

Chance in Contemporary Narrative: The Example of Paul Auster

"If the world is not made up of texts, none can talk about it and, if it is made up of stories, one can only discuss it through them." Mark Chénétier

Introduction

The concept of chance is a culturally pervasive phenomenon. In popular culture, singer/songwriters from Leonard Cohen to Sting compare love to a game of cards. During the Vietnam war, the American government determined the fates of 19-year-olds through a conscription lottery, and today, states "solve" their financial problems by legislating a "stupid tax": the lottery. Heisenberg demonstrated the role of chance in physics, undermining the assumed causal and deductive determinism of that discipline.¹ In the controversial arena of recovered memory, victims supposedly come to understand how their lives have been determined from a repressed traumatic memory of sexual abuse, but the return of this memory is caused by a chance encounter with a childhood friend, or the Proustian intersection of the individual with a smell, taste, or other sensory experience.

Hence, when one comes to the phenomenon of chance in narrative, the concept carries with it its own cultural charge. Authors, their narrators and characters reveal their assumptions about the universe through how they understand the operation of chance. To consider chance in narrative, then, is to uncover larger metaphysical and/or epistemological assumptions that can be examined and tested through argument.

In interviews, memoirs, and fiction, Paul Auster exhibits an ongoing concern with the phenomenon of chance. Yet Auster's texts offer examples of the operation of chance that seem to contradict one another. I will show that implicit in one's understanding of chance are significant metaphysical and epistemological assumptions about the world. Further, the seeming contradictions that Auster's texts exhibit result from overlooking the temporal structures of narratives (both autobiographical and fictional) and from assuming that there is a meaningful sense to the term "world" independent of our constitutive ascription of meaning to it.

In studying chance in Auster's work, I will record the instances of chance in Auster's narratives, distinguish between those in which Auster speaks in his own voice (in his non-fiction works) and those in his novels, in which narrators or characters make claims about chance. Among the non-fiction works are his memoir, *The Invention of Solitude* and the lengthy essay, "Hand to Mouth"—in both cases we can assume he is speaking for himself—as well as interviews, collected in *The Art of Hunger*. The fictional works examined include *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, and *The Music of Chance*.

Paul Auster on Chance

Paul Auster is fascinated with chance. As he says in his interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives" (*Art* 269). Indeed, in many instances, what Auster means by chance is a surprising coincidence, "Meeting three people named George on the same day. Or checking into a hotel and being given a room with the same number as your address at home" (270). Parts of Auster's Memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*, are introduced as "commentaries" on the nature of chance. Each of the four commentaries is presented as a set of

two coincidental events.² He defines coincidence as “to fall on with; to occupy the same place in time or space” (*Invention* 162).³ Here is an exemplary passage, from the first commentary:

During the war, M.’s father had hidden out from the Nazis for several months in a Paris *chambre de bonne*. Eventually, he managed to escape, made his way to America, and began a new life. Years passed, more than twenty years. M. had been born, had grown up, and was now going off to study in Paris. Once there, he spent several difficult weeks looking for a place to live. Just when he was about to give up in despair, he found a small *chambre de bonne*. Immediately upon moving in, he wrote a letter to his father to tell him the good news. A week or so later he received a reply. Your address, wrote M.’s father, that is the same building I hid out in during the war. He then went on to describe the details of the room. It turned out to be the same room his son had rented. (80)

As to his own life, Auster says, “Things like that happen to me all the time” (*Art* 270).

What does Auster make of the recurrence of coincidences in his life? He has given two different answers. In one interview he says, “Chance? Destiny? Or simple mathematics, an example of probability theory at work? It doesn’t matter what you call it. Life is full of such events” (*Art* 270).⁴ However, from other of his writings, one can see that it matters very much to Auster what one calls it, because in understanding it one comes to a greater self-understanding.

At the core of Auster’s cosmology is the contention that life is literally meaningless. His memoir records this personal reflection (couched in the third person):

At his bravest moments, he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, and then he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees. He is in his room on Varick Street. His life has no meaning. The book he is writing has no meaning. There is the world, and

the things one encounters in the world, and to speak of them is to be in the world.

(*Invention* 148-149)

In this passage, Auster embraces the world of Newton and Hobbes, of blind causal forces compelling atoms to ricochet about, creating the universe and ourselves as part of it. Our own impulse as humans is to “to give it a meaning, to look beyond the bare fact of its existence, ... to build an imaginary world inside the real world” but “he knows it would not stand” (*Invention* 148). Not only are our fictional creations untrue; the very act of attempting to understand the world and ourselves is itself an fictional construct, one born of our timorous epistemological cowardice. The world, and the lives we live in it, are literally “meaningless”; meaningfulness, the act of signification, is for Auster a supplementary act on our part, lighting the fire of signification to keep away the frightening beast of chance.

The “brave” Auster sees the world as it is, meaningless. The “weak” Auster gives in to the impulse to paper over the world and its randomness with acts of understanding that obscure the world’s fundamental meaninglessness.

