



"Hotel Room"

Edward Hopper

# The Light and the Fogg: Edward Hopper and Paul Auster

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*Auster contributed an extract from Moon Palace to the collection "Edward Hopper and the American Imagination," and it is clear that Hopper's images of alienated individuals have had a profound resonance for him. This paper employs two main ideas to compare them. First, a pivotal moment in American literature: the hotel room drama watched by Coverdale in Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance. Secondly, Aby Warburg's concept of the "pathos formula" in art, which bypasses the problematic issue of influence, choosing instead to posit sets of inherited cultural memories. It therefore allows discussion of the re-emergence of Hawthorne's puritan tropes of paranoid specularity and transcendence in the work of Hopper and Auster.*

I was never able to paint what I set out to paint.  
(Edward Hopper, quoted in O'Doherty 77)

Words are transparent for him,  
great windows that stand between him and the world,  
and until now they have never impeded his view,  
have never even seemed to be there. (G 146)

Somewhere in New England in the nineteenth century, a man resumes his "post" (Hawthorne 168) at his hotel room window, there to observe the boarding house opposite. Before long, a "knot of characters" enters one of the rooms, appearing before our observer as if projected onto the physical stage, having been "kept so long upon my mental stage, as actors in a drama." Longing for "a catastrophe," some moment of high theatre to fill the epistemological void of his own soul, our voyeur gazes with increasing intensity, fabricating scenarios which, he admits, "might have been altogether the result of fancy and prejudice in me." When, in one of the most compelling and influential moments in all American literature, he is spotted by the female protagonist and barred from the scene by the dropping of a curtain, his appetite for narrative resolution remains unsated and he is condemned to brood on his isolation once more. "The curtain fallen," he muses, "I would pass onward with my poor individual life, which was now attenuated of much of its proper substance" (170-1).

In another room in a hotel in an American city somewhere in the early twentieth century, a woman is sitting on a bed reading. The text she is reading might be a book, or a diary, or even a miniature photo album, but

whatever it is, it is distinguished first by being sufficiently engrossing to have interrupted the woman's unpacking (or packing to leave) and undressing (or likewise, dressing to go out; we cannot know), and secondly, ironically, by being *indistinguishable* to us as viewers. An amorphous mass of undefined pages, this text appears to us to have no text.

And in yet another room in "let's say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument" (G 136), a private detective known enigmatically as Blue has been hired to observe the actions of a figure called Black through the windows of their two apartment buildings:

Parting the curtains of the window, he looks out and sees Black sitting at a table in his room across the street. To the extent that Blue can make out what is happening, he gathers that Black is writing. A look through the binoculars confirms that he is. The lenses, however, are not powerful enough to pick up the writing itself, and even if they were, Blue doubts that he would be able to read the handwriting upside down. (G 137)

So Blue encounters the same difficulty: he can look all he wants, but he cannot read.

Much has already been written about Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, a pivotal incident of which I have attempted, with my own imperfect linguistic tools, to describe at the beginning of this paper. It is not my intention to contribute anything revolutionary to the existing scholarly research on this novel, but I suffice to say that perhaps more than any other nineteenth-century American text, it dramatises what Susan Manning has dubbed "the puritan-provincial rhetoric of distance" (14), the bifurcation of the individual into actor and spectator (in Calvinist terms, self and conscience) in a spectral world of phantoms and unreliable, unfathomable signs in which God no longer appears to be available as an arbiter of meaning. Thus it exemplifies the dilemma not only of the reader, and by implication the critic, but of the artist: how do we experience existence while simultaneously observing it in order to portray it? Does the artist-aspectator (therefore, as reader) merely *fabricate* meanings in the absence of objective, sanctioned ones?

