



## Around Moon Palace

### A conversation with Paul Auster

by Marc CHÉNETIER<sup>1</sup>

*Paul Auster, born in 1947 in Newark (N.Y.) has become over recent years one of the best-known voices of American literature in Europe while his reputation in the United States grows steadily. He studied at Columbia University, held a variety of jobs, among which house-sitting in Provence and working aboard an oil-tanker in the Gulf of Mexico. He is the translator of a large number of French poets and published many critical articles, most of which have been collected in The Art of Hunger. His career as a poet (eight volumes came out between 1974 and 1993) marked him as one of the most promising voices of American poetry. He turned to fiction writing in the early eighties and has now published eight novels as well as several prose writings. His recent collaboration with Wayne Wang (Smoke, Blue in the Face) prolonged the film version of The Music of Chance. He lives in Brooklyn, with his wife, novelist Siri Hustvedt, and Sophie, their daughter.*



*In a phone interview with the New York Times Book Review, when Moon Palace came out, in 1989, you said it was your “first book, in a way, even though it was written later.” Indeed, it wasn’t your first book to be published. And going through your papers at the Public Library, I saw many versions of it, and some of them go back a long time. Could you trace the genesis of it?*

Marc Chénétier is professor of American Literature at ENS (Fontenay/St Cloud). This interview took place at Paul Auster’s home, in Brooklyn, on July 18, 1996.

It’s hard for me to put a date on it, but I think I started working on the book as early as around 1968, while I was still a student. The book was completely different at that time, of course. But always, *always* there were the three principal characters. That never changed. Their names changed, but the idea of a young man, and then the old man in the wheel chair, and then the fat man, was always there. But in different manifestations, different permutations. I’m not sure, this goes way, way back, but the original plan for the book was to write all in the third person.

*Yes, told by Zimmer, at one stage, right?*

Possibly, possibly. But this goes back so far—almost thirty years ago, some of it—that it’s hard to remember all of the different versions. I do remember

writing out a long, crazy bit with the character who is Effing now, but I can't remember what he was called then...

*From what I could see, the first versions had two fundamental parts. One had to do with the inherited books, and a part of the park episode. Then came Barber, who was Nathaniel then. But the part in-between was not there...*

Right. But there was a long passage where the old man is out West having all kinds of crazy adventures, in Oklahoma, I think it was. It was all very sketchy, it was not—how shall I say?—formed. I was writing off the top of my head, trying to figure out where I wanted to go with it. The only thing I can remember with any certainty is that at a certain point it got so complicated, and the project was so much larger than anything I was able to handle at twenty or twenty-two years old, that I eventually just dropped it, put it off to the side. I never fully abandoned the idea of writing the book, but it was buried for a long time, and I can't even begin to guess how many years went by. Maybe fifteen years before I really picked it up again.

*Was that in 1986?*

Yes, I think it was '86 when I started writing it again in earnest. After I finished *In the Country of Last Things*.

*We were together in Princeton, then, as I remember.*

Yes. Was I just about to start?

*You published In the Country of Last Things in 1987, and you were working on Moon Palace then, I am sure, because one day we were walking back from the movies or something, and I had run into a problem in class because I had to tell a story which included a four-letter word, which I had to keep repeating for the story to make its point. But I couldn't say it: "political correctness" was setting in; and I said, "What would you say, Paul", and you said, "Well, why don't you say effing instead?" And that extremely strange smile came over your face. (laughter) So I know it must have been this...*

I know I must have been thinking about it, as I was certainly working on that novel, no question. But the conception of the book was much simpler by then. Instead of having three equal characters, there was one central character, and the story was told in the first person. Fogg tells everything, and what you know about the other two main characters, you learn through him. *He* is the narrator of the whole thing, for better or for worse. That was how I felt most happy and comfortable writing the book.

*Among the early versions I saw, one is called "Columbus's Egg," and before that, there are two "Luna" versions. And at some stage, when it adopts the third-person stance, the narrator appears to be Zimmer, because he says at one point, in essence, "I'm only the scribe of that story; if it doesn't make any sense, it's not my fault, but I roomed with the guy for a year."*

I don't even remember this. What I do remember is a long passage that was probably from the late 60s. Written out in single-space type. The action took place in Paris. Did you see that?

*Not yet...*

I remember an elaborate piece of business from that passage. The narrator, who is an earlier incarnation of Fogg, gets a job working for an old American. Since he has a lot of trouble waking up in the morning, he goes out and buys several different alarm clocks, which he uses to devise an elaborate system for waking himself up. I remember writing all that, but it was a different itinerary, somehow, the shape was altogether different.

*The names underwent extraordinary evolutions. Fogg's originally was a diminutive of "Foganowitz". His original first name was "Lemuel", from Gulliver's Travels; the idea of travel is already there, but for Foganowitz. And then you move on from Fogg to Phileas Fogg. At one point, he's called Peter, as in Peter Stillman, I suppose, somewhere else. And then, there's a version where the first person narrator is Quinn.*

Quinn popped up *all* the time. I started using that name as an undergraduate, and for a long time he was the hero of this book. I was so attached to the name, in fact, that at a certain point—I think it was the year I was a graduate student—I wrote a number of book reviews under the name of Quinn for a small, give-away student newspaper that was being published around that time. I think it was called *The University Review*. There are no traces of it. No one can find a copy.

*At Columbia?*

No, but around there in the neighborhood. I can't remember who was responsible for it. Anyway, I signed all the articles: Paul Quinn. I don't know why, but it amused me to do it. Quinn, of course, eventually resurfaced in *The City of Glass*, years later. The names went through many changes. You don't happen to know the dates on the manuscripts, do you?

*No, the dates are not indicated, except in the last stages. But there was another significant change. In the first versions, the mother of the protagonist is named Effie. Then she becomes Emily. And then Effing intervenes.*

Well, you see how it all swirls around? You touch something, and bounce off another thing, and then a new constellation forms, then it finally settles, and then you feel it's right. It just takes a long time.

*Another interesting thing in the development of the manuscript is that the central part is not in the same position at all. The original tale, the one on which you bank, ends up being the unpublished novel by Solomon Barber. This is supposed to be the core of the book in its incipient stage. It then is chucked into a corner and made into this bad novel by Solomon Barber. You also have a character that is absolutely essential—notes in your papers underline that "Jack Mooney" is "crucial". While he is only a marginal note in the final version.*

Oh yes. There was a whole other part to the story. It all comes back to me now. The character of Kitty, you see, was originally somebody else.

Clio.

She was Clio, and she was an American Indian. And Jack Mooney was her father, and he was a crazy character. A kind of carnival character who, among other things, had some kind of underground sex act. He was a contortionist.

*There's a touch of Mr. Vertigo there, already.*

Yes. He was a very mean guy. And the Fogg character somehow falls in with them, and lives in their house, and falls for the girl. But all this evolved from one thing into another. But it was very sketchy, and not a lot of it was written.

*No. But the funny thing is that what used to be the heart of your story ends up...*

...pushed to the front and then shunted aside...

*That's right, shunted aside as Kepler's Blood, Sol's unpublished novel. While throughout many versions, it's the core of your story. And Moon Palace doesn't appear before very late.*

No. I re-thought the whole project.