However, Auster does not maintain this view (that the world is “meaningless” and that our acts of understanding are supplemental) with any consistency. He sees another way of looking at the world, as something that carries within it a “mystery.” A coincidence is a brief flash of the Mystery showing its ordinarily hidden face: “Reality was a Chinese box, an infinite series of containers within containers” (*Invention* 117). In his interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster says “the world is filled with strange events. Reality is a great deal more mysterious than we ever give it credit for” (*Art* 260).

What is the mystery? For Auster, the mystery lies in the conflict between our understanding of lived experience⁵ as an unfolding temporal sequence, and the ultimately “psychological” character of time: time is not a property of the “real” world, a world that, while it contains us, exists independently of both our intentions and attempts to understand it. In the real world there is no

time; all events that apparently occur sequentially in fact coexist simultaneously. As he says in the Mallia interview, “The central question in the second part [of *The Invention of Solitude*] was memory. So in some sense everything that happens in it is simultaneous. But writing is sequential, it unfolds over time” (*Art* 259).

To sense that two events are coincidental depends on the ability to remember. Memory is important because it allows us to hold up two seemingly non-simultaneous, yet eerily linked events, and see them in their atemporal connectedness. To remember is not to go back in time, but to bring the seemingly past event into its proper place in the “present.”⁶

Memory, then, is not so much as the past contained within us, but as proof of our life in the present. If a man is to be truly present among his surroundings, he must be thinking not of himself, but of what he sees. He must forget himself in order to be there. And from that forgetfulness arises the power of memory. It is a way of living one’s life so that nothing is ever lost. (*Invention* 138)

Temporally, the only “time” that is truly real is the simultaneity of the “present,” the knowledge of which is given to us through the agency of memory.

For Auster, the “chanceness” embedded in a coincidence is not a fantastic event, but a Borgesian Aleph that gives one a glimpse into the mysterious structure of the universe.⁷ The key quality of a coincidence, any coincidence, is that in it, two seemingly divergent events are in fact the same event, changing only in the actors who engage unconsciously in the seeming repetition. Indeed, the repetition inherent in coincidence could be “read” either way, depending on one’s point of view. To support this claim he quotes Leibniz:

... every body experiences everything that goes on in the universe, so much so that he who sees everything might read in any body what is happening anywhere, and even what has happened or will happen. He would be able to observe in the present

what is remote in both time and space. . . . A soul, however, can read in itself only what is directly represented in it; it is unable to unfold all at once all its folds; for these go on into infinity. (*Invention* 160-161)

Thinking, like walking, necessarily occurs in a sequence:

if we were to try to make an image of this process in our minds, a network of paths begins to be drawn, as in the image of the human bloodstream (heart, arteries, veins, capillaries), or as in the image of a map (of city streets, for example, preferably a large city, or even of roads, as in the gas station maps of roads that stretch, bisect, and meander across a continent), so that what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken... (*Invention* 122)

Hence, we need to think, to walk, to trace a path, so that by reflecting on the path we have taken we might see inscribed in it its “meaning,” that is, our place in the simultaneity of the universe.

Another example of Auster’s insight into the deceptive temporality of the world occurs when he visits the elderly Madame Follain, daughter of the painter Maurice Denis, and sees her standing in front a portrait of her as a youth:

For that one instant, he felt he had cut through the illusion of human time and had experienced it for what it was: no more than a blink of the eyes. He had seen an entire life standing before him, and it had been collapsed into that one instant. . . .

Time makes us grow old, but we do not change. (*Invention* 145)

One might describe Auster’s position as a Parmenidean vision that has been “psychologized” by introducing memory as the central cognitive capacity that awakens us to the illusion of time.⁸

As even this casual contact with his ideas shows, philosophically this position is vague and deeply problematic. Among the problems are, for example, if the world’s operation is a mystery and

beyond our understanding, then how can we “understand” that, for example, time is an illusion? The only answer consistent with Auster’s position would be that he possesses a type of gnosis or mystical insight that permits him to know something that he claims is outside knowledge, or that, since the world is essentially meaningless, the claim to have knowledge about the nature of the world is to claim that the false constructs of the imagination are true. Yet, given the tenor of his other comments, one could not responsibly make such an inference. If we live in the “world,” how can we speak knowingly of this place where we live, as the site of our situatedness to ourselves?

For Auster’s notion of the essential “meaninglessness” of the world to work, we would have to first assume the truth of the naturalistic, scientific account of nature, and equate that with the “real.” In so doing, as noted, we would be reverting to a Hobbesian understanding of the world in which passions (Hobbes) or essentially fictive interpretations (Auster) are “added to” the world and taken for the real as such by the unreflective. However, this account assumes a theory-neutral status of the scientific account of nature, which few would accept.

Auster sees chance, as coincidence, as manifesting itself in one of two ways: one, as an aspect of the meaningless randomness of our existence, and two, as an entrée into the mystery of the atemporal status of the world. What responsibility do these views impose on the author of fiction? Auster feels a moral responsibility to reflect this insight into the nature and function of coincidence in the plot structure of his novels.

