
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Varvogli, A. (2020). Money Talks: Language, Work and Authorship from The Music of Chance to Sunset Park. *Lisa*, 18(50), 1-17. Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.11676>

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Revue LISA/LISA e-journal

Littératures, Histoire des Idées, Images, Sociétés du Monde Anglophone – Literature, History of Ideas, Images and Societies of the English-speaking World

vol. 18-n°50 | 2020

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L'argent est roi : langage, travail et profession d'auteur de The Music of Chance à Sunset Park

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/11676>

DOI: 10.4000/lisa.11676

ISSN: 1762-6153

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Electronic reference

Aliki Varvogli, « Money Talks: Language, Work and Authorship from *The Music of Chance* to *Sunset Park* », *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* [Online], vol. 18-n°50 | 2020, document 8, Online since 02 June 2020, connection on 02 June 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/11676> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.11676>

This text was automatically generated on 2 June 2020.



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Money Talks: Language, Work and Authorship from *The Music of Chance* to *Sunset Park*

L'argent est roi : langage, travail et profession d'auteur de The Music of Chance à Sunset Park

Aliki Varvogli

- 1 Paul Auster was writing *The Brooklyn Follies* when he was interviewed by Jonathan Lethem in 2005. He described that novel as very different from anything he had written up to that point: “You try to surprise yourself,” he told Lethem. “You want to go against what you’ve done before. You want to burn up and destroy all your previous work; you want to reinvent yourself with every project. Once you fall into habits, I think, you’re dead as an artist.” Yet, with a little prompting from Lethem, he also acknowledged the impossibility of escaping one’s written past: “all your attempts to flee from yourself are useless,” he noted. “All you discover is yourself and your old obsessions. All the maniacal repetitions of how you think. But you try. And I think there’s some dignity in that attempt.”¹ The tension between the desire to innovate and the compulsion to revisit “old obsessions” has become the defining characteristic of Auster’s *œuvre*. In 1989, Auster claimed that all his books were really the same book, “the story of my obsessions,” “the saga of the things that haunt me,”² and even today there is truth in that assertion. A Paul Auster novel is recognisable by the rhythm of the prose, the familiar semi-autobiographical characters, and by a set of recurring thematic tropes and philosophical preoccupations. However, as we look back on a substantial body of work, what is also becoming evident is that Auster’s “obsessions” are not static. They are not frozen in time, nor are they shaped entirely by the past – either his own or that of the writers he most admires. In addition, these “obsessions” are not exclusively of a philosophical or aesthetic nature, even though much of the earlier scholarship saw them in those terms. Each recent publication brings proof that his novels are deeply concerned with social, political and financial circumstances, and that Auster is as interested in context as he is in text.

- 2 4321 is the most direct and explicit manifestation of this, but it represents an intensification of focus rather than a rupture from earlier works. When Sven Birkerts described Auster as “the ghost at the banquet of contemporary American letters,”³ he was referring to the then common perception that Auster was not like other American authors; that his novels were concerned with philosophical, aesthetic, and metaphysical questions that isolated him from the two traditions that dominated postwar American writing: on the one hand, a group of authors who were eschewing metaphysical questions in favour of a more direct engagement with the world around them, and on the other hand a group whose intense preoccupation with self-referentiality and textual experimentation appeared to be severing ties with the lived world of their readers. Auster himself has spoken of how the nineteenth-century tradition of American transcendentalism has disappeared from contemporary American fiction, whose concerns he has described in a disparaging tone as “sociology.”⁴ Yet Auster’s books have never been divorced from what he calls sociology. Throughout his long writing career, Auster has been writing about the world around him as much as he has been writing about the world inside the rooms, real and metaphorical, noumenal or phenomenal, that he and his characters occupy. His textual experimentations and metaphysical musings do possess a level of timeless abstraction, and yet they are not divorced from the author’s immediate context. Put another way, Auster is both more American and more interested in the lived world than his critics suggest. In order to illustrate this point, this essay focuses on Auster’s treatment of the subject of money and its relationship to matters of authorship, language and work that recur throughout his *œuvre*. *Sunset Park* (2010) is a novel that crystallises these concerns, and its relation to the much earlier *The Music of Chance* (1990) can help to bring into focus the continuity and intensification of a set of Austerian tropes.