*The first child that Nathaniel, in the early version, fathers in the tribe—the fourth child, rather—is called "Moon Eyes". It disappeared afterwards. But in one*

*version, the girl, Kitty, who by then is either Mona or Clio or Vera, is Vera Moon. You seem to play around with all these things, to explore possibilities.*

Yes, it's very organic, isn't it? It just kept changing. And then there was that *long* interruption. Because I just wasn't capable of doing it. And I think the reason why I couldn't write prose as a young person was that I somehow imagined that everything had to be worked out in advance. That I had to be consciously aware of, not just of every image in the book and every character, every twist of the plot, but of the spiritual, literary and religious ramifications of every phrase. If you work that way, you're putting so much pressure on yourself in preparing the book, that by the time you sit down to write it, there's nothing left. It's the problem of studying too many books in school.

*In fact, in one note I found, which is obviously not a sentence from the novel, but belongs to the stage when you are going through the chronology and details, the arborescences of the whole thing, you write: "Reading back through all this, I see it doesn't make any sense". [Laughter] The extraordinary detail of the chronology moves me to ask you a question about the structure of the book. The manuscripts contain innumerable outlines, lists of parts, descriptions of the way things should hang together—reworkings of the organization. Could you comment on this? In particular, you said at one stage, "it has to have three, five, or seven parts".*

I said that to you?

*No, but you wrote it down at one stage. And in fact, Moon Palace has seven chapters.*

I have never written a book with an even number of chapters, and the reason is that you need an odd number to have a center. This is very important. And I've never heard anyone talk about it, ever, except Joan Miro, the painter, who said that every series of graphic works he ever did, etchings or lithographs, came in an odd number, because, he said, an odd number gives you a center. I thought: "Good for you! I shake your hand through the grave, because I agree completely."

*This is all the more important as, for some reason, some people insist on the "decentered" nature of your books. I always felt, on the contrary, they had a very strong sense of center.*

It's a structural problem. It has to do with art in general. You want to feel, no matter how crazy the work is, no matter how eccentric it might be, that finally there is a shape to it, somewhere, buried under all the nuttiness on the surface. And if you're an attentive reader, or listener to a piece of music, or an observer

of a painting or a series of paintings, you're going to feel that shape, even though you can't articulate it or fully understand it. That shape is what grounds you, somehow, and makes the experience infinitely more satisfying and important to you. I can't defend this position. I don't know why I feel this way, but I do. In the end, it's fundamental to me.

*I suggested earlier—and I don't think it's a joke—that one could describe you as being "The Wizard of Odds", "odds" combining various connotations: chance, evens and odds, balance...*

That's true, it is important. It's a very good sentence...

*Because in effect, it seems that the question of balance and equilibrium, with you, is constantly sustained and off-set by an insistence on odds and evens. For example, you never say, "it lasted for two hours", or, "it was 200 yards away", but always "two or three". Two or three hours, two or three hundred yards. An hour or an hour and a half.*

Yes, always approximate, it's true.

*You do that on purpose?*

I do it all the time. I've noticed this. In fact, it might even be what you would call a tic. And I've been trying to control it a little bit. It has to do, nevertheless, with the vagaries of memory and the vagaries of perception. Because the truth is, you never know exactly how long it is. You don't walk around the world with a tape measure, and say, "Well, it was 172 feet from where I was standing". You know, it was somewhere between 100 and 200 feet away. You don't really know the exact distance. I try to represent as best I can what the actual perception or the actual memory feels like.

*In one of the earliest typescripts, which you revised by hand, there is a sentence that's crossed out, and it says: "The likeliest guess is three". This sentence is then replaced by "Two or three days, I would think".*

Yes. That's quite right.

*This also happens to be where you chuck in the remark that remains, shortened, in the final version: "There are three wishes in every fairy tale. The Divine Comedy is divided into three books, Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale. » This is accompanied, in the final text, by "three is a literary number".*

Yes, right, exactly. Yes, I remember exactly.

*So there seems to be a desire for imbalance, in one way, while you keep harping on the necessity to achieve balance, an equilibrium between things. For example, the idea of getting even, of being on an even plane, of finding a balance, whether it's between inner and outer, or between two and three, or between chance and necessity. All these things seem to be working together...*

But you see, the balance between two people, for example, is important. It really is the question of the "I and Thou"<sup>2</sup>; you have to be in equal relation to each other. I think it's in *Moon Palace*, but all of a sudden I can't remember whom it's referring to—Uncle Victor, maybe? Anyway it's a passage in which the narrator describes having a conversation with him, the other person, whoever it is, in terms of a baseball catch. Is this in the book?

*Yes, it is. A commentary on a conversation between Fogg and Kitty.*

Well, somehow, that's an important image to me. If you want to think about balance, consider how people who care about each other are constantly rectifying each other's mistakes, to keep something going, as we are doing right now. You know, when you have a baseball catch, you throw the ball back and forth, that's all you do. But sometimes, you make a bad throw, and if the other guy is good, he will catch it, so that the thing can continue. In a conversation, making an inappropriate remark can stop everything. But someone who's very deft, especially someone who cares about you, will catch the sentence in such a way as to make it O.K., to make it go on again. That, I think, is very similar to what we're saying about this other case...

*Throughout the book, this imbalance is constantly rectified, to ensure some kind of communication.*

You're right! I never thought of it in these terms, but, speaking of numbers, Uncle Victor has his little discourse on the number nine...

*Which also comes back throughout the book. It of course starts out with the constellations, not in a symbolic or heavy-handed way, but as a mere sign, really, that travels throughout...*

Yes, the planets, the innings... Well, Uncle Victor has a peculiar way of looking at the world. It's not true or false, it's just his particular method of perceiving things, and it certainly influences Fogg, who shares some of these traits later on. It is part of the way Uncle Victor talks. He's always finding euphemisms, or more florid expressions, instead of saying simple things. So he'll say "The Chewing Gum King" instead of saying "Wrigley", the name of the owner of the Chicago Cubs.

*So, odd number of chapters, three main characters, the young man, the infirm and the fat man. Three. Why two embedded stories within the principal one? Did you feel it was a way of putting it all in?*

Effing's story and Barber's story, you mean?

*Right...*

This was a way to deal with the fact that all three are equally important, you might say. All three of these characters. I eventually settled upon Fogg as the central intelligence of the novel, so he is the medium through which we get the other stories. They are not peripheral at all, they're important, but they come in odd ways.

*Odd again, then?*

Odd! [Laughter]

*Was that the reason why you kept the "bad" half-baked novel? You didn't want to make it so much better that it could have been published, for example?*

No, no, no. It was, in a way, I suppose, a little tip of my imaginary hat to my old young self. After all, Barber is a young man when he writes this book. He writes it with great earnestness, but it's very bad. So I think I was saying to myself, "Well, what you started, years ago, when you tried to write this book, was also very bad, and we must acknowledge this and keep it in as part of the book"; but it is also, somehow, a skewered version of the novel in miniature. So... But I don't know why. Again, it just feels right when you do it.

*But why should all the earlier versions be centered on a murder, while there is no such thing in the book itself, the closest thing to a murder being when Solomon falls into the grave?*

That's just an accident.