As a writer of novels, I feel morally obligated to incorporate such events into my books, to write about the world as I experience it – not as someone else tells me it’s supposed to be. The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all these mysterious goings-on in the world. (*Art* 273)

Earlier in this interview, he speaks more specifically about the nature of a novelistic coincidence, and how it should be represented:

When I talk about coincidence, I'm not referring to a desire to manipulate. There's a good deal of that in bad eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction: mechanical plot devices, the urge to tie everything up, the happy endings in which everyone turns out to be related to everyone else. No, what I'm talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency. Our lives don't really belong to us, you see—they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding. We brush up against these mysteries all the time. The result can be truly terrifying—but it can also be comical. (269)

Auster's claim that time is a psychological illusion and his seemingly gnostic insight into the world's timelessness involve a paradox. The deployment of chance in fictional narratives involves another paradox, one granted to us as part of the temporal structure of literary narration (which I will discuss below). Let us now seek to understand how these ideas about chance, coincidence, mystery, and the world occur in his novels.

Chance in Auster's Fiction

In the fictional works we can assume that ideas about chance will manifest themselves in two ways. First, the author will insert "chance" events to accurately reflect the world of lived experience. Second, the narrator can take an intentional stance with respect to chance in his interpretation of the characters whose lives he purports to tell, or characters can make claims about chance which reveal

their view of how chance operates. While they are obvious fictions, narrators' and characters' claims can be understood as arguments about the "real" world, the world of lived experience where we, as readers, assume them to "live" as part of our contract with the author.⁹

Chance as coincidence reflecting lived experience

Most of Auster's fiction is structured around coincidental events, reflective of Auster's claim that in the interest of mirroring the operation of the world of lived experience in the world of fiction, the author's obligation is to structure the plot so that coincidental events move the action forward.¹⁰ Auster's justly celebrated *The New York Trilogy* abounds in plot coincidences. In *City of Glass*, Peter Stillman's first name is that of Quinn's son (42). Henry Dark predicts that in 1960 the "new Babel would begin to grow up," the same year that Stillman locked up his son (59). Quinn sits down on the subway, only to find the woman next to him reading a work he had written under the name William Wilson (which, coincidentally, is also baseball player Mookie Wilson's real name) (64). When Quinn, as "Auster" tracks the people disembarking from a train, he discovers that, coincidentally, two people on the train look exactly like Stillman. The Pope decanonizes Christopher, the patron saint of travel, in the same year that people land on the moon (154). In *Ghosts*, Blue relates the story of the young man hiking in the Alps who discovers his dead, frozen father who had perished there years before.

Moon Palace continues this interest in coincidence. Marco Stanley Fogg meets a man named Neil Armstrong in Boise, Idaho, and then watches astronaut Armstrong on television (32). Fogg ducks into a movie theater in New York (53), only to find it showing *Around the World in Eighty Days*, recalling the first time he saw it eleven years ago with his Uncle Victor, who claimed that, in seeing it, Marco "confronted himself" on the screen (via the protagonist Phileas Fogg).¹¹

A series of chances propels Jim Nashe, the protagonist of *The Music of Chance*. Inheriting money,¹² meeting with "Jackpot" Pozzi, "one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to

materialize out of thin air”(1), his affair with Fiona Wells, “like most of the things that happened to him that year, it came about purely by chance” (14)—these seemingly random events almost destroy him, as he and Pozzi are consigned to building an enormous wall in a meadow, an utterly senseless assignment whose origins lie in the impenetrable concatenation of a series of chance events.

Chance events as metaphysical synchronicity

These examples of chance as coincidence function to reflect mimetically Auster’s experience in the lived world. However, *Moon Palace* also features characters making claims about the metaphysical status of chance connections between two events. While the first type examined in *The New York Trilogy* and *Moon Palace* function mimetically for the purposes of narrative verisimilitude, other instances of chance-as-coincidence involve characters making claims about the nature of the universe (the one the characters purportedly share with us, as noted above). In these instances, coincidence serves to reinforce Auster’s claim that coincidence is an entrée into the mystery of the temporal simultaneity of the world of lived experience.

In the course of narrating his life story, Thomas Effing remarks repeatedly that there is no such thing as mere coincidence (104, 197). Fogg, finding an eerie connection between Tesla, Effing, and the message in a fortune cookie, remarks, “The synchronicity of these events seemed fraught with significance, but it was difficult for me to grasp precisely how. It was as though I could hear my destiny calling out to me, but each time I tried to listen to it, it turned out to be talking in a language I didn’t understand” (233). Unfortunately, the sensation reminds him of another character, the paranoid lunatic Charlie Bacon, who sees in baseball scores hints about America’s nuclear readiness. Fogg claims that coincidence “was too difficult a subject for me to handle, and in the end I put it to the side, telling myself that I would return to it at some later date. As chance would have it, I never did” (234).

Coincidence as metaphysical correspondence

For Fogg, more telling than the synchronicity he observes in the universe is what he calls correspondences, which belie the seeming randomness of the universe and our lives' pathways.

Everything works out in the end, you see, everything connects. The nine circles. The nine planets. The nine innings. Our nine lives. Just think of it. The correspondences are infinite. (14)

Correspondences among seemingly unrelated events seem to reveal, if only obliquely, an order to the universe ordinarily hidden from us.¹³ Following the sale of his Uncle Victor's books, Fogg is plunged into economic and material oblivion. At the same time, he feels he is on the verge of an important insight into the nature of things, thoughts that originally seemed to be "clusters of wild associations, a rambling circuit of reveries," but ones he now understands as "significant" (32).