Money matters

- 3 Monetary concerns have shaped Auster’s work. *Squeeze Play*, his early pseudonymous detective novel, was born of the need to make a living. It is of course debatable whether we should think of it as an Auster novel at all, but it is indisputable that he wrote the novel in the hope of making money, and that in the process of writing it he created the foundations for *The New York Trilogy*’s subversion of the detective formula. *Hand to Mouth*, meanwhile, was a chronicle of impoverished living in which Auster reflected on how his “work as writer floundered” while he was “overwhelmed by money problems.”⁵ He wrote of the struggle to make ends meet while trying to make a living as a writer, and he has recently noted that “money is the subject of the book.”⁶ In his essay “The Art of Hunger,” poverty and hunger are both material afflictions and metaphorical conditions. On the metaphorical plain, they stand for things that have since become familiar tropes in Auster’s writing: the delight in paradox, the process of unburdening, of stripping down to the bare bones of selfhood, the concern with letting go of material things in order to reach a state of transcendence, or an understanding of the self. More literally, *Hand to Mouth* also explores the importance of work: using a range of experiences in blue-collar and white-collar jobs, Auster examines the relationship between work as paid employment and work as the writer’s output. There are several key images to be found throughout his writing that link those activities: the act of walking, the detective putting one foot in front of the other; the act of building a wall,

the labourer laying one stone on top of another; the act of writing, ordering one word after another: these are recurring tropes that link writing with labour, and the complex relationship that Auster creates around them forms the basis of my subsequent analysis.

- 4 Much of Auster's writing since his early days of monetary struggle has returned to the problems of poverty and precarity that artists and authors often face, though the material aspect is often de-emphasised in favour of the symbolic or metaphorical. In *Moon Palace*, for example, Marco wears a suit that he inherited from his uncle, and makes furniture out of inherited books. However, the clothes and books are not so much signifiers of poverty as they are markers of an identity in the making – images of a young man trying to find his sense of self and his place in the world. In addition to the theme of poverty, Auster returns to stories more specifically surrounding the acquisition and loss of money. His characters inherit, gamble, earn and dispose of money in storylines that highlight questions of free will, chance and predestination. Auster's autobiographical writings help us to understand that the preoccupation with the inheritance or windfall has its roots in the sum of money he inherited from his father. At the same time, writing about the father in *The Invention of Solitude* became an exploration of voice, identity, and authorial self. Since then the questions of money and authorship have been intertwined in different configurations.
- 5 In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn becomes so obsessed with the Stillman case that he devotes all his time and energy to it. He gives up his work as an author (significantly, an author who writes about a character called Work) in order to take up the work of the detective, but eventually he runs out of money and loses his home. One day, as he is walking down the street, he sees his reflection on a shop window and does not recognise himself. In this example, poverty and the loss of home are tied in with an exploration of the loss of selfhood. *City of Glass* contains memorable images of destitution and homelessness, but, as in Beckett, these images of vagrancy are not primarily used in a literal fashion, pointing rather to psychological and metaphysical concerns.
- 6 *In the Country of Last Things* takes up some of *The New York Trilogy's* philosophical concerns and places them in a world more sharply defined by material want. The story provides a dystopian backdrop for an exploration of the power and function of language, but it also expresses real anxieties about urban living, about poverty, and the fight for diminishing resources in the modern world. The novel makes an extended analogy between money and language. In a world shaped by dearth and need, money loses its transactional value because there's very little left to trade. At the same time, words start to disappear; they become detached, lose their meaning and vanish. Language is therefore shown to operate on the same principle as money: it gains meaning during transaction, and it produces signification by displacing it. Meanwhile, hunger is the main trope in *In the Country of Last Things* and its complex usage brings together ideas about money, food and words that we find in several of Auster's works. As the inhabitants of this dystopian country go hungry, they find solace in using language to describe meals:

Food, of course, is one of the favorite subjects. Often you will overhear a group of people describing a meal in meticulous detail [...] If the words can consume you, you will be able to forget your present hunger and enter what people call the 'arena of the sustaining nimbus.' There are even those who say that there is nutritional value

in these food talks given the proper concentration and an equal desire to believe in the words.⁷

- 7 The complex relationship between words that conjure up non-existing resources and words that ‘consume you’ is taken up elsewhere in early Auster. In *City of Glass*, for example,

Quinn learned that eating did not necessarily solve the problem of food. A meal was no more than a fragile defence against the inevitability of the next meal. Food itself could never answer the question of food: it only delayed the moment when the question would have to be asked in earnest.⁸

- 8 The process of infinite deferral ascribed here to eating is one that captured the imagination of an older generation of postmodernist authors such as John Barth and Robert Coover. Inspired by Borges and by their own academic training, they stretched the limits of fictional representation by delighting in the paradox of infinite displacement. Zeno’s arrow came to be the defining image for a set of writers who questioned the ability of language and literature to refer to anything other than itself.⁹ Auster owes a debt to this tradition of American postmodernism, even if his treatment of paradox is less playful. In the passage quoted above, the process of staving off hunger is one that also relates to language, signification, and representation. In all cases, the activity displaces or defers its own conclusion or actualisation. The centrality of the trope of hunger to Auster’s early novels has its roots in the author’s appreciation of Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger* and Franz Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist.” He writes of Hamsun’s protagonist:

