

The Artist's Hand: The Aesthetics of Loss in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*

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Abstract Paul Auster's novel *Sunset Park* is an experiment in realism. The experiment consists in trying to dissolve and then reconstruct the relation between thing and sign, *res* and *signum*. In order to accomplish this reconstruction the narrative focuses on characters, most of whom are artists and intellectuals, who in one way or another have become victims of the economic crisis that set in in the year 2008. Four of these characters squat in an abandoned house in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where they attempt to create an alternative life style and, in the case of one of them, a young woman painter, Ellen, carry the experiment into a series of nude sketches that combine realism and abstract form in an attempt to capture pure thingness and the in-betweenness of things. Pain and loss, and the remembrance thereof, are transmuted into a new existence emanating from Ellen's unfinished portraits.

Key words Hand as object; creativity and negativity; the margin; fragment; fetish; *res* and *signum*; economic crisis

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See how the sleeping outflung hand, touching the bedside candle, remembers pain, springs back and free while mind and brain sleep on and only make of this adjacent heat some trashy myth of reality's escape: or that same sleeping hand, in sensuous marriage with some dulcet surface, is transformed by that same sleeping brain and mind into that same figment-stuff warped out of all experience.

— William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

Some shadow's hands moved with my hands
and everything I touched was turned to darkness
and everything I could not touch was light.

— John Glenday, "Etching of a Line of Trees."

In his novel *Sunset Park* (2010) Paul Auster once again focuses on characters that are marginalized in society; the author, or rather the narrator's examination of marginalization strikes me as being radical and unique in several ways. The narrator's voice, speaking consistently in the third person, is disseminated across the field of narration, recording the experience of several characters one by one, mostly employing the present tense, alternating somewhat with the past tense, thus achieving the effect of direct, simultaneous *reportage*, getting close to the characters and at the same time being distanced from them. The result is a *de facto* approach to character and situation where the act of creation does not reside in the narrator but in the character-artists of whom there are several. Subjective experience, deepened by an acute sense of loss and marginality, is presented as a specific mode of creativity in negativity, and the artist's hand is singled out as the subjective *and* objective instrument that presses the button of the camera to take a snapshot, seizes the marker or brush to draw and paint, and holds the pen to write. As the mind sleeps, the hand "springs back and free", recalling pain (Faulkner 115); the hand of the artist is liberated into a negativity not recorded by the brain but existing in its own right as autonomous creative activity in a space where the relations between sign and thing are dissolved and where the hand is severed from the body, picturing, sketching, writing as the subject of art as well as the object of art. Here the hand of the artist is imbued with knowledge of itself as moving with some "shadow" that turns everything touched to "darkness" while also indicating the presence of a "light" — a presence in negativity (Glenday 8). Creating in negativity, the artist's hand attempts to name the unnamable, the discarded; and

it also tries to name itself as an unnamable, discarded object, i.e. as an object participating in the dissolution and (experimental, temporary) reconstitution of the relation between sign and thing.

Presence means existence at the level of the unnamable, and the line “everything I could not touch was light” undergoes subtle changes in meaning according to where the emphasis is put: “I could not touch” would mean “the ‘I’ could not touch”; “I *could not* touch” would probably mean “*unable* to touch” as well as “*beyond* touch”; and finally, “I could not *touch*” — most likely the intended meaning — emphasizes the impalpability of *light*. But does “impalpable” signify *unknowable* or may the “light” be approached in the artwork by applying a different method, aesthetically and epistemologically? In what follows I will suggest that the *senses* — sight, hearing, feeling (touch) — provide a more direct form of access to “light” than do mind and thought, at least as they persist, still today, in customary, common psychology and epistemology. The artwork emerges, then, as a form of sensual refinement and as an *object*-ification of subjectivity, combining realistic technique and abstract form. Abstraction involves a radical separation of sign, *signum*, from thing, *res*. *Sunset Park* is a bold attempt to convey the artwork as pure, yet *not absolute thing*, and so the novel manifests itself as a non-Platonic as well as a non-semiotic approach to art in Modernity. Auster’s text reverses the history of semiotics in trying to capture existence prior to the sign.