Coverdale's private theatre is an image which has re-manifested itself throughout American culture. As well as surely providing the central metaphor for Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, it provides a nexus and a starting point

for adducing many of the intricate connections between the two artists whom this paper will focus on—Edward Hopper and Paul Auster. Both Hopper’s “Hotel Room” (1931) and Auster’s *Ghosts* (1986), as the synopses above illustrate, treat frustrated attempts to decipher meaning which result in a sense of solitude, of urban isolation. Likewise, Hopper’s “Night Windows” (1928) places us in the position of voyeurs, tempted toward the imposition of narrative by the suggestion of significance offered by the open windows and the bright light, yet ultimately thwarted by our partial-sightedness. Mostly obscured, the woman bending over attests to our inability to forge a meaningful relationship or to fully understand the other.

I will attempt in this paper to take these tropes of looking and not seeing to extrapolate the wider critical and cultural implications of, to quote David A. Ross, “the themes of isolation and transcendence which run through Hopper’s work” and which, if we consider the aggregative effect of these repeated obsessions in writers such as Auster, might be said “to evoke a powerful American mythology” (Ross, qtd. in Lyons viii).

Importantly, “Hotel Room” and *Ghosts* clearly have much in common in reflexive terms. Just as behind Hopper’s “pure depiction of situations there always lurks the question of what painting is capable of representing at all” (Kranzfelder 43), so Blue, whose voyeurism, like Coverdale’s, is analogous to the specular processes we perform as viewers of a Hopper painting, comes to realise that “words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say” (*G* 147-8). They are not simply windows, or at least, if they are, the glass is visible (as in Hopper’s iconic “Nighthawks” 1942) and therefore purports to offer perspicacity while in fact threatening reflection, refraction, screened views.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, unable to penetrate the obscurity adumbrated by the name Black, denied access to the central meaning of the case (symbolised by the text he cannot decipher even through binoculars), Blue accepts that “the various stories he has made up for himself” (*G* 147) are as valid as the fastidiously accurate reports he has been accustomed to producing in which “action holds forth over interpretation” (*G* 146). Interpretation is all he has now: he is brought tantalisingly to the brink of mimetic efficacy, only to be confronted with the inadequacy of his realist ethic. Auster, who tends to consider himself a realist,<sup>2</sup> is more accurately one who continually questions the grounds for realism through the experiences of his characters. Reality-as-lived is ironic; it is tantamount to an inability to know what is real, if anything. Likewise, our surveillance of the woman with the enigmatic book

in "Hotel Room" highlights "the space between what is seen and what is known," thereby, to quote Wallace Jackson, testing "the sufficiency of 'realism' as a comprehensive term for Hopper's art" (137).

Paul Jahshan's recent article "Paul Auster's Specters," boldly declares that "debates as to whether Auster's writing is postmodern or not are ... sadly irrelevant" (390) and further challenges the grounds for realism. Indeed, his argument would appear to configure *Ghosts* as doubly reflexive, enacting both diegetically and rhetorically the testing of the sufficiency of several epistemes—realism, post-structuralism and postmodernism—and exposing their redundancy. Ultimately, these discourses must be abandoned in favour of a "virtualization of identities" which occurs when "hyperreality ... finally takes over" (405) and implicates both writer and reader in its vacuous processes.

I feel that Jahshan goes too far and yet, strangely, not far enough. Dismissing a wealth of Auster criticism as redundant seems ruthless but, more importantly, he fails to recognise that many of postmodernism's concerns with specular processes, signification, representation and the problematic designation of something called "reality" have been apparent in American literature since at least the 1800s, especially in the work of (post)puritan writers such as Hawthorne, Melville and Poe. Isolated by his distance from the objects of scrutiny, Coverdale's reality must remain phantasmagorical. Ishmael/Melville's text entitled *Moby Dick* constantly oscillates between empiricism and laboured symbolism, as the white whale defies description and refuses to be pinned down as a monolithic signifier or a legitimating meta-narrative. Eventually it succeeds in annihilating the whole representational project and reducing it to the whiteness or blankness most feared by Ishmael, a precursor, perhaps, to a form of postmodern nihilism. This is the same whiteness which envelops the close of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*: malevolent, open to endless scriptability by any maniac semiologist. Following on from critics such as Susan Manning and Tony Tanner, puritanism's relevance to American culture for me adheres in its representational, not just its theological concerns. Therefore, I also find Stephen Farthing's characterisation of Hopper as "a technically struggling, trying-to-be-cool, sexily under-skilled, Kodak Color version of Walter Sickert. In short... a very early postmodernist"<sup>3</sup> unsatisfactory for similar reasons. By subscribing to an overly diachronic view of cultural movements, Farthing cannot accommodate the possibility that certain characteristics, such as reflexivity and a relativism to be both feared and applauded for its democracy, have long been an integral part of American art.