His fast, then is a contradiction. To persist in it would mean death, and with death the fast would end. He must therefore stay alive, but only to the extent that it keeps him on the point of death. The idea of ending is resisted in the interests of maintaining the constant possibility of the end.¹⁰

- 9 This passage has clear connections with the one concerning Quinn’s hunger, and in both cases hunger is presented as a closed system. Through his exploration of Hamsun, Kafka and Beckett, Auster articulates his interest in “an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself.”¹¹ This engagement with self-referentiality can be understood in a different way when we consider it alongside Auster’s treatment of the logic of money – a treatment that has gradually moved away from its earlier, more abstract and self-reflective origins.
- 10 Though *Leviathan* is the most overtly political of Auster’s twentieth-century novels, it is *The Music of Chance* that best illustrates the marriage of realism and abstraction, or of social commentary and philosophical investigation, that becomes more prevalent in later works. Auster describes the book as “part novel, part fable,” noting that “even though not a word is mentioned about politics, I think it’s one of the most political books I’ve written.”¹² This combination of abstraction and political commentary enables Auster to engage with a range of issues, including political power, state surveillance and control, and the rights of the individual under capitalism, while also extending his enquiry into the mysteries of self and the workings of fate. *The Music of Chance* is also the first of Auster’s novels to be explicitly about money. Using the story of a man who seeks freedom but ends up in bondage, Auster explores the different ways in which someone can acquire money, and looks into the implications of each for the individual. There is an unexpected inheritance, a lottery win, a poker game, and money earned through manual labour. Unearned money appears in several Auster novels, and its meaning is often symbolic: the underlying concern is often with fate, chance and

free will. In this book, though, the engagement with money is much more concrete, making this a story about work, gain and loss under capitalism.

- 11 *The Music of Chance* begins with a windfall: money inherited, seen as unearned, is spent with a recklessness that threatens to destabilise the individual. The literal and metaphorical drive to use his money up also compels Nashe to relinquish parental responsibility and to give up his relationship with Fiona. The unburdening that is precipitated by the inheritance becomes an experiment into the limits of selfhood: how much can Nashe get rid of while still remaining himself? A steady job, relationships and material possessions are disposed of with little thought or emotion in the mistaken belief that they form barriers to the attainment of personal freedom. In *The Music of Chance*, money buys and denies freedom in equal measure; it propels Jim Nashe while also hampering his progress:

The money was responsible for his freedom, but each time he used it to buy another portion of that freedom, he was denying himself an equal portion of it as well. The money kept him going, but it was also an engine of loss, inexorably leading him back to the place where he had begun.¹³

- 12 The paradox highlighted in this passage is strongly reminiscent of the hunger motif; in both cases, the problem and its solution double up on one another as in a Moebius strip. Whereas in earlier works by Auster such an image would convey primarily symbolic meaning, here the concern is with money as much as it is with monetary metaphor.

Earned and unearned money

- 13 Having used up money he had not earned, Nashe pins his hopes on a game of poker, thereby exchanging one form of unearned capital for another. It is only when he and Pozzi lose the game and he finds himself building a wall in the Stone and Flower mansion that Nashe reconnects work with monetary gain. This act of reconnection is his penance, and almost his redemption. Having given up a salaried job in the hope that he would be free, Nashe is forced to confront and re-evaluate his simplistic equations of giving up regular employment with the pursuit of freedom. Does the book then suggest that good, honest labour is the only means of acquiring “good” money, money that does not precipitate the kinds of unravelling we have seen in Nashe? Perhaps, but Auster is interested in the concept of work in different ways: the physical effort is seen as an enabling and ennobling force for Nashe, yet at the same time the monetisation of the worker’s very conditions of existence, symbolised by Flower and Stone’s cruel and unexpected contract, undermines the narrative that seeks to glorify the worker’s honest labour. In addition, as Joyce Goggin points out, here Auster creates another paradox worthy of Zeno: the living expenses incurred while building the wall mean that the debt can never be cleared, since the wages are needed to cover those expenses.¹⁴ Work thus becomes self-referential, conferring no value to the workers other than their continued existence as workers. Seen in a different way, the work is also meaningless because it does not produce a tradeable commodity, nor does it perform a socially useful function. In Marxist terms, Nashe and Pozzi do not engage in useful labour. Rather, their plight becomes a reflection, a way of thinking about useful labour, and also a way for the author to highlight the dual meaning of work as physical undertaking and as an aesthetic product. We see this preoccupation in Stillman’s invisible writing on the streets of New York, in Auggie Wren’s photographic project, and also in the references to the Mysterious Barricades in *The Music of Chance*: a way of

thinking about the relationship between the physical act of producing music using fingers on the keyboard, and the act of composition which involves thinking of “work” as an abstract concept. Many of these ideas become central in *Sunset Park*, where intellectual and artistic expression as forms of work are juxtaposed with the material reality of keeping a roof over one’s head.