Running through a series of seemingly unrelated coincidences, he says that

The more I opened myself up to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. I was going mad perhaps, but I nevertheless felt a tremendous power surging through me, a gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things. (32)¹⁴

Although he later loses this sense of mystic insight, the feeling remains that correspondences—coincidences, chance connections among disparate elements of the world—are an entry point to revealing the world ordinarily shielded from us by our intrusive consciousness. The lesson to be learned is that "causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe. ... Heraclitus had been rescued from his dung heap, and what he had to show us was the simplest of truths: reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant" (62).

Both Fogg and Auster claim that coincidence, properly understood, gives one an insight into the nature of the world. Yet, an interesting divergence obtains here between the narrator Fogg's

claim that change is the only constant, and author Auster's claim that correspondences established through an act of memory reveal that change is an illusion. I will forego discussion of this intriguing connection until later.

Chance as an affirmation of the universe's meaninglessness

Claims that change is the only constant, or that change is an illusion support the idea that the universe is in principle knowable. This epistemological optimism can reveal verities about the world independent of our participation in it, with the implication that we can order our lives properly in light of this knowledge. However, the narrators of *The New York Trilogy* doubt that this is the case.¹⁵ In *The Locked Room* we are told that "In the end, each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose" (256). Indeed, for this narrator,

In general, lives seem to veer abruptly from one thing to another, to jostle and bump, to squirm. A person heads in one direction, turns sharply in mid-course, stalls, drifts, starts up again. Nothing is ever known, and inevitably we come to a place quite different from the one we set out for. (297)

Hence, chance events are just that and nothing more; they reveal nothing to us except the meaninglessness of our existence. This is much like the "brave" Paul Auster, the one who wants to assert that life is indeed meaningless (see above, p. 3). The "weak" Auster would, given the understanding that the world is indeed meaningless, construct stories about it that would assuage his fear.

Games of chance as reflections of the universe's structure

Perhaps the most well known of Auster's reflections on chance is found in his novel, *The Music of Chance*, which was made into a feature film. A recondite allegory, the novel features two central events, a poker game and the building of a wall. While the novel comments on chance as a

random event in life,¹⁶ as well as the idea of a “curious correspondence” (49), the central locus of chance is the individual wager. After receiving his inheritance, but before meeting Pozzi, Nashe goes on a “gambling jag” in Las Vegas (13), and later, bets on horses in Saratoga (19). Following the assault on Pozzi and his subsequent (and suspect) trip to the hospital, Nashe plays pool with Floyd for money (212).

These bets are thematically secondary to the central poker game between Pozzi and Flower and Stone. Pozzi’s loss in this game results in his assault and possible death, and Nashe’s unexplained, but surely injurious fate following his nighttime car trip back from the bar with which the book ends. Had Pozzi won, he and Nashe would have left Flower and Stone’s estate wealthy; having lost, they subjected themselves to months of backbreaking work, physical injury, and possible death.

Auster claims that he includes chance events in his narratives to better reflect the operation of the world of lived experience. Couldn’t we reverse the direction and say that the world of lived experience can best be represented as the seemingly random events one experiences in a game of chance? Don’t we all “take a chance” daily, invariably with insufficient information to properly predict the outcome of our action? Isn’t getting married, moving to a new town, taking a job, and so forth a gamble, just like a card game?

Nicholas Rescher’s book, *Luck*, argues succinctly against this analogy:

It makes no sense to assimilate personal fate to games of chance, because with games there is always antecedently a player to enter into participation, while with people there is no antecedent, identity-bereft individual who draws the lot at issue with a particular endowment. (31)

To put it another way, gambling involves adopting an intentional stance toward a state of affairs; a wager involves putting your own future condition (marital, financial, professional) “on the line.” If

“life” itself were a wager, it would require an individual who runs the universe adopting an intentional stance with respect to the possible future events in it that would in turn affect the individual’s status. Even religious people would reject this claim, on one of two grounds: either the deity knows the future, in which case wagers lose their meaning, or the deity is understood to be all-powerful and thus unaffected by the events transpiring in the universe.

To repeat, while individuals adopt intentional stances as a consequence of interacting with the world, the world itself is not the consequence of anyone’s intentional stance. Hence, from a cosmic point of view “life” cannot be a “game.”¹⁷

Hence, we need to separate the two claims. On the one hand, we could say that our lives are ruled by chance, that chance is a name for cosmic randomness. On the other hand, we would say that taking chances is part of life. The first is a claim about the nature of the cosmos (made by the “brave” Auster); the latter is a truism. To link them through the metaphor of gambling is logically unsound.

Chance and fate

The evidence in *Moon Palace* presents an inconsistent view of fate and its relation to chance. In Fogg’s discussion of the death of Cyrano de Bergerac, he asks, “Had one of his enemies murdered him, or was it simply a matter of chance, of blind fate pouring destruction down from the sky?” (38). Clearly, chance and fate are opposed terms, and to equate the two isn’t conceptually appropriate. As Leland Monk says,

Chance (from the Latin *cadere*, to fall) can mean a totally haphazard event (the fall of the dice) or an opportunity (your turn to throw the dice) or a lucky break (the fall of the dice that wins the game). Fate, on the other hand, refers to events that fall out in a manner predetermined by a higher power (the loaded dice of the gods). What

seems like chance to us, throwing the dice, becomes a way of divining our fate (from the Latin *fatum*, the gods' sentence). (2)

For Fogg to say that chance and blind fate can be equated fails to acknowledge the very real difference between the two terms.