I would argue that there are two quintessential, interconnected Hopperian-Austerian moments which locate both artists in a predominantly puritan mode (in the senses I have defined it).<sup>4</sup> The first, seen in *Ghosts* and “Hotel Room,” is what we might dub the *paranoid moment*: the spectator or protagonist, faced with a plethora of signs but a paucity of definitive, authoritatively sanctioned meanings, resorts to acts of compensatory narrative construction, convinced that there must be an explanatory story there somewhere and that somehow he or she is implicated in it. Blue can only speculate (through his specular activities) on any ontological or epistemological significance Black might possess. Similarly, Hopper’s images are notorious for inviting narrative interpretations the legitimacy of which can never be adjudicated or, as Robert Hughes posits, “moments in a narrative that can have no closure” (427).

Again, the narrativity or otherwise of a Hopper text tends to be bound up in discussions of its realism. Whilst it is clear that the very strained mundanity of the images occasionally elevates them to the level of surrealist estrangement, it is also true, to quote Mark Strand, that “the more life-like [they are], the more they encourage us to construct a narrative of what came before” (23). I will return to these issues later, but suffice to say for the moment that they permeate to the heart of our comparison of Auster and Hopper. To what extent can Hopper truthfully be said to be *literary*, in the sense of story-telling and likewise if, as Art Spiegelman has averred, Auster can be “surprisingly nonvisual” (qtd. in Karasik intro.), what are the grounds for our comparison in the first place? Does the scholar of literature who decides to dabble in art history risk seeming a mere arriviste (a problem intimated in Ezra Pound’s essay on Brancusi)?<sup>5</sup> The answers, I suggest, lie precisely in our readerly, critical responses to a notion of a reflexive American imagination manifested in different artistic forms.

The second Hopper-Auster moment, which to some extent addresses the aforementioned problems, I will call *the glimpse of transcendence*, drawing heavily upon the art historian Aby Warburg’s concept of the *pathos formula*. Originally formulated to explore the relationship between Classical and Renaissance art, the pathos formula is, in E.H. Gombrich’s words, “a deposit of an emotional experience which is derived from primitive religious attitudes” (239). It stipulates that “Dionysiac” expressions of extreme emotion and Bacchanalian abandonment help facilitate artistic endeavour, yet ironically the control and poise required by Renaissance artists necessitated the repression of such frenzied constituents, even as they were inevitably present in

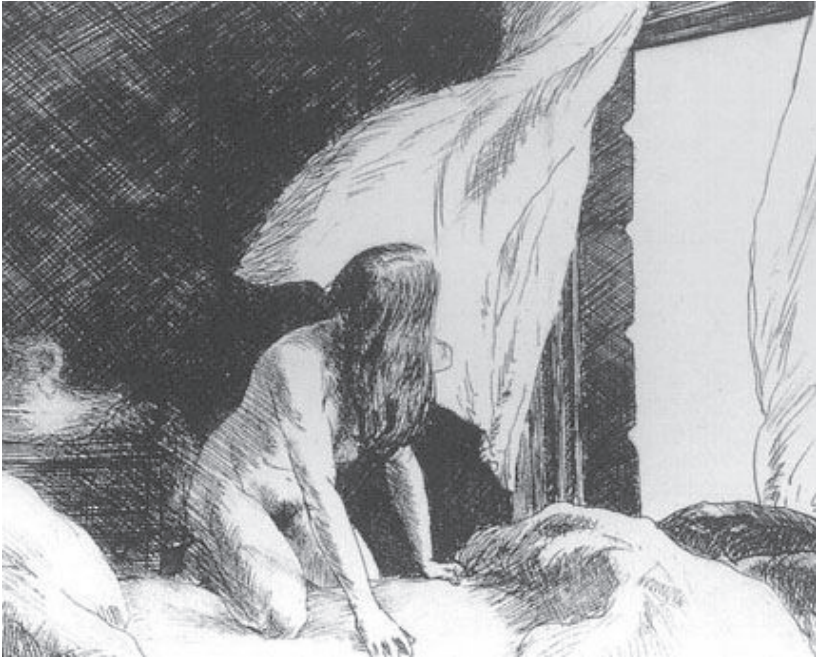
the work as inherited cultural, memorial energies.<sup>6</sup> Thus artists tended to sublimate these energies defensively into repeated symbols, for example the flowing drapes which adorn numerous Renaissance compositions.