The narrative process itself, the *reportage*, emulates Faulkner’s “sleeping outflung hand” that remembers pain; but recollection is turned into “some trashy myth of reality’s escape” by the sleeping mind. In the post-Civil War South of Faulkner’s novel real pain is the loss and the disintegration of an entire civilization, a culture perished in a universal conflagration remembered by the multiple narrators whose hands and voices constantly weave their own individual “trashy” myths of “reality’s escape,” and, while doing so, transform the narrative, or narratives into “figment-stuff warped out of all experience”; thus the narrative assumes a tenuous and experimental quality. Still, in Faulkner the dual negativity, *trashy myth* as fatefully conditioned escape; and *figment-stuff*, elevated, perhaps, to an imaginative, poetic reconstruction, the artistic reconstruction of the South one might say, posits a constructive, *supplementary and sublimating* creativity in response to loss. The poetic image springs to life in a modern and Modernist creative process, remembering pain and inserting it into the textual fabric, thereby absolving it from “the sleeping brain and mind”. History is sublimated as recollection dispenses with knowledge of the absolute and the ideal and discards the “remembrance of things past.” Likewise, in Auster’s novel the artist’s hand “remembers pain,” a pain

caused by its own destructive actions — numerous incidents record punching hands and fists — and disseminates that pain throughout the narrative, turning it into an experimental text in the mode of *realism* that blends subjective experience, the voices of the character-artists, with the narrator's recording voice. The result is a weaving of "trashy myths" and "figment-stuff," both of which participate in a dual negativity as in Faulkner. This dual negativity is the effect of a social condition: economic crisis and cultural disintegration in contemporary America. We may trace signs of and parallels to the loss of the South in the contemporary loss. As in *Absalom, Absalom!* loss and dissolution have produced a narrative, *Sunset Park*, that is a *simulation* of realism; however, simulation undergoes a dialectical transformation whereby it turns into a negativity *positing a new creativity* and a new subjective experience forged by *the artist's hand severed from the body and the mind*. The hand of the artist may create figment-stuff warped out of all experience, but it is precisely this warping that signifies the dialectics of negativity forming innovative creative activities in Auster's artists. The narrative voice in itself is not poetic as are the voices in *Absalom, Absalom!*. However, the narrative voice in *Sunset Park* indicates, in a subdued manner, the radical supplementariness of the artwork, suspended in time and space as the negative, or rather, negating pole of a reality where everything is lost. The negativity of shadow and darkness becomes light as the artist's hand touches and does not touch at the same time.

Sunset Park presents a number of marginal persons, male and female, who for one reason or another have decided or been forced to drop out of society. Miles Heller is a 28 year old college drop-out, presently working in Florida as member of a crew of four that go through abandoned houses, i.e. houses people have lost due to the economic crisis, gathering up discarded objects, cleaning the houses and then turning them over to the bank; Miles is the son of Morris Heller, owner and manager of an alternative publishing firm in New York City, himself out on the margins since he belongs to a small and decreasing number of literary publishers still printing and selling fiction that is different, mostly literary works that are not on the popular hitlist. Miles' mother, the actress Mary-Lee Swann, divorced her husband a few months after giving birth to Miles in order to pursue a career in acting, on stage and in film. Morris remarried, to Willa Parks, English Professor, who had a son, Bobby, from a previous marriage. He is Miles' stepbrother, then, and the two of them are so different that they appear as opposites in the narrative, and the opposition never develops into a productive complementarity but remains a stark opposition — Miles being studious, introverted yet physically strong and active, and Bobby being lazy in school, extroverted, temperamental. The difference

in character culminates into a physical confrontation one day they are out walking on a serpentine country road after the car has broken down. They argue, Miles shoves Bobby into the middle of the road, a car approaches unseen from around a bend, runs Bobby over and kills him on the spot. Miles does not tell his parents about his pushing Bobby into the road; he is guilttridden, of course, and this guilt finally leads to his leaving home, dropping out of college and embarking upon the life of the eternal drifter, so abundantly present in American fiction. In Florida he falls in love with a young girl, 17 years old, that is, 11 years his junior, a girl not of age yet with whom he nevertheless shares an apartment. Pilar Sanchez is her name, her parents were killed in a car accident but she has three older sisters the oldest of whom, Angela, “looks after her,” or rather, attempts to control her. Pilar’s sexual relationship to the older man is accepted by Angela but she exploits the fact that her sister is a minor by law, pressuring Miles into giving her discarded objects from the abandoned houses, expensive electronic equipment that has been left behind. He finally refuses and is forced by Angela’s bullies, two thugs, to hand over the objects required or get out. Miles gets out, takes the bus to New York where he moves into another abandoned house in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, occupied by four squatters, including himself: His friend Bing Nathan, drummer in a band called Mob Rule and owner of The Hospital for Broken Things where he repairs broken or outdated electronic equipment, restoring it to life, so to speak; Ellen Brice, painter and sketcher; and Alice Bergstrom, a PhD student working on a thesis about male-female relations as portrayed in post World War II film and fiction. None of them have any money, barely enough for groceries and utilities. They live in the house illegally and are finally evicted forcefully after four eviction notices have been served. During the eviction — which is fairly violent — Miles punches a police officer in the jaw thus breaking the law in a serious way and losing his chance of getting married to Pilar who is waiting for him in Florida.