In another instance, Fogg ascribes Effing's paralyzing injury to cosmic retribution:

the purest kind of justice had been meted out; a harsh and anonymous blow had descended from the sky, and he had been crushed, arbitrarily and without mercy.

There had been no time to defend himself or plead his case. Before he knew it had begun, the trial was over, the sentence had been handed down, and the judge had disappeared from the courtroom. (188)

Clearly, the cases of Cyrano and Effing are comparable (Cyrano's death, Effing's injury); yet Fogg makes two contradictory claims about the nature of the cosmos: fate is 'blind' to Cyrano, while it functions as karmic retribution toward Effing. One can't have it both ways.

Auster's most celebrated work, *The New York Trilogy*, also concerns itself with fate. In the *Trilogy* we discover two different claims about fate that dovetail, in that one of them suggests the conditions of our epistemological orientation toward others while the other is a cosmological claim.

In *Ghosts*, Blue had "thought of himself as essentially free. ... Now, after the incident with the masked man and the further obstacles that have ensued, Blue no longer knows what to think. It seems perfectly plausible to him that he is also being watched, observed by another in the same way that he has been observing Black. If that is the case, then he has never been free" (200). Later, during a Thoreauvian reverie, Blue imagines himself free of the tyranny of his job, "walking through the woods and swinging an axe over his shoulder." But, he realizes that wherever he goes, Black will be there, too, shadowing him, and "there will never be any end to it. This is what the ancients call fate, and every hero must submit to it. There is no choice, and if there is anything to be done, it is

only the one thing that leaves no choice” (222). Here we can note one of the principal thematic claims of *The New York Trilogy*, that we can have no knowledge of ourselves without the participation of an Other. (In Blue’s case this inspires a Sartrean round of despair, followed by aggressive anger).

Our desire for self-knowledge requires involvement with others. In Blue’s case, he interprets this condition as a type of psychic tyranny over his dream of freedom. He calls that tyranny “fate.”

Quinn, in *City of Glass*, ponders the telephone busy signal he received when calling Virginia Stillman, and wonders what to think of it. “It had been a sign,” he decides, that “the fates” were preventing him from contacting her. “Was ‘fate’ really the word he wanted to use,” he wonders, “It was such a ponderous and old-fashioned choice. And yet, as he probed more deeply into it, he discovered that was precisely what he meant to say” (132).

However, still not pleased with the term, he reflects further.

Fate in the sense of what was, of what happened to be. It was something like the word “it” in the phrase “it is raining” or “it is night. “ What that “it” referred to Quinn has never known. A generalized condition of things as they were, perhaps; the state of is-ness that was the ground on which the happenings of the world took place. He could not be any more definite than that. But perhaps he was not really searching for anything definite. (133)¹⁸

We might be able to link these various meanings of fate and the attendant concept of chance, if we understood the term “fate” as a word for the causal chain of significance that is inevitable in any act of understanding. The problem with the presentation of fate in these accounts is that they fail to understand the temporal character of what they call fate, and displace the actions of fate into something they call the “world,” instead of understanding fate as another word for causal linking in language. These two problems, temporality and the assuming there is a “world” independent of our constitutive acts of signification, are features both of Auster’s non-fiction and his fiction. To better

understand what is at issue, let us now consider more generally time and the “world,” and their relation to chance.

Time and its connection to the fated, the caused, and chance

Speaking broadly, we can say that a chance event is an uncaused event, one that is a consequence neither of the whimsical act of a Greek god, the moralistic intervention of a Hebrew one, nor the play of a cosmologically omnipresent or divine fate. Fate might work impersonally, as do the Greek fates; cyclically, as does *Fortuna*; or morally, as does the variously understood force of karma. In turn, chance can be understood as just “what happens,” the outcome of a series of probabilistically understood possibilities, or the (in principle) unpredictable outcome of an algorithm (as illustrated in information theory by Conway’s game of Life).

Looking more closely at the relation between fate and chance, we could say that, in the modern world, understood retrospectively, the *cause* of an event is often called “fate.” That is, retrospectively, fate is understood as a force that dovetails with our intentional acts. Kismet, for example, the romantic inevitability of two lovers being joined, can only be understood through an act of remembering the various seemingly (at the time) chance events that brought the two lovers together. Prospectively, fate can act when someone “takes a chance,” whether that chance be taking a job, choosing a lover, or betting money on a horse. In that sense, “taking a chance” in many ways is simply making a choice in the ignorance of the possible consequences, and the consequence of the choice is better understood not as a “fated” event, but as a caused one. Making a bet in poker is taking a chance from the point of view of the bettor, but if one knew the order of cards in the deck, the bet would be not taking a chance at all, but instead the bettor would understand the unfolding of the game as caused by the necessary relationship of the cards relative to the series of choices the players make, both in taking a card or holding, and betting. In more modern terms, we understand

the consequences of our actions to be what information theorists call “sensitive dependence on initial conditions.” Taking a chance in that sense once again means being ignorant of the combined elements that converge to cause a state of affairs. Fate in either of these senses doesn’t mean the actions of a cosmological force, but the result of ignorance regarding the states of affairs that cause, and are consequences of, an intentional act. Fate, classically understood—in Greek tragedy or Hebrew theology or the actions of karma—functions as a moral force in the world. Causes—whether of the scientific or probabilistic form—merely describe or circumscribe an amoral property or relation between material objects.