The pathos formula is therefore useful in allowing us to bypass the controversial and occasionally otiose question of artistic influence. Instead of resorting to an overly instrumentalist analysis which stipulates that A influences B, the pathos formula describes “unconscious inherited dispositions” (Gombrich 241), a kind of cultural subconscious, and thus prescribes the inevitable re-emergence of these dispositions through the cultural history of a particular nation or movement at a given moment. If we accept as axiomatic the importance of puritanism to American literature and posit, as I have done, that many of what are now dubbed postmodern concerns with excesses of signification, the consequent deliquescence of reality, the unavailability of authoritative meanings and the retardation of our experience of the other are contemporary manifestations of puritan-inflected ideas, then the tropes of urban alienation and specularity encountered in Hopper and Auster constitute these (post-)puritan tendencies as they achieve renewed prominence in different eras. For Hopper they describe an increasingly technological, urbanised modernity; for Auster the necessary result of language’s inefficacy in a late capitalist, egocentric, paranoid society where access to the other, even the self, is restricted and the city becomes a new wilderness. Returning to our earlier examples, we could say that Hopper paints city windows which reflect our own obsessions and refuse elucidation, whereas Auster re-envisages *words* as windows which have become grimed through excesses of signification after the Fall, in cities of glass of endless linguistic refraction.

So as the director of the exhibition entitled “Edward Hopper and the American Imagination” insists, the inclusion of so many diverse responses to the artist’s work (including Auster’s) does not prove his overwhelming influence *as such*. Rather, it demonstrates that “there *is* something to the notion of an American imagination, and though no single artist can define such an abstract concept, the clarity and the deep resonance of Hopper’s work has made it possible to picture this fully ephemeral thing” (Ross, qtd. in Lyons VII-VIII). In other words, Hopper can visualise those American subconscious cultural energies more clearly than most.

Importantly for this argument, there is nothing in the pathos formula to preclude the possibility of these dispositions coming to light in media other than art; in fact I would assert that it is inevitable in the continuing





“Evening Wind”

Edward Hopper

process of a search for forms of expression. As enough recent literary theory has persuaded us, a literary text has a subconscious as much as a painting. If the subconscious functions like a language, then its signifiers may be verbal or visual. The art historian, after all, whether he wishes like Jackson Wallace to emphasise the harmony and interplay of elements within the frame and eschew the narrative (140-1), cannot avoid words in interpreting the pictorial.

Ivo Kranzfelder has suggested that the pathos formula has been expanded during twentieth-century art, and frequently in the work of Hopper, to include traces of any ineffable or inherently unrepresentable phenomena, those influences which lie beyond the material precincts of depiction per se, and have to be depicted through their *effects* on material things. Time and again, in etchings such as “Evening Wind” (1921), Hopper’s human subject’s attention is arrested in the middle of a quotidian task by an event, in this case the billowing of the curtains in a sudden gust of wind,<sup>7</sup> which assumes a heightened importance in the context of this captured moment, perhaps triggering half-buried memories of religious or at least spiritual experience.



This is what I have named the glimpse of transcendence.