*You know it has been read, sometimes, as an outright killing...*

Oh, really?

*Yes, some see the gesture that makes him fall into the grave as rather aggressive.*

Well, it is aggressive, but it's just out of anguish... And he's not intending to hurt him at all.

*That's my feeling. So the murder which was crucial in the beginning is completely eradicated.*

It remains in *Kepler's Blood*. There is the murder there, right? So that's the vestige; in the vestigial novel, the vestige remained.

*Kepler's Blood sprang from Luna. Is that another sign of the transition from the original versions to Moon Palace?*

Yes, but I never liked that title, *Luna*.

*Is Kepler's Blood, then, another trace of Thomas Harriot in the book, considering the Kepler/Harriot connection?*

Kepler certainly is associated with the moon, as far as I'm concerned. And, yes, there definitely is that connection. Weren't they in correspondence at some stage?

*Yes they were<sup>3</sup>. How important to you, at the time of writing, was the presence of what we might call this American prehistorical material?*

It was very important for me, and I had to do everything I could to repress it. I didn't want to overwhelm the book with this kind of material. So, in a certain sense, it's there now as a vestige, also. Barber is an historian, he's written about these subjects, and they are mentioned, but not in any great detail. It also serves as a kind of echo of many other things going on in the book.

*Among the books written by Barber, one is on Berkeley and the Indians. One of your manuscripts includes a note in the form of a question: "Why did Quinn feel that he was perched on a stone wall in the middle of a forest? Did anyone hear the crash that shook the forest from end to end, and if not, did such a crash really take place?" That seems to imply Berkeley's ideas count as much here as the Indians.*

Yes, of course. There's Humpty-Dumpty, and I was also reading a lot of Berkeley then...

*The epigraph for one version of Moon Palace was a quote from Lewis Carroll.*

Really? I can't remember.

*The dialogue between Alice and Humpty on language as power.*

Oh yes; it's quoted in *City of Glass* now. Stillman quotes it to Quinn.

*Anyway, Kepler—as well as Tesla and his Long Island “Tower of Babel”—occupied a much larger space at one stage.*

This must have been during the second stage of my working on it, though. In 1968, I didn't even know who Tesla was... I discovered him later. You see, Tesla is such a fascinating character, I got so absorbed in reading about him that at a certain point he threatened to throw the book out of whack. When I sat down to write the final version, I put away all the books I had about Tesla and made an agreement with myself: anything I could remember without looking up, would be free to use. But I wouldn't be allowed to go back to any book to find a sentence, an idea or a passage for the novel. That would have been cheating, somehow, the wrong way to write the book.

*You made abundant notes on Harriot too, that end up in the book. His work on the Algonquin language eventually provided you with the Indian words you needed and the five that are in Moon Palace were selected way back, belong to previous stages of development...*

Every book goes through a series of purgings. That's how you find the musculature of a story. You don't know what's really important until you put it all down. And then things that might once have seemed important become much less so. And I think it's better, in the end, to keep less rather than more. Because then there's some strength to what you have, it's not just part of some flood of information that comes washing over you. But I should also say that the original idea for *Moon Palace* was so big, so pregnant with material, that much of it was put into *City of Glass*, which was the first novel I wrote. I used quite a bit. A lot of the material about Columbus, for example, and the theory expounded by the Auster character about Don Quixote. Those things were originally part of an early version of *Moon Palace*.

*This is clear from your manuscripts. Many traces remain, though.*

I stole from myself... Years later... when I sat down to write this other novel, I used that.

*That stage also included reflections on story, authorship, Columbus, Don Quijote, Humpty Dumpty... and Quinn's in there too, as we saw.*

That's right. There were so many different forking paths that I got lost in the labyrinth and stopped. And then I began pulling threads back towards me, much later, when I was older. I was better able to handle it then....

*Talking of Columbus, there seems to be an abundance of round shapes side by side in Moon Palace, including an unlikely number of words that have two*

*"O"'s in their center. The effect is comparable to that of Dr. Eckleburg's glasses in The Great Gatsby, as if one were constantly looked at by the words themselves.*

In some cases it just happened and in other cases it was conscious. It's like the sign on the restaurant, the two eyes of God.

*You don't trust words very much, do you?...*

Probably not... and yet that's all I have, isn't it?...

*Much of your poetry indicates that there are things, outer as well as inner, that one is tempted to "capture" with words, but that the minute the word actually stops on the thing, it hardens into a barrier between us and the thing, so that the challenge consists in coming up with words that would not be wall-building, but wall-destroying... So far so good?*

O.K., yes...

*One element in the linkage between your prose and your poetry therefore appears to be that you deliberately opted for a "writing of speed", which of course does not mean that you write quickly but that you will not allow words to root, to do much more than slide over what they designate.*

Somewhere I once said, and I sometimes feel—not always—that for me the ideal book would be one in which the language was so transparent that the reader would forget that the medium of communication is words... You would somehow be able to travel through the words into what the words were saying... This is impossible, of course. But on top of that, if one is to achieve this transparency, so to speak, it doesn't mean that the sentences can't be rich and knotty at times, and have a lot of sonorous texture to them... that's not what I mean. But I think that what you have to try to achieve, and this is what I *strive* for all the time, and what takes *all* the time, is to listen to the language very carefully, to hear it, to create a rhythm by which the reader is actually experiencing the language on a level below the intelligence, in the body; I think that the relationship of the body to the language in a book can provoke something extraordinary. I've often felt that people who like my books very much feel this rhythm, and people who don't like them at all—and there are many who think they're garbage—are not able to hear the language, or that this kind of experience with language is not interesting to them.

*Musicality, then. "I liked the sound of those sentences, even if they were false" it says, p. 3 of your book, and elsewhere Fogg starts "to sing a crazy tuneless*

*kind of singing". The abundant rewriting of each clause and sentence in your manuscripts feels like the building of some kind of momentum...*

That's right. It's like raking, raking all the time. You take the pile of leaves and smooth them out, and then start raking again. You do that with the sentence, with the words, but also with paragraphs and pages and chapters, at times with whole books... Purifying it, strengthening it. Every detail counts.

*For example the first sentence of the book, the first paragraph actually, is reworked innumerable times, and what is now the opening sentence doesn't appear until way later...*

I remember very distinctly when that first paragraph came to me. I was about to have lunch with an old childhood friend I hadn't seen for many years. In Jack's Deli, of all places, where Auggie Wren tells the Christmas story, and walking over to that restaurant—this must have been in late '85 or early '86—it came to me. Fortunately, my friend was a little late, and I was able to sit down and write out the first paragraph on a napkin before he came in. And then I had it. Just like that. After trying to find it for fifteen or twenty years.

*For a long time, the first sentence remains: "There was a time in my life when I kept myself open to all the accidents of the universe", followed by a long development on the state of things in the '60s: Chappaquiddick, world events that only reappear around page 62 in the novel. So, in the new version, the emphasis seems to be placed more on signs than events...*

Right. I remember. But I used just *one* event, the moon landing, to stand in for *everything*. Yes, I'm still attached to that opening paragraph... It's much better than the other ones.