- 14 The relationship between earned and unearned money, explored through the preoccupation with work and manual labour, is further highlighted in the passages that deal with wealth creation. Flower and Stone, the eccentric and sinister millionaires to whom Nashe loses, have made their initial fortune through a lottery win. However, they have also gone on to re-invest the money in the commodities market. As Flower puts it, “No sooner did we become rich than we started to become very rich. And once we were very rich, we became fabulously rich.”¹⁵ Eyal Dotan notes that Flower and Stone’s wealth creation through speculation entails “a certain transformation of money, causing it to lose its everyday characteristics. In gambling and in speculations, money becomes more fluid, more abstract.”¹⁶ Auster focuses on this loss of concrete materiality and uses the concept of money generating more money to highlight the absence of work: there is no effort and no product involved in this enterprise, so the money is self-generating and self-referential: just as a signifier points to another signifier, so money is used to “buy” more money.
- 15 Tim Woods has read *The Music of Chance* as “a critique of the ideology of American capitalism,” noting that the “extent to which money controls and coerces is one of the more insidious issues at stake in the novel.”¹⁷ Woods was probably the first critic to read the book for its *literal* preoccupation with money. Picking up the argument, Warren Oberman sought to demonstrate how Auster’s existential concerns combine with a “postmodern critique of late-capitalism.”¹⁸ Whereas overall the existential theme is dominant in *The Music of Chance*, in *Sunset Park* the critique of late capitalism is much more overt and more fully woven into the themes and structures of the novel. Whereas *The Music of Chance* explored how capitalism relies on materiality by monetising human labour to produce tradeable commodities, and juxtaposed that with the immateriality of the financial markets, *Sunset Park* considers how postcapitalism has also monetised that which is not physical: communication, imagination, language and creativity. Reading *Sunset Park* with *The Music of Chance* in mind can help us to understand how Auster has moved on to a fuller engagement with contemporary politics and the concreteness of the world around him; an engagement that we see even more clearly in 4 3 2 1.

Writing postcapitalist fiction

- 16 Auster has for a long time resisted the idea that his novels are about what he calls “sociology,” aiming instead for a symbolic or allegorical resonance that transcends the realities of each novel’s setting. He told Jonathan Lethem:

I want to write books that can be read a hundred years from now, and readers wouldn’t be bogged down by irrelevant details. You see, I’m not a sociologist, and the novel has often concerned itself with sociology. It’s one of the generating forces that’s made fiction interesting to people. But that’s not my concern. I’m interested in psychology. And also certain philosophical questions about the world. By removing the stories from the morass of things that surround us, I’m hoping to achieve some kind of purer approach to emotional life.¹⁹

- 17 Auster's novels are rarely dated (in both senses of the word) by extraneous detail, yet they can often be read as symptomatic or illustrative of a period in American life. *Sunset Park* is a novel of the late 2000s, but it features no cellphones, Facebook, Google or many explicit references to politics or to world events. Yet Mark Lawson, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, called it a credit crunch novel, thereby situating it in a particular time in economic world history.²⁰ Andrew Lawson more specifically refers to the book as a foreclosure novel: a book that concerns itself with the loss of home that happened on a massive scale following the subprime mortgage lending scandal.²¹ The preoccupation with the loss of the home is not new in Auster. *Sunset Park* opens with images of homelessness and discarded objects that call to mind *City of Glass*, but Auster revisits these tropes with less emphasis on their metaphorical value and philosophical meaning, and more on the grim reality of Florida's foreclosures.
- 18 The crisis precipitated by the subprime mortgage scandal brought the paradoxes of money into sharper focus. It drew attention to the immateriality of money embodied in financial speculation and evocative phrases such as "futures trading," which provided a stark contrast with the material reality of abandoned homes or the widely shared images of sacked workers. The enormity of the sums gained and lost in financial markets remained inconceivable to most people, while processes such as quantitative easing vexed the question of how money is actually created. The great discrepancy at the heart of our relationship with money, its tangibility and its lack of materiality, has interesting parallels with the paradoxes of signification that Auster has been pursuing in so much of his fiction. *Sunset Park* concerns itself with money, with the economic downturn, and with the fate of the American economy not only in direct thematic terms, but also in aesthetic ones. Money in this novel is treated as real and material, as well as being viewed as an abstraction with links to Auster's previous preoccupations. The novel seeks to represent, recount and explain what happened when people started losing their homes, while also exploring new possibilities for artistic expression and novelistic practice. Auster has long been concerned with the relationship between language and things, between reality and fiction, and between interiority, subjectivity and narrative point of view. Here, he has used the economic downturn as a new means of exploring those issues in a new context. *Sunset Park* displays a preoccupation with the nature of money, and with its metaphoric and symbolic value. At the same time, questions of the value of cultural production and the monetisation of the life of the mind are brought to the fore.
- 19 Money is the embodiment of contradiction. It has a material presence in the form of notes and coins, and yet at the same time it is immaterial because it is a signifier of worth, rather than having its own intrinsic value. It carries a promise to pay the bearer of the note or coin a certain sum rather than being the sum itself. More generally, the economy itself is understood and conceptualised as both immediately physical and bafflingly abstract. On one end of the spectrum, there are algorithms on screens and mysterious-sounding products such as futures and derivatives. At the other end of the scale, there are people who lose their jobs and their homes, experiencing financial crisis as a painfully material crisis. This dual nature of money and the economy, the visible and invisible, the material and the intangible, the daily necessity and the ungraspable enormity of the system that produces and supports it, is mined by Auster for its potential to give new impetus to some of his old obsessions. Richard T. Gray notes that the "metaphorical field circumscribing analogies between language and