Kranzfelder continues:

Mundane life does divert people from thinking about the deeper reasons and causes behind their actions. But in a very private moment, an awareness of them may suddenly arise. (42)

Once again Hawthorne got there first. We are reminded of his assertion in *The Marble Faun*<sup>8</sup> that:

There is a singular effect oftentimes when, out of the midst of engrossing thought and deep absorption, we suddenly look up, and catch a glimpse of external objects. We seem at such moments to look farther and deeper into them than by any premeditated observation; it is as if they met our eyes alive, and with all their hidden meaning on the surface, but grew again inanimate and inscrutable the instant that they become aware of our glances (235)<sup>9</sup>

So it is not entirely unfeasible that the nude woman staring out of the window in “Morning in a City” (1944), or the woman seemingly transfixed by the sunlight in “Morning Sun” (1952), or even the bald man who sits impassively alone on the pavement in “Sunday” (1926) may be engaged in profound metaphysical thought, about to experience that fleeting glimpse of revelation in the diurnal scenes they inhabit. Occasionally, in paintings such as “Summertime,” (1943) the sense of transcendence is offset by the suggestion of eroticism. As Rolf Renner has observed, this painting employs inviting, darkened interiors, phallic structures and the slightly provocative stance of the young woman to insinuate repressed sexual desires and “wish-fulfilment” (53). Yet the billowing curtains once again intimate higher powers in operation, so that, curiously, divine and sexual forces appear to be sublimated and conflated in modern urban society.

What connects these works, and what characterises so much of Hopper’s output, is the light. Partial to dramatic chiaroscuro effects while “never sacrificing the physical reality of objects” (Goodrich 12), Hopper employs light almost as a protagonist, an entity with which the human figures frequently appear to be interacting, even if in a rather pensive manner. As Lloyd Goodrich describes, “[e]verything in his pictures is seen with the utmost clarity, the lights and darks are strongly contrasted ... to him



"Sunday"

Edward Hopper

colour is an attribute of form and light" (12). Yet the inverse is equally true: light is a phenomenon which *cannot* be represented except through its communication with material objects and their colours. For Alan Yentob to say of the painting "Sun in an Empty Room" (1963) that Hopper had "finally achieved his ambition to paint just light" is disingenuous: to see *only* light would be to blind ourselves to everything else, and to succumb to the terrifying, all-encompassing whiteness of the leviathan.<sup>10</sup> A quasi-religious moment of elucidation may thus only serve to blind us to the truth or, to put it another way, an impetus toward paranoid speculation may disguise itself as transcendental illumination. Thus the woman gazing out into the "Cape Cod Morning" (1950) appears less liberated by the light than trapped within her own narrative edifice.

So by analogy, as viewers (and if anything is obvious about Hopper's paintings it is their reflection and manipulation of our specular processes) it is likely that to infer some momentary transcendence in any of the aforementioned Hopper images is to fall prey once again to the paranoid tendency toward narrative interpolation. We can only conjecture exactly how life-



"Cape Cod Morning"

Edward Hopper

changing these moments might prove to be for Hopper's figures. Similarly, the trace of an intrusive but potentially transformative power, possibly a divine one, regularly re-emerges in Auster's novels, but is likewise deeply ambiguous, playing off a manifestation of the ineffable against the characters' desperate need to implicate themselves at the centre of meaningful stories.

I would like now to focus on an example of this in a passage from Auster's 1989 novel *Moon Palace* which the author contributed to the Whitney Museum's anthology, *Edward Hopper and the American Imagination*. *Moon Palace*, uniquely among Auster's novels, is imbued with the sensibilities of visual art, pivoting as it does on Ralph Blakelock's painting of Native Americans called "Moonlight." In this extract, saturated with characteristic Austerian allusiveness, the hallucinatory text combines a paranoid sensibility with an ambiguous glimpse of transcendence in the images both of the sun and the moon, and in so doing, I shall demonstrate, points, as the Blakelock piece does, to a critique of American historiography and foundational mythologies. Moreover, its juxtaposition of the wondrous and the dismal

locates it within an American tradition which includes Hopper, the Fitzgerald of *The Great Gatsby* and the Hemingway of “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” a place where the quotidian may become iconic in the glare of the sun, or may equally well reveal its dirtier secrets.