Taking potential future and actual antecedent events relative to an intentional act into account is implicitly assuming that chance and time are in some way related. An event is “chancy” relative to one’s temporal and epistemological position with respect to it. One avenue into exploring the differences between chance in lived experience and chance in literature would be to examine the difference in temporal status between experiencing the sensory world and concretizing a text hermeneutically (understanding, of course, that in a sense reading is itself a sensory experience).

Both people and fictional characters respond to their respective sensory worlds within the temporal realms of past, present and future. However, readers are placed in a different position with respect to the act of understanding a fictional narrative. In the act of reading the reader is placed in two separate temporal worlds. First, sitting in the chair, following the narrative, the reader experiences a series of unfolding events which occur in the readerly present. The narrator tells us that the character disembarks from the train, picks up her suitcase, and moves into the railway terminal. However, there is a second temporal level to the event of reading, given that the story that is unfolding before us has already happened, *from the standpoint of the narrator*. What seems to be happening in a narrative time analogous to our own lived time has in fact been arranged by the narrator to happen in a particular sequence for particular narrative purposes. The unfolding events

in fact occurred in the (narrator's) past, and are linked owing to their significance with respect to an event that the narrator finds important. After the character leaves the railway station, she will get into a taxi that will, ten minutes later, plunge over a precipice. The reader was ignorant of the accident, but the narrator wasn't—the temporal structuring of the tale is based on something that has already occurred and structured owing to its significance with respect to another event.¹⁹

Hence, narratives don't transpire in a single temporal sequence, but occur simultaneously in two temporal ways, the readerly present, and the narrative (i.e., remembered) past unfolding in the present as the narrator putatively “tells” the story. Unlike lived experience, which moves only forward, the seemingly prospective “moving forward” of the readerly present is, from the standpoint of the narrator, a retrospective examination of events, usually to understand their cause. (Other terms for these two elements in narrative are “story”—the events in their temporal sequence—and “plot”—the events in their causal sequence). The reader makes concrete what *seems* to her to be a story, which is in fact a plot.

These remarks should help us understand how chance works in narrative. From the point of view of the story (the reader, or the narrator as he “lived” the experience prior to setting it down on paper), chance events do indeed “just happen”; they exist as unrelated and uncaused from the standpoint of the person who experiences them (life, as we are told, does not narrate). However, when chance events are understood retrospectively, a divide occurs between reader and narrator, based on the narrator's attaching significance to the events in the past, based on what they brought to fruition in the narrator's experience. The death of the woman in the taxi (who we learn was the narrator's hated wife) enabled the narrator to marry his one true love. Hence, the “accident” of the plunge over the precipice is an accident *as it happens*, but becomes, through the narrator's attempt to understand his life, an element in the ordered chain of caused events which brought the narrator together with his one true love. The accident is *both* a chance event *and* a significant element in a

causal chain responsible for bringing the two lovers together. The narrator (now) knows that the chance event is significant; the reader doesn't. Within the story, the narrator arranges the accident so it seems to the reader to have been accidental, but from the standpoint of his individual interests, it isn't an accident at all.

While this describes the condition of a fictional narrative, isn't this the same condition we experience when we try to make sense of our lives through telling ourselves our individual stories? We exist in the (seemingly "random") present, yet our lived present only becomes *significant* as it is linked to past events through the agency of memory. Lived experience is indeed meaningless; it gains its meaning only through retrospection. The events of lived experience are "chancy"; what moves them from the realm of chance to becoming part of a causal chain is one's attaching the chance event, through an act of telling oneself one's story, to another, significant event. From the intentional perspective of the fictional narrator, *or the actual person*, chance events are simply those that fall outside the chain of significance established through the act of telling oneself one's story. The world may be random and "meaningless" as it is lived, but claiming to have access to such a world, outside of blind sensation, is an abstraction, since one of the criteria of "having an experience" is that it is meaningful; it occurs within the context of signification.

Hence, except insofar as they are placed there as such by the author for the purposes of verisimilitude, there are no chance events in fictional narrative. As narrator Jack Gladney said in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, all plots move deathward—narratives, as narratives, free isolated events from their aleatory contingency in the narrative act of making sense of them. This freeing from contingency, seen from the standpoint of lived experience, is a loss of freedom. In our own non-fictional acts of autobiography, telling ourselves a story helps us understand ourselves, but in understanding it seems as if we are unfree, since actions we deem significant derive their significance from their connection within a determined causal chain. If we are unfree, then, seemingly there

must be a “cause” for our actions, other than our own voluntary act of narrating the events in our lives. What agency could that possibly be? Fate, *Fortuna*, karma—forces we introduce into the stories we tell ourselves, which are in fact reifications of the conditions of narrativity itself.