money is undoubtedly one of the most productive in all of Western culture.” He observes that many elements “drawn from the sphere of finance, such as the notions of circulation, exchange, credit, banking, counterfeiting, investment, etc., are frequently applied as metaphorical vehicles for the illumination of linguistic practices.”²² Auster uses money as a metaphorical vehicle, but he extends his enquiry beyond his enduring fascination with the nature of language. He also takes into account the processes and products of intellectual or creative work, and considers how these fit into a world that privileges monetary value above all other kinds of value.

- 20 Our understanding of the relationship between language and the world has been altered by Saussure’s theory of the signifier and the signified, and in the field of literature both authors and critics have found Saussurean linguistics useful in exploring the production and circulation of meaning. However, as Richard T. Gray observes, it is not only linguistics that can help us to understand the divorcing of the signifier from the signified.²³ To use Marc Shell’s phrase, we also have “the shift from substance to inscription in the monetary sphere.” “Bank notes were backed by land; or by gold in a vault somewhere; or by silver; or by loans; or perhaps by actual or potential government power,” he explains, but “the precise connection between gold and paper seemed the stuff of mystery.”²⁴ The connection is even more mysterious now that the creation of money is no longer tied to any specific, materially measurable wealth, and money comes to resemble the empty signifier, or the simulacrum. As David Harvey argues, the “de-linking of the financial system from active production and from any material monetary base calls into question the reliability of the basic mechanism whereby value is supposed to be represented.”²⁵ Harvey links this shift with a crisis in representation within the sphere of cultural production, and *Sunset Park* offers an aesthetic demonstration of this argument by concerning itself with the conditions necessary for the production of culture.

Moneyed culture

- 21 The link between an abstract, dematerialised understanding of money, and its effects on the sphere of cultural production, is more explicitly articulated by Jean-Joseph Goux:
- [t]he fact that our century has experienced what has come to be called the dematerialization of money, leading to a radically nominalist conception of the monetary instrument and culminating in inconvertibility and floating exchange rates, and that this same century is also marked by an unprecedented rupture in the mode of representation as well as by a deepening concern with the nature of the sign and the philosophical status of language, is certainly not a simple coincidence.²⁶
- 22 Auster has explored this rupture in novels such as *The Music of Chance* and *In the Country of Last Things*, but in *Sunset Park* the problem becomes more pronounced and more concrete. The reconciliation of his interest in abstraction with his concern for lived experience and human suffering recalls Franco Berardi’s comments on the relationship between money and language: “they are immaterial. They are nothing, and yet can do everything: they move, displace, multiply, destroy.”²⁷ Berardi has written extensively about the importance of human capital in the form of the *cognitariat*, and *Sunset Park* picks up many of Berardi’s concerns around work in a post-industrial society. Berardi and theorists of human capital have sought to explain the relationship between human

knowledge and economic structures, but their concerns are not new. As far back as 1761, German thinker Johann Georg Hamann had seen the use of language in the production of human knowledge as analogous to the economic system:

money and language are two objects whose examination is as profound and abstract as their use is universal... the theory of one explains the theory of the other; for this reason, they appear to derive from common grounds. The richness of all human knowledge is based on the exchange of words... all the goods... of commercial and social life relate to money as their general measure.²⁸