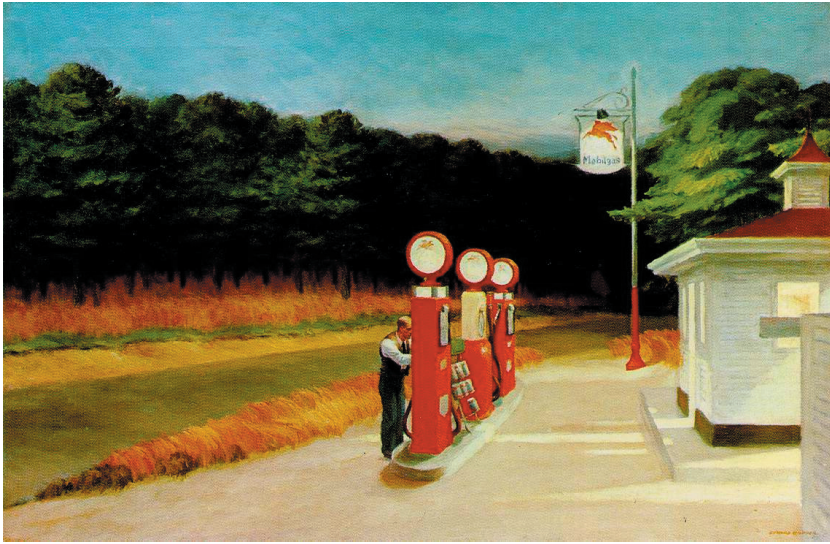
A destitute Marco Fogg has been living rough in Central Park for several days, eating in hash houses and hanging out in stinking clothes in the reading library. At his absolute nadir, feverish, vomiting violently, he finds a small cave and lies down there, realising “what it means to have no one.” He spends two or three days there, during which the fever begets “ferocious dreams” (69). Featuring as it does the central, polyvalent symbol of the novel, the neon sign for the Chinese restaurant “Moon Palace,” the first dream described is worth quoting in full:

Once, I remember, I saw the Moon palace sign in front of me, more vivid than it had ever been in life. The pink and blue neon letters were so large that the whole sky was filled with their brightness. Then, suddenly, the letters disappeared, and only the two *os* from the word *Moon* were left. I saw myself dangling from one of them, struggling to hang on like an acrobat who had botched a dangerous stunt. Then I was slithering around it like a tiny worm, and then I wasn't there anymore. The two *os* had turned into eyes, gigantic human eyes that were looking down at me with scorn and impatience. They kept on staring at me, and after a while I became convinced that they were the eyes of God. (69-70)

Fogg has earlier stressed the plurality of the sign's symbolic resonances, remarking “[e]verything was mixed up in it all at once: Uncle Victor and China, rocket ships and music, Marco Polo and the American West... One thought kept giving way to another, spiraling into ever larger masses of connectedness. The idea of voyaging into the unknown, for example, and the parallels between Columbus and the astronauts. The discovery of America as a failure to reach China” (32).

Typically, this spiral of connectedness reflects the almost bewildering allusiveness of Auster's own creative processes, the paratactic chain of connotation in the latter passage implying equal validity for all these interpretations. (One is reminded of Hawthorne's offer in *The Scarlet Letter*: “The reader may choose among these theories” [219]). Insofar as the Moon Palace sign cannot be attached to a single sanctioned meaning, it participates in