This seems to be the paradox of our condition: in seeking to make sense of our life, to make our life *a* life, we engage in the free act of signification that seems to erase our freedom. Both chance events and acts of free will are reduced, in their own way, to a caused element in our respective stories.

The paradox of chance in lived experience derives from our lack of ongoing awareness of our dual temporal orientation—the “forwardness” of lived sensory experience, the arena of random, chance events—and the atemporality of memory’s act of joining past events with present events we deem significant.

The paradox of chance in literature derives from its “as-if” character. With respect to the reader, strictly speaking there are no chance events. But as the reader “lives” the story forward, seeming chance events occur. Hence, chance events in literature are not “chancy” from the standpoint of the narrator, but are such from the standpoint of the reader, so long as the reader understands the narrative as a story and not a plot.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this discussion, we have come across a series of seeming contradictions, both in Auster’s view of the role of chance in lived experience, and his narrators’ and characters’ accounts of the operation of chance and its relation to what they call fate. To best understand these various claims, we should now see them not as contradictions, but rather as poles of a series of paradoxes that arise owing to the dual temporal structure of narrative.

Let's restate some of the claims we have examined in our discussion. Auster claims variously that life is meaningless (i.e., its events as experienced are random), and that insight into life's meaning (and time's illusory character) can be understood through analyzing the operation of memory (the "mystery" of life). Auster claims that time is an illusion (and therefore change doesn't occur), while Fogg, one of his characters—siding with Heraclitus—claims that change is constant (suggesting that temporal succession is all there is, with the attendant problems with respect to identity). Both Auster and his characters variously claim that life is in principle unknowable, and that it is knowable, in that it is ruled by "fate." We can express some of these oppositions more clearly, if also more inelegantly, through a chart:

Change is an illusion	Change is ongoing
Life is meaningless	Life is meaningful, though such meaning is "supplementary"
The events in life are random	Life is a "mystery" whose operation can be revealed to us
Life is ruled by fate/causes outside ourselves	Life is ruled by chance
The universe is unknowable	The universe is knowable

Given our discussion thus far, we can see that these views are not opposed, but rather result from privileging one of two differing temporal stances with respect to both lived experience and, respectively, the hermeneutical act of concretizing a text and telling ourselves the story of our lives (i.e., understanding our experience). Auster's random world is that of a life (or text) lived forward; it's one damn thing after another, with no seeming meaning. Meaning arises owing to an act of signification that ascribes acts as meaningful insofar as they are part of a causal chain linked to an

event deemed significant. Chance events in life are events outside the narrative; in literature, there are no chance events, except insofar as they appear that way to the reader.

The origin of the seeming problem, both for Auster and his narrators and characters, is their collective assumption that the random, meaningless world is somehow available to us outside narrativity. As Mark Chenitier's epigraph to this essay suggests (echoing Wittgenstein), if there is something outside our capacity to talk about it, it's unavailable to us. Our error, and conceivably heartaches, begin when we constitute such a putative world outside language and then claim that it has certain qualities that create for us metaphysical problems. Whether this is Kant's noumenal world, science's world of blind causal forces, or Auster's random world, these are all posited abstractions that in fact exist as second order reifications beyond our originary constitution of the world through language. Chance, then, would be a word to describe elements of this, or another world outside of signification. Chance, in other words, signifies nothing.

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¹ As Rescher says, "Step-by-step, modern science has been moving away from determinism and toward a doctrine of chance limited by law" (45).

² See 80, 88, 134-135, 143-144. See also Auster, *Hand* 106.

³ Auster's definition seems to connect with the classical understanding of the term "chance": "*Tuchē* does not imply randomness or absence of causal connections. Its basic meaning is 'what just happens'; it is the element of human existence that humans do not control" (Nussbaum 89). "Although chance (*tyche*) is initially mentioned by the Greek philosopher Empedocles, it is first consistently thematized by the atomists Leucippus and Democritus in the fifth century B.C. But they considered chance only to deny its existence [owing to the deterministic quality of atoms' movement]. ... According to the early atomists, when we designate or experience something as chance, we do so simply because we are ignorant of its determinant cause. ... For Aristotle, the two forms of chance (*automaton* and *tyche*) both exist in our everyday experience, and are as real as other forms of causation. They are alike in that they are both causes of effects that happen *incidentally*; they are different in that chance as *automaton* operates in the realm of *nature* ("both in the lower animals and in many inanimate objects") while the chance called *tyche* operates in the realm of *mind*. *Tyche* is experienced by agents capable of moral action and is predicated on deliberate inattention" (Monk 16-17). Compare as well with Kavanagh's etymology: "The English 'chance,' like the German *Zufall*, the Spanish *casualidad*, and the Italian *caso*, all, in terms of their roots either in the Germanic *Fall* or the Latin *cadere*, evoke the idea of 'what falls out,' 'what is coming down.' They leave undecided the question of whether the event in question is causally motivated or fortuitous" (6). Rescher offers this: "Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, chance (*tuchē*, *casus*, *Zufall*) has been defined as an accidental concurrence of independent eventuations, which, as such, are inherently unpredictable and exempt from any mode of lawful regularity" (225, n. 24). See also Monk's discussion (5).