- 23 In *Sunset Park*, Auster asks what happens when the two systems become too intertwined and interdependent. As the production of knowledge is more systematically tied in to the production of money, the phrase “richness of human knowledge” acquires a new meaning, and one that Auster does not welcome. *Sunset Park* bemoans the monetisation of culture and knowledge. The gifted Arts and Humanities graduates that Miles Heller meets in the squat not only struggle to make a living, but they hardly have any hope or faith in the future. Their commitment to the study of language, or the practice of art, places them in the margins of society. In this sense, the squat itself is an apt space for them. Squatting raises questions about legitimate or illegitimate ownership and occupancy. Squatters exist in the margins, removed from the mainstream world of regular employment and monthly mortgage repayments. As the squatters strive to affirm the importance of their pursuits, the squat comes to represent their rejection of monetised culture at the same time that it represents their exclusion from the mainstream. Home ownership is a powerful trope in the American imaginary, and in American literature. Its rejection, and the denial of opportunity to participate in this aspect of the American dream, are used in the novel as a form of social critique while also linking to Auster’s concern with the relationship between the material and the immaterial. Is a house bought on credit more legitimately owned than a squat? In both cases, the physical reality of bricks and mortar, of a roof over one’s head, is juxtaposed with the lack of materiality that a mortgage represents.
- 24 Sub-prime mortgages, in particular, exposed the immaterial nature of credit: people were allowed to buy homes using money they could never pay back, but as long as the repayment was not imminent, the debt could be deferred, the absence of money always displaced into a utopian future. As demonstrated earlier, Auster has always been fascinated with paradox, and we see his fascination with infinite deferral in the images of driving at speed, eating and fasting, and gaining and losing money. Like mortgages, like banknotes and coins, language works on the basis of deferral as well, and *Sunset Park* highlights those links. The preoccupation with the ways in which the loss of money and home affects individual lives is coupled with a wider artistic concern with finding a way to represent money. For Auster, who has always been interested in the relationship between words and things, the language of money is irresistible. Language and money both rely on the same principle of infinite deferral: just as a word is never the thing it signifies, a note or coin is not an item of value, but the representation of one. *Sunset Park* looks at what happens when the philosophy or the metaphysics of money collides with what he calls “the morass of things:” when abstract notions of value and trust translate into homes broken and lost, and lives ruined.
- 25 Section one starts with the story of Miles, who works as a trasher in Florida. Trashing out is the process of clearing homes that have been abandoned by their owners and repossessed by the bank. Miles is an unusual trasher because he comes from a privileged background and has a degree from Brown University. However, in order to

deal with grief and guilt, Miles gives up his privilege and takes on a series of jobs that do not reflect his social or educational background. Andrew Lawson sees Miles's downward mobility as an example of "a newly revealed landscape of class, where a precariously located middle class begin to sense their own economic vulnerability and structural affinity with the working class."²⁹ Whereas Quinn's descent into destitution was entirely metaphorical, here the move from college graduate to manual worker is explored for its social consequences. This being an Auster novel, though, Miles is no ordinary trasher in another important way. He has developed an artistic project of photographing the things he has to clear:

Each house is a story of failure – of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure - and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses.³⁰

- 26 The presence of empty homes and discarded things instantly recalls *City of Glass*, and the first few pages of the novel continue the analogies. In the beginning, Miles was "stunned by the disarray and the filth, the neglect." "Always, there are the objects, the forgotten possessions, *the abandoned things*."³¹ Further analogies between Miles and Daniel Quinn can also be found in the following description: "Bit by bit, he has pared down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum."³² This process of paring down, which Auster gets largely from Samuel Beckett, is central to Auster's *œuvre*. Here, though, for the first time the emphasis is on the materiality of Miles' possessions, and the difficulty of letting go. Unlike other Auster protagonists, Miles cannot strip down to the absolute minimum: he needs his car, he needs his cell phone, he needs his digital camera, and he needs books. The strong emphasis on material objects continues in the first few pages of the novel, setting the tone for a book that is concerned with material conditions and their relation to the creation of art. Miles believes that his artistic project is "of no possible benefit to anyone",³³ a statement that contains in its simplicity much bigger questions about work, art and value that this novel asks.
- 27 The preoccupation with things, with the materiality of objects, continues in the second section where we meet Bing Nathan. Bing, who initiates the squat as an attempt to put his ideas into action, is introduced as a man with no hope: he "takes it for granted that the future is a lost cause", a sentiment that is echoed and amplified by Miles at the novel's conclusion. Bing Nathan's hopelessness is coupled with nostalgia: "if the present is all that matters now, then it must be a present imbued with the spirit of the past",³⁴ he thinks, and that nostalgia is the driving force behind his enterprise, the Hospital for Broken Things. His decision to set up a small business repairing "objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth" is revealed to be driven by his desire for tangibility: "That is the word he uses most often when discussing his ideas with his friends."³⁵ Bing's privileging of tangibility is a way of fighting invisible money. While global capital, financial markets and mortgage lending rely on immaterial, invisible wealth, the championing of tangible objects reveals nostalgia for an earlier time when goods were manufactured for their use value. Repairing broken objects is also a way of resisting the logic of disposability that drives consumerism, and *Sunset Park* more generally concerns itself with consumerist values and their relation to culture.