Miles, Bing, Ellen and Alice have something in common: an interest in, perhaps even an obsession with broken things, or fragments of things, and, particularly in the case of Ellen, the painter, individual body parts, internal and external, that are almost fetichized.

Miles takes photos of abandoned objects in the houses he “trashes out,” as it is called:

Then, always, there are the objects, the forgotten possessions, *the abandoned things*. By now, his photographs number in the thousands, and among his

burgeoning archive can be found pictures of books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and board games, party dresses and tennis racquets, sofas, silk lingerie ... (Auster 4).

After moving from Florida to New York Miles starts taking pictures in Green-Wood Cemetery, a seemingly useless project:

He has embarked on another useless project, employing his camera as an instrument to record his stray, useless thoughts, but at least it is something to do, a way to pass the time until his life starts again, and where else but in Green-Wood Cemetery could he have learned that the real name of Frank Morgan, the actor who played the Wizard of Oz, was Wuppermann? (102)

Thus the nameless gain names in his photography; a photo-graphic *mimesis* temporarily discloses the real identity of "Frank Morgan." Dissimulation and the mimetic function merge in an uncanny assembly of shadow and light, death and life, or death reconstructed.

Miles has no idea why he feels compelled to take these photos. The objects possess a curious fascination — an aura emanates from them; it is the uncanny aura of the fetish which Julia Kristeva explores in *Revolution in Poetic Language*:

In order to keep the process signifying, to avoid foundering in an "unsayable" without limits, and thus posit the subject of a practice, the subject of poetic language clings to the help fetishism offers. And so, according to psychoanalysis, poets as individuals fall under the category of fetishism; the very practice of art necessitates the reinvesting the maternal *chora* so that it transgresses the symbolic order; and, as a result, this practice easily lends itself to so-called perverse subjective structures. (65)

While employed in trashing-out in Florida Miles had noticed signs indicative of how the former owners — who during the last few months of their residence occupied their houses like ghosts — abandoned their houses in haste but often not without breaking the furniture, smearing the walls with paint, dumping garbage on the floors in a fit of rage, reacting to bankruptcy and default. These abandoned houses and Miles' photos of the objects in them recall his own autobiographical work *Portrait of an Invisible Man*, a portrait of his father who after the death of his wife lived in his house like a ghost, never really present, piling up dirty dishes

in the kitchen and leaving used razor blades in the bathroom and worn shirts in the bedroom; and Miles' pictures recall the professor, or ex-professor in Part One of *The New York Trilogy*, *City of Glass*, who picks up broken objects in the streets of New York City and proceeds to re-name them, dissolving and recreating the relation between sign and thing. The photos taken by Miles participate in a renaming, or rather, in a process leading to the unnamable, the pre-verbal, analyzed by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

In that anteriority to language, the outside is elaborated by means of a projection from within, of which the only experience we have is one of pleasure and pain. An outside in the image of the inside, made of pleasure and pain. The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnamable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain. (61)

In the same work Kristeva talks about “the drive-quality attached to archaic objects” and how that “drive-quality” must be introjected in the individual consciousness; without that introjection, Kristeva says, “pre-objects and objects threaten from without as impurity, defilement, abomination, and eventually they trigger the persecutive apparatus” (116).