*Among all your books, is Moon Palace, in your mind, the one that's most about America?*

Not necessarily. More overtly perhaps, but not at its heart. *City of Glass* is also about America. And certainly *Leviathan* and *Mr. Vertigo* are also about America. *The Music of Chance* may be less so on the surface, but that story, too, could only happen in America.

*When it comes to chance, I take it to be related to your esthetics inasmuch as it is part and parcel of realism, for you.*

Absolutely. That's it... and nothing more needs to be said about it really, because it keeps coming up in what is said about me and it's beginning to drive me a little crazy. I don't know what people think the world looks like. I

don't know what planet they're living on! If they think life moves on in an orderly, rational way...

*On the other hand, the only counter force available, and necessary to make aleatory things stick together, is fictional power. We all tell our stories of the world as we think it is, giving the particular shape we choose to disconnectedness...*

Definitely, definitely... I mean, it's what you can see that makes it interesting. Not everyone sees the same things. I suppose that's why we need artists. You know: to help us see things that we would pass over. This isn't to say that we don't have rational thoughts or that we don't have a will, or that we don't make an effort to organize our lives in as rational and satisfying a way as we can. I would never argue that. But we are not the masters of our own destinies. And the very fact that we are mortal is, how shall I put it?, a big impediment to making a world that we feel completely satisfied with. And, you know, death can come at any moment, for any reason.

*Was it Jacques Dupin or Bonnefoy or Giacometti who said that the function of the artist is to tame the savagery of the world?*

I don't know which one, but it's an interesting comment. But as for chance, even though I like the title of *The Music of Chance* very much, I'm also sorry that I used the word "chance" in the title—simply because people have jumped on it so much, to the point that I've begun to feel misrepresented.

*Does that mean that when I say the "Wizard of Odds" I shouldn't include chance in "odds"?*

Well, of course, chance has to do with the odds. If you're a betting man, you're very concerned with the odds. What do you say in French?

*"La chance", "les chances", "les probabilités", depending on context... A poker game is the next thing we must organize...*

There's no poker in *Moon Palace* though...

*Since you mention French, your image as you know, particularly in France, is largely articulated around a certain number of recurring themes (chance, fathers and sons, etc), a situation which you seem to resent. What if I*

*proposed to you that the father-son relation, much like chance in fact, is not so much a psychological as a structural proposition?*

I think there's truth to what you're saying. But it's very difficult for me to understand why I do what I do. It's impossible for me to get a grip on it.

*Which, I suppose, is "why you write"?*

Yes, probably. There's no question that certain—what?...—forces or obsessions, or preoccupations, come up with a certain frequency in my work. It's not that every time I sit down to write I'm doing the same thing, but there is what you might call a set of particularly important preoccupations that I seem to come back to fairly often. Why this should be so probably has everything to do with psychology. Everything to do with what happened to me as a child, pains, wounds and traumas of all kinds. But, so what? That doesn't seem to me as important as how these things are manifested in the work, as what I actually *do* with it. So I think you're probably right.

*Dora Shamsky, in Moon Palace, is not called that for a long time, she bears other names before she becomes Dora. In Luna, she is "Dora Sparks, née Witkowski". Considering the Freudian overtones of her first name did you change her last to signify Freud was a "sham"?*

[Laughter] No, but I have to say that there was a baseball player on the Mets named Art Shamsky, and I always liked this name very much. There was some business in *Moon Palace* about the 1969 Mets and Art Shamsky happened to be on that team. So, his name inevitably found its way into the book.

*You have a whole list of players in one of your notebooks...*

Do I?

*Twenty five names or so, but only a few surface in the novel.*

Well, Memo Luna for example, was a real player, and I got carried away with some of the funny names. I was looking through the baseball encyclopedia, and jotting down the ones that I was most attracted to. Virgil Trucks was one I just... [Laughter] Only in baseball do they have names like that... There's a guy on the Mets now named Butch Husky! Come on! How is this possible? There was another player, I used to love his name: Charlie Spikes; he was never very good but his name... It's fantastic, fantastic! There used to be, and still are, people who play games making up imaginary teams with funny names for the players. It's like a little minor sport in America. My favorite one is the "Body Parts Team". In it was a pitcher named Rollie Fingers, and another pitcher

named Bill Hands and Barry Foot, the catcher, and, you know, on and on. On the « Money Team » there was Don Money and Bobby Bonds, and Dave Cash. It goes on and on... [Laughter]

*Some names just pass through the manuscript and don't reappear, some others stick. So, considering the importance you attribute to "what's in a name", did you see any particular potentialities in, say, the names of philosophers that pop up—Hume, Descartes, Bacon, Pascal...?*

I don't think too much should be made of it. How shall I put it? These are real names. I mean, it's perfectly logical that the French would have named a ship "S.S. Descartes". It's not at all improbable; and Hume is a name, I've known people with the name Hume.

*But Rita Hume is also a skeptic?*

I wouldn't go so far as to say that. It juggles back and forth, you see. It's a delicate line that I'm treading, I suppose. On the one hand, we shouldn't think too much about the real names. On the other hand, if you want to think about them, then what it does is point to the artificiality of the book. It points to the fact that this is the work of someone's imagination; that it's not a piece of journalism in the newspaper; that it is possible to use your mind to organize reality in a certain way that will lead you into a certain way of thinking about things. In *Ghosts*, I used the names of colors. This is probably the most significant use of names to talk about in any of my books—Blue and Black and Green and White, and all the rest. The inspiration for this, again, was a sports thing. One morning I was reading the Sports page in the [*New York Times*] about the NFL, the National Football League. They had the statistical leaders in there... You know what football's like, right? And you know about receiving a pass, catching, a reception. So I looked at the receiving leaders, and their names were: Gray, Brown, White, Green and Black. Five guys. Real people who were playing in the NFL. I thought, "Well, isn't *that* amusing... I like this very much." And so, I started toying with this idea in a play I wrote back in '76—one of the plays that I haven't published yet but am going to publish now.<sup>5</sup> In another play I wrote around that time, a man and a woman and talking about language. They get onto a discussion about the word « blue ». And one of them says, "Well, you know, that's my favorite word. 'Blue, blue.'" And they start speaking the word.

*For some, saying "blue, blue", over and over again, was a way to reach transcendence. Apparently it was the favorite syllable of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, their own sort of "Om".<sup>6</sup>*

Interesting. I didn't know that. In any case, the point was, in this little passage in the play, that "blue" is a word that doesn't *mean* anything. In other words, you can't define it. The only possible way you could define the word "blue" is to call it a color. You could give the physical properties on the spectrum and the waves that it emits and so on, but you can't *see* that. So, in other words, unless you've had the experience of perceiving "blue", when someone uses the word "blue", you have no idea what that person is saying, right? That's obvious. I think what I was trying to do by giving characters the names of colors was not only to turn them into abstractions but to underscore the fact that you can't know a person until you've had the experience of that person—in the same way you can't know what a color is until you've had the experience of that color.

*Incidentally, in the Brooklyn Museum, ten minutes away from here, on the fifth floor devoted to Contemporary Art, there is an extraordinary piece of light sculpture which would support your view. I don't remember the artist's name.*

Is it Kossuth, maybe?