⁴ The role of chance in culture, from ideas of destiny to those of probability, have been examined by, for example, Nussbaum, Daston, Kavanagh, Mitchell, Banerjee, Rescher, and Oriard. See also Monk 16-31, 79-82.

⁵ I will employ the infelicitous "lived experience" or "lived world" to denote our immediate sensory experience of the world, to avoid using the more problematic terms "real world" or "reality." Of course, after Derrida, even the assumption of the immediate presence of the sensory to consciousness is itself problematic.

⁶ Given Auster's metaphysical stance with respect to temporality, the "present" is a misnomer, since its meaning derives from the sequential elements of past, present, and future, a relationship Auster denies.

⁷ See Borges, "The Aleph": "What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive" (26). For commentary, see Bell-Villada 219-229. Relevant here also is Borges' "Funes the Memorious," in which ironically (for us), the capacity to remember everything renders elements of memory not comparable, but unique—"it bothered him that the dog at three fourteen (seen from the side) should have the same name as the dog at three fifteen (seen from the front)" (*Labyrinths* 65). For another connection between Borges and Auster, see Bray 85.

⁸ In this connection, see Borges, "A New Refutation of Time": "The denial of time involves two negations: the negation of the succession of the terms of a series, negation of the synchronism of the terms in the two different series. In fact, if each term is absolute, its relations are reduced to the consciousness that those relations exist" (*Labyrinths* 232).

⁹ For studies of chance in literature, as, for example, paired with the idea of *moira* in Greek tragedy, or the surrealist experiments with chance, see Bell, Biard, Madoff, Monk, Paulson, Porter, and Wilson. A related and fecund approach involves looking at how narratives handle causation, and the role of chance as the counterpoint to cause, as evidenced in Brian Richardson's fine book. See also the citations listed in his book (187, n. 3).

¹⁰ Referring to the "paradox" of chance in fictional narrative, Richardson notes, "its absence indicates a specious causalism that posits a seamless and unreal chain of cause and effect; its presence, however, invariably reveals authorial intervention, since chance in fiction is never a chance occurrence" (166).

¹¹ For further examples in *Moon Palace* see 35, 104, 184, and 196. For the French view of *Moon Palace*, see the special issue of *Q/W/E/R/T/Y*, published in October 1996.

¹² Instances of good and bad fortune figure as well in Auster's life and works. Auster himself inherited money following his father's sudden death. In *Moon Palace*, Fogg's mother gets hit by a bus, which results in a substantial financial settlement for the young Fogg. And what propels Nashe on his journey in *The Music of Chance* is a familial inheritance. The idea of one's "fortunes" being down one day and up the next has, of course, a long history in the west. "For Fortuna accordingly became a goddess with her own cult and numerous temples (one on the Tiber just outside the city). Early in the third century B.C., a colossal bronze statue of the goddess *Tychē* (Fortuna) as civic deity was erected in Antioch by Eutychides, a pupil of Lysippus. ... Fortuna was deemed to be the firstborn daughter of Jupiter and a prime personage among the gods. ... Yet another sector of the Roman iconography of luck relates to the wheel of fortune (*rota fortunae*), which became one of the most popular and widely diffused secular icons of the Middle Ages. It was commonly

depicted as a great wheel on the order of a mill wheel, ridden by people, some on the way up, others on the way down, some 'on top of the world,' others 'hitting bottom'" (Rescher 9-11). See also Daston.

¹³ Compare to the comment of Tim Woods: "In the final analysis, chance or accident is regarded as an unknowable and impenetrable possibility of pattern, although always obscurely evading specific definition and tangible isolation" ("*Musik*" 145). I don't think that chance evades *specific* definition, but in Auster's novels we are offered a series of definitions.

¹⁴ Compare this character's claim with Auster's comments on the "mystery," p. [x] above.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the narrators of *The New York Trilogy*, see Alford.

¹⁶ See 1, 14, and 20.

¹⁷ In his discussion of the transformation of the concept of fortune to that of chance in literary narrative, Richardson notes, "In medieval, Renaissance, and Restoration texts, fortune had generally been viewed in relation to individual desires and ambitions, and it invariably implies a larger, governing (though often obscure) supernatural design. Chance, on the contrary, is impersonal, arbitrary, and subject to statistical quantification, while its effects on human aspirations are random and incidental. Major metaphors of fortune are the wheel, the moon, the tides, and a fickle woman; the dominant trope of chance, whether couched in terms of dice, cards, or lotteries, typically comes from gambling. (It is perhaps no coincidence that speculation on joint-stock companies, an extremely proper and profitable form of gambling, emerges around the same time.)" (23-24).

¹⁸ See Sorapure's discussion, in which she claims that "Quinn here reconceives of fate in a way that displaces the belief in a controlling or omniscient authority and instead sees it as descriptive of a ground-level perspective, characterized in this instance by the detective's immersion in the world of the text rather than the author's position above or beyond it." (170). Compare as well with Heidegger's discussion of the "*es gibt*" in *Being and Time*, and the translator's commentary (255 n. 1).

¹⁹ Champigny has made a similar argument regarding probability in the detective genre.