Kristeva's analysis is a complex, Freudian interpretation focusing on anthropology and on certain “primitive” practices and rituals resembling poetic practice. Miles is a kind of poet, practising the kind of photography that records objects as the signs of the object, of *abjection*, at this point in history a collective abjection. The 21st century economics and history have determined abjection in the New World; economic collapse has become conducive to a fatal prevention of the usual introjection Kristeva talks about; therefore we have abomination and, in the end the unleashing of the “persecutive powers” in Auster's text — the fist punching the officer and the police forcefully evicting the squatters.

Moreover, the narrator's presentation of the decaying urban environment is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Baroque allegory and its resemblance to modern fragmentation in the *Passagen-Werk*, the Arcades Project. In her work on Benjamin, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss notes:

The allegorists heaped emblematic images one on top of another, as if the sheer quantity of meanings could compensate for their arbitrariness and lack of coherence. The result is that nature, far from an organic whole, appears in

arbitrary arrangement, as a lifeless, fragmentary, untidy clutter of emblems.
(173)

Not only in view of the proclivity in Auster's text towards the fragmentary and the emblematic but also in view of his well-known interest in French poetry and his year-long residence in Paris it is tempting to see an influence, or parallel to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, particularly *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *The Flowers of Evil*. Baudelaire's poem "The Swan" is especially interesting in this respect; in it the poet traverses the newly rebuilt Place du Carrousel when, as Buck-Morss writes, "his memory is suddenly flooded with the image of Andromache, wife of Hector, who was left a widow with the destruction of Troy" (178-179). In Baudelaire's poem the figure of Andromache is superimposed on images of modern Paris:

Andromache, I think of you!

...

The old paris is gone (the face of a city
Changes more quickly, alas! Than the mortal heart)

...

Paris changes, but nothing of my melancholy
Gives way. New palaces, scaffolding, blocks,
Old suburbs, everything for me becomes allegory,
While my dear memories are heavier than rocks. (329-30)

Recalling that Miles Heller's mother is Mary-Lee Swann it becomes tempting to view her as a contemporary Andromache; however, in this case it is a "swan" reconciled to the loss of her first husband through divorce; an Andromache who has built an impressive career in the theater, integrating heaps of broken images in her role as Winnie in Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*. Of course, it is ironic but also profoundly meaningful that art, theater and literature become a way out in *Sunset Park*. Auster's "swan" does not evoke melancholy reflection as does Andromache in Baudelaire's poem. However, it is important to note that the arts, theater and literature as expressive vehicles focus exactly on decay and fragmentation, Beckett's play being one of the primary examples in modern drama. F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* is another. The supreme and subtle irony is, naturally, that artistic careers may be planned and carried out around fragmentation, in the midst of the ruins of history. The modern artist — and "artist" includes, here, not only Mary-Lee Swann and a number of novelists appearing

in the text; it also includes the main characters, Miles, Bing, Ellen and Alice — is his own impressario, displaying herself or himself in various identities like Baudelaire: the flâneur is one of them, the ragpicker is another. Miles and the other young people occupying the abandoned house in Brooklyn are the contemporary versions of this character, and Miles' father, Morris, is a version of Baudelaire's ragpicker, appearing as what he himself calls the Can Man, disguising himself, as do numerous other characters in Auster's works, in order to secretly follow his son around, observing him from a distance, worried but at the same time fascinated by his son's vagrancy, by the adventure of it.

In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin comments that the debasement and decay of nature and the city in the 19th century find their source in the production process itself: "The devaluation of the world of objects within allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity" (660). And so in *Sunset Park*: the devaluation of objects in modern 20th century literature, e.g. Beckett and Fitzgerald, is "outdone" by the decay and fragmentation, the mass of broken things collected not only by Miles in his photos but also by Bing in his Hospital for Broken Things, by Alice in her PhD thesis on broken down male-female relationships in post World War II film, and by Ellen in her sketches of body parts, including the hand, that are initially fetishized then turned into abstract objects. If "fetishism" involves an emotional or libidinal attachment then this attachment is glossed over and aesthetically sublimated in Ellen's sketches. Erasing attachment constitutes the beginning of an artistic endeavor designed to *reconstruct*.

Bing Nathan is characterized by the narrator as "the champion of discontent, the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world. Unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action"(55). The ruins of a failed world, Benjamin's "ruins of history," can only be reassembled or restored through focusing on "the local, the particular, the nearly invisible details of quotidian affairs"(locus citatus: same page; loc.cit.). Bing is right in a sense, of course. But he invests too much emotional energy even in his particular and highly individualized approach, believing till the end that it is safe to ignore the eviction notices served by US marshalls, and the result is disastrous: forceful eviction.