*It may well be<sup>7</sup>. It's a paragraph in blue neon that attempts a definition of the color blue, and fails to do so while being blue. But to go on with names, Effing's for example seems to be one that proclaims artificiality, preventing merely psychological readings.*

But Effing is a real name. There are people with that name<sup>8</sup>. It's not so uncommon. Originally, in the *Music of Chance*, Nashe's name was Coffin, which is an old New England name. But I thought it was a little too heavy in the end. In Italian, by the way, Pozzi means "a well" or "a hole in the ground". The coffin fits into the hole. I abandoned the idea however.

*You bank on your reader's making these associations but you often include the interpretations yourself?*

I do? Like what?

*Like, say, a coincidence between two things made explicit after it has been merely suggested, or the explicitation of Fogg's names. At the same time your conception of story-telling also abides by more traditional rules, which begs*

*the question: "Where do you place yourself in contemporary aesthetics?"—on the side of proclaimed artificiality or on that of novelistic make-believe?*

I don't feel I belong to either one. Over the years, I had several great revelations. The first revelation came after all my struggles as a young person, not managing to achieve the books I wanted to write, even though I was, as you know, bursting with ideas. I had a thousand ideas and I didn't have a way of organizing them. And I understood at a certain point that the making of art is not about the making of art. This was an important step in my growing up, not only as a writer, but as a man. That the desire to make art, the desire to do it, is a fundamental *human* desire and that the results are less important than the process of doing it, the propulsion into it. What you might call the *necessity* to do it. There's no book or poem worth reading that wasn't necessary to the writer who wrote it. The last thing to worry about is style. The style will take care of itself. You don't have to strive to create a willed, artificial style. After so much experience—I mean this only comes after years of doing it—it's better to write in one's own way, to let it come naturally. Your style is like your thumbprint, you can't really get away from it. There are certain ways of writing for different people that come naturally to them. Proust wrote the way he did, Céline wrote the way he did. They are both great stylists, but the two styles have nothing in common. If you're Proust, you can't sit down and say I want to write like Céline, and vice versa. It would be a useless effort. That was, I think, the first revelation. And out of that revelation came the *Invention of Solitude*. It was with the experience of writing that book that I understood that I just didn't give a shit anymore. I had to say these things, and I was going to do it in the best way I could. And let everything else fall where it may. A kind of active indifference to the fate of the thing as an artifact, as a book, a work of art. The second revelation, I think, came as a result of thinking very carefully about what I like when I read books, what attracts me to books, what I care about in literature. Story-telling is crucial, and I believe that no matter how painful a book can be to read, no matter what dark territory it might take you into, it has to give pleasure; if it doesn't give pleasure, then you just don't want to read it. There are a lot of very daunting modern and postmodern texts that I admire a great deal. But I don't get any joy out of reading them. It's a big effort for me to sit down and slog my way through them. And I've come to the age where I don't care any more, I don't feel obligated to read these books, I don't feel that my life hinges on knowing what...—I can't even think of a name now—but somebody's novel, means. I don't care. I have to like it, I have to want to read it and it has to give me something. Therefore I realized that I owed it to myself to write the kind of books I like. So that's what I try to do. I'm my own reader, after all, before anybody else. And in a way, showing off, showing how smart you are, how much you know, how much you can manipulate language and juggle all kinds of things, is really not important to me anymore. When I was young, I thought that was what writing largely was.

It was the crushing presence of James Joyce; to me, as a youngster, he was the one that you had to emulate. And I think, in the end, that he went down the wrong road. *Finnegans Wake* took him seventeen years to write. One of the greatest literary minds we've ever had spent *seventeen* years writing a book that nobody reads, that nobody gets any pleasure out of. I find that sad. At a certain point, you realize that you don't want to do that. But I used to think that you had to start where *Finnegans Wake* left off, to go even further, to continue the progress. But there is no progress.

*Works like Finnegans Wake, or Duchamp's, stop things in their tracks. You can't go any further anyway.*

Definitely; it's a wall, and then you have to go back, return to something simpler. I think that's why Beckett was such a revelation to me. He, more than anybody else, was under Joyce's thumb. He worshipped Joyce all through his youth; and then he finally grew up and realized what his path was. He was forty by the time he really found it. Then he started all over again. Tiny, simple little stories, tiny and simple as could be. And I found that beautiful, that someone should have had the courage, after the education he'd had, the training, the background, the experience, to go all the way back and to become a simpleton again. Right? All these things have been important moments of discovery for me. They've made me who I am.

*Talking of simplicity, Paul, one thing that strikes me is the extreme rarity of metaphors in your work.*

Yes...

*There is practically none...*

Yes, I know, I know...

*Would you comment on this?*

Well, even in my poetry, which was written in a metaphorical realm, so to speak, there are no metaphors. I don't know how often I use similes in poetry, but I would say that you can probably count them on the fingers of one hand.

*More similes than metaphors, certainly, but...*

But even "like" and "as" ... very rarely, very rarely; and I think that I was very conscious when I was writing poetry of the Jewish injunction not to use images. And there were times when I tried very consciously not to use images in poetry.

*For ideological reasons or because it struck you as wiser?*

So as not to hide behind the games and artifices of literature, to try to get down more deeply to something else. And I think when you get way down, what you find is narrative; this is the interesting thing: the words, the shapes of thoughts, the action, mental, emotional, spiritual, whatever, start to take the shape of a story. I can't prove this, but once you get into that realm, that seems to be what happens. It's very interesting... Did you ever see the movie "Brazil"...?

*No, I haven't seen it.*

This is a very interesting case. About narrative and metaphor and what happens when you tell a story. I thought it was an excellent film and I liked it very much. It takes place in a kind of imaginary post-World War II England. But everything is different. Sort of an Orwellian world. Vaguely totalitarian, quite scary, bureaucracies everywhere, weird things taking place. The film tells the story of a functionary who is the victim of a clerical error. A fly gets caught in some machine and the wrong name comes up, his name. He is pursued and eventually killed by the state. The narrative reality of this film is brilliant. The scenes, the set design, the art direction, everything is brilliant, and you're completely absorbed in it. Already we're one step removed from ordinary reality, but you accept it. In the course of the film, however, there are one or two moments when the main character, played by Jonathan Pryce, that English actor, dreams; these dreams are highly metaphorical, symbolic dreams. In one, I remember, he's flying through the air with enormous, metallic wings attached to his body. I thought these dreams were awful. They took the story one step too far, shattering the integrity of the world the director had gone to such pains to make us believe in. By going to another metaphorical level, the illusion was destroyed. It's what I would call too much of a good thing: you take a situation, and you find that bedrock, metaphorical level and then a story can develop; but if you take it farther, then it's not interesting anymore. It becomes contrived. I'm not expressing myself very well, but I suppose what I mean to say is that every work or art has its limits; they can be different limits, depending on what you are trying to do. But you have to know where the thing stops. You have to know where the wall is, otherwise you get into a fluid, open, disconcerting situation that doesn't produce the satisfaction I was talking about before. The pleasure that reading can give you, that we all felt as children. That's why we do what we do now, because we loved books so much when we were young. Siri said something amazing, years ago, when we were first living together. She had never read Céline, a writer I like very much, especially his first two books, and I got her to read *Death on the Installment Plan*. She read it with tremendous avidity, just ate the thing up. And when the

book was over, she shut the book and said: "This is better than life!" [Laughter] That's what a great book makes you feel. That it's better than life.