Materiality and immateriality

- 28 Materiality is also central to the story of another of the squatters, Alice Bergstrom, a PhD student whose future career prospects are bleak, and who works for PEN International. Her work for an organisation that aims to protect freedom of speech and expression in literature points to another way in which Auster stresses the materiality and immateriality of language. Alice was ten years old when the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was issued, and at the time her response was that it was “the stupidest thing she had ever heard of. Words were harmless, with no power to hurt anyone, [...] words weren’t knives or bullets, they were simply black marks on a white page.” The narrator goes on to note that “as she grew up, of course, she understood; about the danger of words, the threat to power words can represent.”³⁶ The childish identification of words with black marks on a white page is reminiscent of a child’s perception of money: pieces of paper or pieces of metal that stand for themselves: they *are* money, rather than representations of value. Alice’s work at PEN International is also important for its literal meaning. The organisation works to promote freedom of expression and to help authors who risk persecution. In this way, Auster highlights the value of writers whose involvement in the world is much more direct than his own and calls attention to the debate concerning the role of the author in society.
- 29 Ellen Brice, the third squatter, is another character whose work carries symbolic value. She is an estate agent by day, participating in the very same enterprise that excludes her and her housemates from the housing market. In her spare time she is an artist, and her relationship with objects continues the theme that has already been explored in relation to Miles and Bing Nathan. Ellen wants to paint like Morandi, “to make pictures that would evoke the mute wonder of pure thingness [...] a translation of human existence into a minute rendering of all that is *out there* beyond us.”³⁷ Later, though, she decides to abandon this project: “she was wrong to put her trust in things, to trust in things only [...] [n]o more inanimate objects.”³⁸ Her decision to give up on representing inanimate objects because she no longer believes in the value of self-referentiality, or in art as “an empty exercise in style,” can be read as a commentary on Auster’s late fiction, too. Ellen resolves to return to the human figure “and force her strokes to become bolder and more expressive, more gestural, more wild if need be”³⁹ in a way not dissimilar to the way in which Auster himself uses new narrative techniques in this novel.
- 30 Other chapters in the novel focus on Miles’s parents. His father owns a struggling publishing firm, and his mother is an actress preparing for the role of Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days*. Their professional struggles amplify the text’s concern with creative economies and consumerism. The choice of *Happy Days* is not coincidental: Winnie buried in the dust heap creates a powerful image that echoes the themes Auster explores in this novel: cultural production as work, and its place in a postcapitalist society. The humanities graduates in the squat are the products of a system that believes in the monetisation of knowledge and human imagination and yet does not value their creative output as work. They are thus forced into the margins of society, represented by the squat and their eventual eviction.
- 31 Auster’s post 9/11 novels have increasingly engaged with the new realities of the twenty-first century while also bearing the hallmarks of a “typical Auster novel” in terms of narrative voice, structure, tropes and thematic preoccupations. In *Sunset Park*,

the characters and their background, the way people speak, the predicaments they find themselves in, all seem familiar, as do several of the themes and tropes the novel employs and explores. Yet the novel is also not typical in other, important ways. The way the narrative is broken into chapters that focus on different characters is new, as is the use of narrative voice. As far back as 1992 Auster had spoken to McCaffery and Gregory about his experimentation with narrative voice, stressing the importance of point of view in all his work. He spoke of how in each novel “the entire story has developed out of the particular narrative voice I’ve chosen,” and further noted that “there’s a vast range within those two categories [first and third person narration], and it’s possible to bring the boundaries of first person and third person so close to each other that they touch, even overlap.”⁴⁰ *The Music of Chance* highlighted the themes of surveillance, state control and free will through the use of a third-person narrator who seemed to know slightly too much about Nashe. The narrative voice reproduced the sinister effect observed within the fictional world where Nashe and Pozzi found themselves under daily scrutiny. *Sunset Park* follows the inner lives of several characters, but the narrative voice remains unchanged in tone and register even as it shifts its focus. This complex technique of maintaining narrative voice while changing focaliser is effective in capturing the loss of affect that Fredric Jameson has identified as a defining condition of postmodernist expression. The characters are seen “from within,” and therefore given interiority and depth. At the same time, their interiority is flattened by the unifying narrative voice, and in this way Auster finds a narrative technique that allows him to critique rather than just foreground the loss of affect.