In her work on William Wyler's film *The Best Years of Our Lives* Alice Bergstrom notes how:

The men no longer know how to act with their wives and girlfriends. They have lost their appetite for domesticity, their feel for home. After years of

living apart from women, years of combat and slaughter, years of grappling to survive the horrors and dangers of war, they have been cut off from their civilian pasts, crippled, trapped in nightmare repetitions of their experiences, and the women they left behind have become strangers to them. (75)

In his work *The Philosophy of Literary Form* Kenneth Burke comments as follows in Proposition 11 (from “Twelve Propositions”):

11. Human *relations should be analyzed with respect to the leads discovered by a study of drama.*

Men enact rôles. They change rôles. They participate. They develop modes of social appeal. Even a “star” is but a function of the total cast. Politics above all is drama. Anyone who would turn from politics to some other emphasis, or vice versa, must undergo some change of identity, which is dramatic (involving “style” and “ritual”). People are neither animals nor machines (to be analyzed by the migration of metaphors from biology or mechanics), but actors and actors. (310-311)

Burke's comment applies directly to the “actors” appearing in the theater, film and literature as well as to the “real life” actors in *Sunset Park*. The deepest plunge into a dramatic change of identity involving “style” and “ritual” and, as I shall argue, tending towards abstraction, is Ellen Brice's sketches of the naked human body. Her sketches are inspired by walks on Seventh Avenue during which her mind is flooded — like Baudelaire's mind in the poem “The Swan” — with images, here images of the genitals of both sexes, of young and old, and of ... “luxuriant thighs, skinny thighs, vast, quivering buttocks, chest hair, recessed navels, inverted nipples, bellies scarred by appendix operations and cesarean births ...”(83). Using in part her imagination, in part Bing as model she proceeds to work on dozens of sketches portraying body parts, fascinated as she is by the body in its total form as well as by its separate parts:

The human body can be apprehended, but it cannot be comprehended. The human body has shoulders. The human body has knees. The human body is an object and a subject, the outside of an inside that cannot be seen. The human body grows from the small of infancy to the large of adulthood, and then it begins to die. The human body has hips. The human body has elbows. The human body lives in the mind of one who possesses a human body, and to live

inside the human body possessed of the mind that perceives another human body is to live in a world of others. (163)

Access to “the world of others” is through the work of art *only*. The drama of *Sunset Park* consists in the narrator’s presenting the painful, crisis-ridden lives of the characters and then providing close-ups where inside and outside both are transformed by the creative process. Naturally this approach inaugurates a shift in realism. Ellen’s decision to start drawing and to ask Bing to pose for her in the nude is logically prompted by a significant change in her mind as regards realism in drawing; the new realism emerging in the nude sketches parallels the realistic mode of the narrative, or narrative voice which becomes increasingly abstract while at the same time assuming a fuller note, sometimes approximating a musical *crescendo* — a crescendo heard from a distance, though, and the distancing effect is that of minimalization: a minimal intensity signifying the reduced function of the sign. Ellen’s early paintings were photography-like pictures of buildings and urban scenes that in her own words did not “speak to anyone”. Now she embarks upon an entirely different project, inspired in part by Morandi:

She thought the delicacy of her touch could lead her to the sublime and austere realm that Morandi had once inhabited. She wanted to make pictures that would evoke the mute wonder of pure thingness, the holy ether breathing in the spaces between things, a translation of human existence into a minute rendering of all that is *out there* beyond us, around us, in the same way she knows the invisible graveyard is standing there in front of her, even if she cannot see it. (87)