*What's the place of Moon Palace in you mind, heart, whatever? In your career?*

I would say it's a central book. I think of it as a source. First of all, it's the longest novel I've ever written. To tell you the truth, most of the other novels I've written were first imagined as short stories or novellas. They just got longer and longer as I was working on them. I never intended them to be two hundred or three hundred pages. Always fifty pages. But then something always seems to happen, and there's more to tell and it keeps going on. But a book like *The Music of Chance*, for example, is very different from *Moon Palace*. It's much smaller...

*Sketchier?...*

I wouldn't call it that...

*I mean, stylized, in the sense that it has less, say, cultural material for example, that it's closer to the bone.*

Yes, it's more concerned with the action, the actions of the characters; hardly "sketchy", though. In fact it goes into great detail, great psychological detail and a lot of physical detail too. But it's all circumscribed. It's small, it's a very tiny universe, and even *Mr. Vertigo*, which is a large book, in many ways, I thought would be twenty or thirty pages when I started. But Thomas Mann thought *The Magic Mountain* was going to be fifty pages too!

*Wrong again!*

Right!

*What about the various painters in Moon Palace? Blakelock, Cole, Church, Moran, Ryder...*

Is Ryder mentioned in the book? Maybe just in passing.

*Yes, in passing... But all are Luminists, or people that have to do with light, and that brings me to the exploitation you do of light in the text in connection with visions... the eyes and so forth.*

It was interesting, I got a letter just recently, from a French professor, who's about to teach *Moon Palace* for this same program... A woman, I think from Paris, but maybe not from Paris, maybe another city, I can't remember.

Anyway, she said: I'm gearing up to teach the book and there's just one little question I want to ask you—about Chandler, the owner of the bookstore... This person was actually based on a real character named Salter, and I definitely wanted an "er" word.

*You had him as Tillman at one stage, and Pepper at another, and Miller...*

Yes Pepper—Salter, you see became Pepper, that was how it came about. There was a famous bookstore near Columbia called Salter's, up there on Broadway, where I myself sold many books, trying to roust up a little cash for myself. Anyway, she thought it had something to do with Raymond Chandler... but not at all, not at all... Chandler, of course, as you know, is a "candle-maker", which makes it just one more buried reference to all the light imagery in the book. That's all. So I wrote to her. Generally, I do *not* answer such things, but I thought, this time I'm going to do it, otherwise she's going to get up there and say the wrong thing, and I wanted to tell her what I was thinking anyway... But, you see, it's not as though she can't choose to believe that, after interpretation. The name Chandler is there, after all, Raymond Chandler was a writer, a writer I like very much, by the way, so... But I don't think that reading leads you anywhere. It's a dead-end. It wouldn't make any sense. You may want to assume that the names *mean* something, but you could easily ignore that whole question, and still get a great deal of fun out of the book...

*But light, on the other hand, is a real theme.*

It's a real theme. It comes up all the time: natural light, artificial light, moonlight, sunlight...

*Vision...*

Vision, yes... the eyes. We have a blind man, after all, we have the blackout, which is an event that has its importance...

*It loomed large in the first version, that New York '65 blackout.*

I was a freshman in college at that time. It was an amazing event. One of the most extraordinary things I've ever lived through. It took place in October '65, I think, just a few weeks after classes started. All of a sudden, the whole city went black, and it was an extraordinary thing. A kind of jubilation in the streets. Everyone was happy. And, interestingly enough, nine months later, more children were born than was statistically probable. People went home and fucked! [Laughter] The blackout-babies...

*But you have an innumerable list of people speaking with their eyes, or speaking and doing something with their eyes...*

Really? I'm not even aware of that. But that's quite normal, I suppose. People communicate through their eyes, don't they?

*That compensates your remarks on your dream of language as a sort of intransitive medium... Saying is always spewing out, as if matter, physical matter was coming out.*

But words *are* physical things. I feel that. I feel that language is a physical substance... Do you remember the little piece I wrote, "White Spaces"?

*Yes, of course, and feel it's probably the text by you which I love best... Everything, everything is there, everything in your poetry and in White Spaces makes sense in terms of the way you write fiction, the "leanness" and the "swiftness" of your writing, your notion of the status of the text, that notion of "speed", etc.*

I hope you can say that in your book<sup>9</sup>, because writing that little thing was the breakthrough for me; *that* was the movement into prose. And it was a revelation. You know the circumstances under which it was written, right? I talk about them in the interview with Larry [McCaffery] and Sinda [Gregory]. This was a period when I wasn't writing at all. I really had nothing but troubles on every front, inner and outer; and for more than a year, a year and a half, I didn't write much of anything. One day, my dear friend, David Reed, who is really an important person for me—David was the one, just in parentheses, who took me out West, the person I explored all these canyons with. He was the one who introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who appear in *Moon Palace*. They were real people. I didn't make up anything about them. They were not fictionalized at all. She was the great-granddaughter of Kit Carson. Mr. Smith... I can tell you stories about him, too. Fogg's encounter with the draft board, by the way, was directly based on David's experiences. I used David's story. He starved himself to get out of the draft, back in 1968 or 1969. David, who's an excellent painter, was also the person who told me about Blakelock. I didn't know anything about Blakelock until David told me about him. So anyway, at the time, back in the late seventies, December 1978, to be precise, David had a girlfriend who happened to be a choreographer. She was quite good. She'd been in the Twyla Tharpe company and had branched off to form her own group. David called me up one day to invite me to an open rehearsal of her new piece—which was still a work in progress. The event took place in a high school gym, somewhere in Lower Manhattan. There were only about twenty or thirty people there. Actually, [Jacques] Dupin was in town, and we went together. And David's girlfriend, Nina, got up with her dancers;

there were about ten dancers in the company, and she stood there on the gym floor, a little off to the side... There was no music, no set, no costumes, nothing, just her, trying to explain what the dance was. She would say something, and then the dancers would dance and I found what they did very beautiful. The movements, the gestures. They just moved around the floor, with no music to support them or tell you what to think. Ten bodies moving in space. I thought it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. And she, standing there, with all her earnestness and sincerity, tried to explain what they were doing. And her words were so inadequate, they missed the mark so completely about what these bodies were doing right in front of her, that I started trembling in a kind of ecstasy, an enormous surge of happiness, realizing how inadequate language was in the face of such a thing, in the face of the world. It was as if the dancers were the world, and she was language. That was what inspired the piece. I went home, and that very night I started writing *White Spaces*. That was the breakthrough for me. It got me writing again. I hadn't been able to write for a year and a half.

*It falls right in step, if I may say, considering the context, with what you seemed to be searching for in your poetry...*

I think you're right. When I finally finished it a few weeks later, I thought to myself: "Good. At last I've written something that doesn't disgust me". It felt like a new step, a step in the right direction. It was a Saturday night.<sup>10</sup> I worked till about two a.m. and then went to bed. At seven o'clock, Sunday morning, the phone rang. It was my uncle, and suddenly he was telling me that my father had died during the night. Very odd, very odd indeed. Eerie.