- 32 The multiple focalisers are a departure from the intense scrutiny on the individual that we associate with earlier Auster novels. Now, Auster seems more interested in the collective fate of the country, and the multiple viewpoints represent an opening out from the personal to the public arena. Thematically, the novel proposes communality and shared endeavour as the way forward. At the same time, the narrative voice retains a distance from each character; we find out their innermost thoughts and secrets, but not in their voices. Instead, the narrating voice, whose style is unlike any that Auster has used before, is the same throughout. The effect that this achieves is chilling: we have a sense that the characters are not in control of their own destiny; that the lack of money also robs them of agency. Stylistically, Auster uses the comma extensively to link phrases, which he has not done before. Whereas previously his style could easily be identified by its short, punchy sentences with their staccato effect, here the sentence drifts and meanders and carries on almost breathlessly. These longer sentences, Auster explains, allow him to represent “the meanderings of thought and reflection,”⁴¹ but they also recall the flow of immaterial money, the algorithms endlessly running on screens in financial markets across the globe, the length and relentlessness of the sentences an aesthetic and stylistic analogue for the streams of data that run and ruin our lives.
- 33 Another notable stylistic feature in the novel is the use of narrative tense. The present tense, third-person narration implies no antecedence; the characters are denied the comfort of fictionality, and the story lacks the comfort of things that have already happened and belong in the past. The effect is dramatic; long before the narrative even veers into script-writing with stage directions, the readers sense that we are watching an unfolding drama whose main characters do not know that they are actors on the stage. In this way, the novel manages a rare feat: to be about representation, and also to be about the things it seeks to represent. To be realist and metafictional, material and

immaterial at the same time. This desire to reconcile the two representational plains is echoed thematically throughout the book. Photography, painting, film criticism and acting are all depicted as activities that strive to reconcile the tangible with the invisible; the world of things and the world of ideas and feelings. Present-tense narration also adds to the idea of surveillance, with the narrative taking on the role of fly-on-the-wall and calling into question old certainties about things that have already happened. In this way, the novel is also about money whose value can be determined by time rather than traditional use or exchange. The temporal instability of money, subject to fluctuation on the currency markets, for example, finally relates to conceptions of the future. “Futures” are financial products, but the future of their worth is unstable. In addition to replacing the more conventional novelistic past tense with the present, Auster also depicts a world with no future for his protagonists. As the novel ends, Miles “wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.”⁴² Miles thus surrenders to the eternal present of finance capitalism, and does so at the precise moment he has become a victim of it, evicted from his home just like the subprime borrowers in Florida had been evicted from theirs at the book’s opening.

- 34 *The Music of Chance* also has an ending that echoes its beginning. Nashe attempts to regain control of his life by getting behind the wheel of a car, even if doing so might also prove his undoing. Both Miles and Nashe have been shaped and scarred by the monetary and narrative economies they have been placed in, and both exit the narratives on a note of uncertainty. Auster believes that Nashe has been “set free inside himself. It’s a new awareness of who he is and who he can be.”⁴³ No such freedom is hinted at as *Sunset Park* comes to a close. Whether he ends up in prison or not, Miles, who would have been born around the time of *The Music of Chance*’s publication, represents a new, starker reality that Auster has captured in his work.

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ABSTRACTS

This essay explores the various ways in which Paul Auster has written about money in his novels throughout his career, and argues that there are continuities as well as differences which reflect the author's increased concern for the lived world and the socio-economic forces that shape it. The argument focuses on Auster's treatment of the subject of money and its relationship to matters of authorship, language and work. Much of Auster's writing since his early days of monetary struggle has returned to the problems of poverty and precarity that artists and authors often face. In earlier works, the material aspect was often de-emphasised in favour of the symbolic or metaphorical, but more recent work has sought to bring the two plains of representation into closer alignment. The preoccupation with the language of money allows Auster's fiction to be both about representation and about the things it seeks to represent, to be realist and metafictional, and to explore material and immaterial questions at the same time.

Cet essai explore la manière dont Paul Auster aborde l'argent dans ses romans, au fil de sa carrière, avançant qu'il y a une certaine continuité et des différences qui illustrent la préoccupation grandissante du monde vécu et des forces socio-économiques qui le gouvernent. La discussion se concentre sur la façon dont Paul Auster traite le sujet de l'argent et sa relation avec sa profession d'auteur, le langage et le travail. Depuis ses débuts financièrement difficiles, l'écriture de Paul Auster s'attache à décrire la pauvreté et la précarité auxquelles les artistes et les auteurs sont souvent confrontés. Dans ses premiers travaux, l'aspect matériel était souvent relégué au second plan afin de mettre en lumière la portée symbolique ou métaphorique, mais ses travaux récents ont tenté de rééquilibrer les deux plans de la représentation. La préoccupation du langage de l'argent permet à la fiction de se concentrer à la fois sur la représentation et sur les choses qu'elle tente de représenter, d'être réaliste et métafictionnelle, et d'explorer des questions tant matérielles qu'immatérielles.

INDEX

Keywords: authorship, money, language, economy, metaphor

Mots-clés: auteur, argent, langage, économie, métaphore

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