Ellen realizes that “all she has ever wanted is to draw and paint representations of her own feelings”(88). Ellen’s drawing hand that “remembers pain” refuses to make a “trashy myth of reality’s escape”; rather, she is bold enough to risk losing reality in an approach to representation that evokes Faulkner’s “figment-stuff”: representations of her own feelings. I see the toning down of the narrative voice to a minimalistic recording of intensity as a prelude to and implicit anticipation of Ellen’s drawings. These drawings fuse subject and object as much as this is possible; it is possible because it is facilitated by the transformation, a genuine metamorphosis, that occurs when the subject projects itself into an objectivized image *that contains the subject immanently* to a greater extent than the subject can be said to contain itself. The figment of feelings and dreams leap into immediate,

unmediated portraits of body parts, drawn in anatomic verisimilitude and yet, paradoxically, showing the artist's and the artwork's *interest* in "the spaces between things": the artwork as an *inter-esse* and the human body as an abstract form. Indeed, abstraction in *Sunset Park* is as refined as the poetic voices in *Absalom, Absalom!* From a dialectical perspective, abstraction as artistic method, here in drawing, is a response to the sociocultural condition determined by the economic crisis, as were the poetic voices in *Absalom, Absalom!*; the drawing hand of the artist sublimates the pain of crisis and loss, personal and collective, societal. Paradoxically, in the process of abstraction the drawing hand salvages the subjective, disclosing its unique existence in the "spaces between things"; these "spaces" somehow emanate "pure thingness" as well as "all that is *out there* beyond us." The artwork as *inter-esse*, then, becomes a refined coalescence of "thingness," *res* divorced from *signum*, and a subjectivity that is almost erased through being fused with a "beyond" that includes the cemetery.

In Augustine's *De doctrina christiana I* we learn that "All instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means of signs/*Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur*"(9). However, Ellen's drawings illuminate *res* in its pure form, even discarding what Augustine calls *verbum interius*, mental concepts, the "internal word," in her "representations of her own feelings." The Paradise Lost of the Sunset Park community in New York City, bordering Green-Wood Cemetery, is a fallen world where signs have lost their meaning so that things are not learned "by means of signs," but in the process of this loss *Sunset Park* restores *res*. Restoration and reconstruction are enhanced by abstract form in drawing and painting, and abstraction absolves the subject from itself through letting it merge with the world: *inside* is turned into an *outside* and this *outside* is the artwork. This process is initiated at the moment when Ellen starts drawing her own hand:

She takes her drawing pad and a Faber-Castell pencil off the top of the bureau, then sits down on the bed and opens the pad to the first empty page. Holding the pencil in her right hand, she raises her left hand in the air, tilts it at a forty-five-degree angle, and keeps it suspended about twelve inches from her face, studying it until it no longer seems attached to her body. It is an alien hand now, a hand that belongs to someone else, to no one, a woman's hand with its slender fingers and rounded nails, the half-moons above the cuticles, the narrow wrist with its small bump of bone sticking out on the left side. (88)

As in *Absalom, Absalom!* the substance of remembering is:

sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel – not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream. (115)

For Ellen, getting it right as a painter means getting close to the world of objects by letting her muscles “grope for” them; in this act there is an absence of personal involvement and “memory”; the world becomes alien as does the artist’s own “alien hand.” The alien-ness of the artist is the pre-condition for really *seeing, feeling and hearing* the world and without this pre-condition there can be no artwork. Therefore Ellen must begin by drawing her own hand, thus turning it into an “alien hand”. The drawing hand is the method; the artistic method must participate in the very alien-ness immanent in the world.

The artwork follows as the *form* of everything the artist could not touch: everything is “light” when the artist’s “mind and thought” are called by “the name of dream.” Paradoxically, the senses provide immediate access to the physical as well as the metaphysical, or: *objects as the in-betweenness of things*. When method and medium merge with the alien, i.e. other world, the creative process erases *mimesis*; the process of artistic creation is one with the process of the world itself. *Res* is presented without the mediation of *signum*. In the simple act of drawing her own hand Ellen abolishes the borderline between subject and object. This is accomplished spontaneously, without theoretical or philosophical preparations. Spontaneity, intuition and sensation facilitate the coming into existence of the artwork *as any other object in the world*. In Comment 12 of *39 Comments on the Creative Process* John Glenday says: “The creative process begins with the need to exist, not to express” (2014).