*The Elizabethan background in your novel is rich: Greville, Francis Bacon, Elizabeth, Wyatt and all this. This is a mere backdrop for the late 16th century American situation?*

Yes, but I've always been very interested in that period. As early as my undergraduate days at Columbia. Fulke Greville, for example, is a completely forgotten poet now, but he's a master, a genius of a sonneteer and actually, in this piece I'm working on now, I quote a line from him. It's always struck me as one of the most beautiful sentences in the English language, "I write for those on whom the black ox hath trod". Think about it. "I write for those on whom the black ox hath trod". It's so beautiful. What one syllable can do...

*He was a friend of Harriot too.*

Yes, and a great friend of Sydney's as well as the patron of Giordano Bruno. They were incredibly brilliant characters, those men. Geniuses. And of course it's all connected with America. It is.

*Kitty, as we saw, had all sorts of names before. Does she end up being Kitty because of Kitty Hawk?*

Yes, the Wright brothers...

*There is a note somewhere in the manuscript to that effect, and it falls in line with the flight imagery...*

Yes, there was a moment when I was toying with her having a job as a topless go-go dancer, who performed on the stage under the name of Kitty Hawk, but I abandoned that idea quite early on.

*There is hardly a whole thing in your text. Somebody's always "half-literate". It's "mid-American" life, it's a "part-time" job in a bookstore, it's a "half-world". It's the "first half-hour" of a film or "limiting myself to one meal a day". It's a group of "half-naked" men. It's "half-finished", it's a "halfwit's voice"... This is not really a tic, as it seems functional. Does it fall in with the "two or threes?"*

[Pause]. Probably. I'm thinking about this for the first time. Um... let's see: something like "halfwit" is an entire phrase... right?

*Yes, but you opt for such things...*

*"Half-way into the film..."*

*Or when you see a house it's a "split-level house" and if it's a motel, it happens to be called Comb Ridge...*

Well, that's a real place.

*But such systematic choices produce a stylistic effect...*

Yes, that's true. There must be something that resonates in that approach that is important to me. But I don't know how to account for it...

*What if I relaunched the question as "Your writing is very often a writing of paradox"...*

I would subscribe to that.

Examples could include “at each moment there is the possibility of what is not”, or “it was impossible to exclude either alternative”, etc., or even finds like “Shut up and talk, boy”...

Yeah, I’m glad you picked up on that... I always liked “Shut up and talk!”  
[Laughter]

*These paradoxical statements seem to cohere, stylistically with the halving, the evens and the odds, and the balance and the imbalance, etc., including your interest in Philip Petit!, to draw some sort of psychological map.*

I think you’re right. I think you’re right. I think you’re definitely right.

*In a distinct area, what is your general view of history?*

I’m just a great reader of history. I’m fascinated by it, and I find myself compelled, again and again, to read and read and read more and more books about history. It’s what I like reading most these days.

*Because that makes a good story too?*

Since I spend most of my waking life living in an imaginary world, living inside my books and the work I’m doing, I find myself less and less attracted to reading fiction. It becomes harder and harder to step into somebody else’s imaginary world. Reading about the real world, about things that really happened, is so stimulating, so generative for me, that I keep doing it. History interests me, and for once, in *Moon Palace*, I finally made up a character who was a historian.

*Do you see history as fiction at any stage?*

Well, historiography is a very murky subject, I think we both know all the pitfalls, we don’t have to go into that. But because history is such a delicate and difficult proposition, history keeps getting rewritten, and people keep going back to the same events and exploring them from different angles and coming up with new interpretations of what happened. I have been at events that are supposedly important, you know. I’ve been there, I’ve seen things happen, and never have I read an accurate account of what I have seen with my own eyes. Most of our contemporary history comes out of newspapers, people recording what happens; and they *always* get it wrong. It happens so consistently, that you learn that everything you read in the newspaper is wrong—even though the journalist is trying his best, is not purposely distorting the facts. So you have to read between the lines. I remember when Kennedy was shot. I was a junior in high school. He was somebody I liked very

much. A couple of my friends and I decided to go down to Washington for the funeral. We wanted to do that. And this was a very interesting thing to do: you know the common view of it today, that America was stunned, that everybody was grieving and there wasn't a dry eye in the nation? Well, what I found fascinating and a little disconcerting, was that standing on the street as the funeral procession was going by, a large number of the people there were only interested in getting good photographs. There were people climbing up into trees and yelling at each other about how to get the right angle. There was no sadness or bereavement that I could see. Just people out there in a kind of carnival atmosphere. It was very interesting.

*As you were telling this story, you used an expression that keeps recurring in the text, which is "with my own eyes".*

Well... "I saw it with my own eyes"... yes. It gives you a different perspective. Most of what we know comes from the eyes of other people. Most of what we know about history—and everything, for that matter. What's going on in the world today? I don't know. I'm not in Bosnia right now. I can only read what people tell me and watch TV and listen to what they're telling me, but I'm not really seeing it with my own eyes. But when you're actually there, wherever it may be, you're able to make your own judgment. You have possession of more facts than you would otherwise have. But even when I've been there, sometimes I don't understand what I'm seeing. The Columbia riots in '68 were another great example of how the press distorted what was going on. The details were so complex, there were so many factions, so many arguments, so many minute-by-minute decisions to be made. People looking from the outside had a broad view of what was going on, but no sense of the texture of things. Another example: 1989, Tienanmen Square, one of the horrible events of recent years. As it was happening, I followed it as closely as I could, in the newspapers. About a month ago, seven years after those events, they had something on PBS, the public TV station. It was a three-hour documentary about the students who participated in the Chinese democracy movement. And I realized, again, how complicated it was. How many fights were going on. How many differences of opinion. You look from a distance, things looked unified, everyone is together and yet they're not. Not to compare the two situations—what happened in China is much graver and more important than what happened at Columbia University, the consequences were not at all of the same magnitude—but the dynamics of the groups were the same. It's utterly fascinating. The closer you get to something, the more complex it becomes.

*So that the way you put things together, the essential act of fiction, is crucial. Fogg is constantly told to "act as if he were a character in the novel of his own life"; that's supposed to be the David Copperfield connection. You have*

*to make sure you tell the story of your life before you can live it. Or to make it suit the story you have in your head.*

Right. Though Fogg is not like David Copperfield, in that he's already lived the story. He's trying to tell it, he's trying to understand what he's been through. He doesn't really care whether he is the hero of his own life or not. Although in some sense, I suppose, he knows that he is.

*In your mind, is he a lucid character?*

A lucid character? Yes. Later. The man who writes the book is a lucid character of about forty. The younger self that he is describing is not at all a lucid character.

*He's in the fog!*

He *is* in the fog. He's a confused, complex but, I find, infinitely endearing young man [laughter]... so pathetically lost, and yet finally with such goodwill. He's looking for a place in the world. He doesn't know how to find it.

*There are moments in the story when I felt you had simultaneously a desire to use a number of autobiographical details and a reluctance to do so. You think of doing it and then you sort of veer off...*

How so? Give me an example.

*Say, things like "My French was as good as his", or "The book was rejected by twenty-one publishers" or...*

Right, right! [laughter]

*You know, things of that sort. Or the similarities in age and dates, and even things such as "No matter how scrupulous and professional he was in treating them, there was always a personal motive behind his work, a secret conviction that he would still have dealings in the mysteries of his own life."*

The fact that Fogg was my age, and that he went to the same school I went to...

*Right.*

Fogg is like an imaginary friend. A person I went to school with, but who never really existed. That's what he's like.

*To me, an endearing aspect of the text is the parallel between the personal history of the character and the history of the country.*

Yes.

*A convergence, the same sense of loss...*

Yes, he's caught up in the times, and even though he is very marginal to what is going on, he feels the zeitgeist pressing down on him. But it's strange that even though this book feels like an intimate autobiography, I would say this novel has less of my own life in it than any other book I've written.

*Even vicariously, and in spite of sentences like "My own story stands in the rubble of those days and unless this fact is understood, none of it will make sense"?*

This is not autobiography though, only the story of that generation which we both belong to... But doesn't everybody feel this? Every generation feels this. Everyone is marked by his time. But that was a particularly crazy time.

*By the way, speaking of MS, it turns out that "emmes" in Yiddish or Hebrew means truth... You knew that?*

No, thank you for telling me! That's good! That's great.

*Do you intend to offer the reader a critical lime twig when you talk for example of a romance begun in "Valentine" or a wound received in "Needles"?*

It's funny, you know, I never gave it a moment's thought. Needles, California, is the only town in that area. It's an important place in a small way, and I thought, well, he would be around Needles, California by now. So, it doesn't matter. But you can make the point if you really want to.

*Not necessarily, but the readers constantly find themselves thrown into this sort of situation, lured on by details like this, and more often than not, you will eventually, a page later, two pages later...*

... show my hand, yes.

*Exactly. Which encourages me to say you take your reader for a partner more than for a victim of the "reality" you impose.*

That's true, I do want the reader to be there with me. Whoever he or she may be.

*Since you do often lead one on, let me come to a detail concerning the distribution of fifty-dollar bills in the street. Since "it was the only denomination that Effing would accept", one of the first things I did was check whose face appeared on the fifty-dollar bill, a detail I had forgotten; and it turns out it's Grant, a name that can be severally connected with dealing out money—grants or graft—particularly in a context where Effing advises Fog "not to to take anything for granted". You make that sort of temptation constant.*

I see. But I'll tell you: this too, has an absolutely autobiographical source. The fifty-dollar bills, I mean. In fact, as I told you earlier, I've been writing this little book about money. I'm almost done, I have about two days to go; a 130-page autobiographical essay about money. *Hand to Mouth*—that's what I'm calling it. It's about my early days. "Hand to Mouth—A Chronicle of Early Failure": that's the full title. In the book, I talk about different experiences having to do with money. Lots of jobs, lots of people I met along the way, the stupidity with which I lived my life as a younger person, always broke, always in trouble, that freelance life of translating and hack work, of never knowing if you'll manage to pay the rent. Anyway, there's a passage in which I talk at great length about this experience. H.L. Humes, does the name ring any bells for you?

*Yes, the guy who gave away his money in the streets?*

He was a novelist. One of the founders of the *Paris Review*. And considered in the fifties as one of the most promising young American novelists. He wrote two novels... Harold Humes was his name. Doc Humes, he was later called. (Humes, Hume: You see: there you go.) One was called *Underground City*, an enormous book. And then another book with the wonderful title of *Men Die*. Anyway, in 1969, just as I was getting ready to graduate from Columbia, in the Spring of '69, this guy shows up on the Columbia campus, giving away fifty-dollar bills. I eventually got to know him. He actually wound up living in my apartment for about two weeks—but that's another story. He was a shattered, devastated character with all kinds of problems—shock treatments and so forth—and he couldn't write anymore. He talked obsessively. In fact, remember Charlie Bacon, with his radio plugged into his ear? That was Doc. I took it straight, again, from life: what the nuclear weapons are doing under the ground... The "thumpers", he used to call them.

*Forgive me for interrupting you briefly here, but, parenthetically, I saw you had plenty of notes and xeroxes of books on the Enola Gay and bombing and nuclear bombs, etc. among your Moon Palace manuscripts.*

Yes. There was going to be more, but it got stripped down. One of the currents of thinking in the book that atrophied as time went on. Anyway,

Humes had just inherited fifteen thousand dollars from his father, and he had this idea that he could go out and destroy the American economic system by giving away fifty-dollar bills to strangers, encouraging them to spend them as quickly as they could, telling everyone to tell the next person "Spend it as quickly as you can." He said "we'll create this amazing effect where there'll be so many fifty-dollar bills flying through the air, it will be like rubber balls bouncing against a wall, and pretty soon the walls will come tumbling down." I walked up Broadway with him one night as he was giving out money to people, and it was one of the most extraordinary things I've ever seen. Bums, you know, just as in the book. "Spread a little sunshine", he was yelling. He sounded like Tom Waits, that's how he talked. "Spread a little sunshine". He'd walk into Bickfords' and Childs', these down-and-out coffee shops, with bums sitting at the counter, and I used all that in *Moon Palace*. It was just wonderful—he'd slap the fifty-dollar bills down in front of all these guys... [Laughter] *That's* where it comes from. That's an autobiographical element of the book. I mean, who could have dreamed that up? In *Hand to Mouth*, I must have written ten or fifteen pages about Doc Humes. And the bills *were* fifties.

*One more detail. Why did you switch from the American Encyclopedia to the Humboldt Encyclopedia between the manuscript and the published version?*

It was more subtle. Humboldt, the famous scientist and so on. It was just more interesting. Don't you think we should have a drink?

*That sounds good. After all, a key sentence in your book, considering the situation we are in, is "There is nothing more important in this world than being good to your friends".*

Who says this?

*Solomon Barber, p. 267, to Aunt Clara.*

Oh, to Aunt Clara, yes. The imbecilic old woman he's talking down to like a child. That's it, yes. And it is one of the most important things, that's for sure. Let's go.



---

1. I would like to thank Paul Auster very warmly for his availability, his patience and his help. Without Paul and Siri's hospitality under the pressure of busy and troublesome days, this and other work could not have been completed in time. My gratitude and friendship fly out to both of them.

2. Martin Buber's book.

3. Between 1606 and 1608.
4. *Why Write?* (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1996).
5. This play, *Blackouts*, was published in *Le Magazine Littéraire* (December 1995). It will be included in the forthcoming volume entitled *Hand to Mouth*.
6. That point was made and developed by Professor Elemire Zolla, of the University of Rome, at the first Conference of the European Association for American Studies, in Heidelberg (1976).
7. I checked with the Brooklyn Museum, later on, and Paul Auster is quite right. It is Joseph Kossuth: "276. (On Color, Blue), 1993". (MC)
8. The Bronx phone book indeed lists one such name. The Manhattan and Brooklyn books, none.
9. Marc Chénétier, *Paul Auster as the Wizard of Odds: Moon Palace* (Paris: Didier Érudition, 1996).
10. January 14, 1979.

—