This is precisely the meaning of Ellen’s new method as it is described in the following passage:

For the first hour after setting to work, she warms up by concentrating on details, isolated areas of a body culled from her collection of images or found in one of the two mirrors. A page of hands. A page of eyes. A page of buttocks. A page of arms. Then she moves on to whole bodies, portraits of single figures in various poses: a naked woman standing with her back to the viewer, a naked man sitting on the floor, a naked man stretched out on a bed, a naked

girl squatting on the ground and urinating, a naked woman sitting in a chair with her head thrown back as she cups her right breast in her right hand and squeezes the nipple of her left breast with her left hand. These are intimate portraits, she tells herself, not erotic drawings, human bodies doing what human bodies do when no one is watching them. (164)

The drawings evoke stimulating, arousing “pictures bubbling in her head”, but she concludes that sexual arousal is only a “minor bi-product of the effort”; what she really wants is to get it right. The drawings are usually left unfinished because she wants “her human bodies to convey the miraculous strangeness of being alive — no more than that, as much as all that” (165). It is precisely the unfinished image that points to the in-betweenness of the artwork; the drawings are as real as representations can be and yet they are endowed with a strangeness, another reality, a submerged world of human bodies surfacing in a disintegrating culture and coming to life only in the work of art. The biography of Ellen, her private life, is a record of pain and loss; but it is this experience that precipitates the act of creativity on the canvas where she attempts to attain the sublime. This endeavor must go on, must be infinitely prolonged since, as John Glenday puts it: “Because each poem ultimately is a failure, we write on” (38). The attainment of the sublime cannot be finished; for it it were to be finished it would cease to be sublime. It would also cease to *exist* as a real image of the in-betweenness of things. Existing in this reality is Ellen’s interest as an artist, her *inter-esse*.

In addition, Ellen’s artwork represents the culmination of what we may call a displacement of identity involving all the other characters as well. This displacement occurs as part of an artistic endeavor; it is compelled by what Slavoj Žižek in *The Ticklish Subject* refers to as “the threat of nonexistence”; under this threat subjects are “emotionally blackmailed into identifying with the imposed symbolic identity (‘nigger’, ‘bitch’, etc.)” but it is, nevertheless, possible for them “to displace this identity, to recontextualize it, to make it work for other purposes, to turn it against its hegemonic mode of functioning ...” (265-266)

The “symbolic identity” in Auster’s novel is that of the contemporary rebel, drifter, vagabond and artist, the marginalized individual who has given up belonging to a center because that center does not exist. *Sunset Park* moves the margin into the center, or rather, turns everything and everyone into a margin. How and where do you represent a margin while simultaneously displacing oneself from it and, ultimately, also displacing the margin and, with it, representation? In carrying out a work of art; and in the work of art, subject and object become

“figment-stuff warped out of all experience” since the artwork engages what John Glenday calls “averted vision” so that it “looks to one side of its subject matter”. Like stars, “abstractions are so dim they are all but unknown to us” (34). — Even the group of four’s modest existence as squatters does not work as an alternative social experiment since they are evicted; and their resistance does not work since they themselves, at least the two men, Miles in particular, use force when confronted with force. Miles’ fist hitting the police officer is a powerful and subtle reminder of the fact that fragmentation as applied to the human body may have tragic results. And yet, Miles’ punching fist stands in a subtle dialectical relationship to Ellen’s drawn and drawing hand; the hand as an aggressive tool is at the negative pole of an opposition whose positive pole is the creative hand. But the opposition is not binary: the punching fist and the drawing hand constitute *supplementary positions of exchange* whereby one metamorphoses into the other. The punching fist is a primal force whose manifestation as violence is an inherent rebellion against “hegemony”; thus the hand as an instrument of physical revolt contains the drawing hand immanently within itself. The drawing hand becomes the fist transformed into a creative instrument but “fist” and “hand” are *akin* in their being poised to “strike at” existence as *inter-esse*.

The closing incident of the novel makes Miles think of “the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands”, and the incident makes him wonder “if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future”; he tells himself that from now on “he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever” (227-228).

The final passage is reminiscent of Baudelaire. It is, in a way, Baudelaire in a new vein. The new mode, the 21st century mode of existing, experiencing and creating, takes place in a passing moment. Since time itself is unfinished how can the artwork ever be finished? The very structure, or unstructuredness of time is “figment-stuff warped out of all experience,” and the artist’s hand, when best applied, moves along an axis propelled by “averted vision.”

In another one of his 39 *Comments* John Glenday says: “The self must be expunged from the poem” (9). Expanding the statement to cover the work of art in general and *Sunset Park* in particular, the expunging of the self is the ultimate loss generating a (skewed) artistic vision. Auster’s novel and his character-artists practice an aesthetics of loss. But the loss of self and the collapse of the social order make for *existence*, make for “the strangeness of being alive.”

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