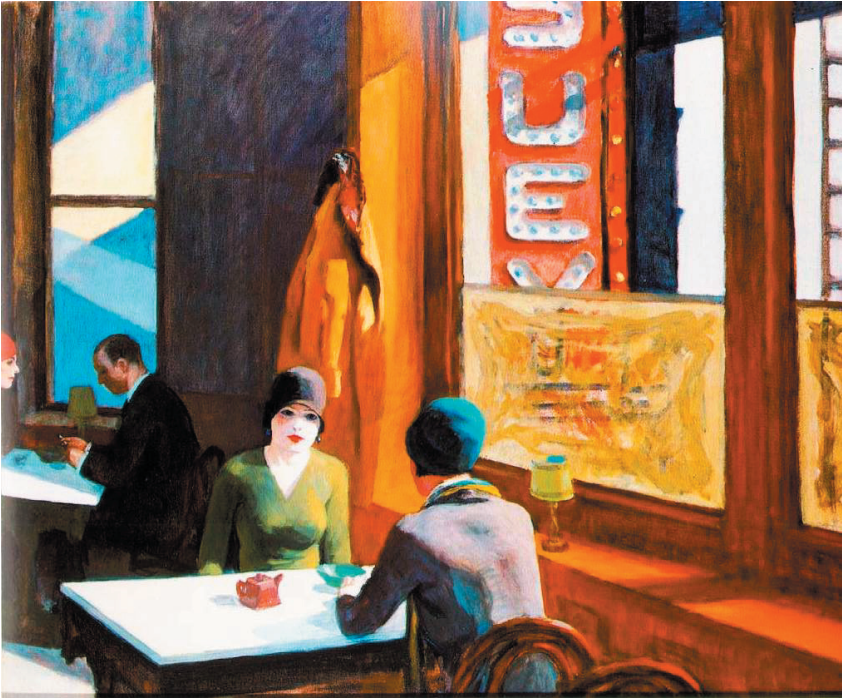
"Gas"

Edward Hopper

a post-puritan untethering of signifier and referent and consequently an American symbolist tradition.

But more telling are the particular meanings Fogg ascribes to it. Whilst the re-casting of the narrator as a worm is reminiscent of the self-abasement of Puritan journalists such as Jonathan Edwards, Fogg goes further and visualises the letters as the eyes of God, thereby evoking Fitzgerald's T.J. Eckelburg. Like Eckelburg, the image is essentially paranoid, fantasising the protagonist as the centre of God's scrutiny, dreaming of authority. Yet like Eckelburg it also conflates *capitalism* with puritanism in the emergence of a secularised divinity through advertising: God is here a garish symbol of private commercial endeavour. Just as Willy's re-awakening in Auster's later novel *Timbuktu* is inspired by the ironic consumerist spirituality of Santa Claus, so the first premonition of Fogg's rescue from hoboism and desperation comes shrouded in neon. Capitalism is the new God.

Clearly, the transcendence of the "Moon Palace" sign as it fills the sky is an ironic counterpoint to the essential seediness, or at least ordinariness, of the restaurant itself. In this aspect it echoes Hopper's "El Palacio" (1946), in which drab rooftops and bleak facades are lent a lugubrious grandeur and exoticism by the titular hotel sign. Furthermore, as Rolf Renner has observed, Hopper's use of adverts and signs articulates a dismal truth that in "the tangle of urban life, the only points that provide any orientation are



"Chop Suey"

Edward Hopper

advertising logos" (28). There is an emptiness to their signification; they frequently invite interpretation whilst pointing to, and taking mute pleasure in, nothing but themselves. In "Drug Store" (1927), the lights are on, but humans are conspicuously absent, therefore unable to partake of the laxative remedies on offer.<sup>11</sup> The "Mobilgas" sign in "Gas" (1940) promises movement where there palpably is none. Furthermore, almost hiding behind the idle pumps, the proprietor is positioned on the side of the wilderness, seemingly ostracised from the very civilization the advert connotes. Likewise Fogg, who has temporarily withdrawn from civilization, aspires to the mystical transcendence of the moon sign only to find, as the laconic "then I wasn't there anymore" illustrates, that it proves not to be mystical at all, rebuts him, and mocks him with human eyes onto which he *projects*, somewhat desperately, God. The dream enacts the separation of man from sign and in consequence, the sign becomes everything and nothing.

*Moon Palace* is in several ways a frontier novel, concerned with investigating and debunking American myths of the Wild West and seeking,

through Fogg's discovery and analysis of the Blakelock painting, to recuperate a pre-settler world in which indigenous peoples lived in harmony with sky and nature; in other words, where man-made frontiers did not exist. Glimpsing transcendence through the Chinese restaurant sign, Fogg recapitulates the idea of America's or indeed any national identity's arbitrariness by reminding us that Columbus' "discovery" was based not on destiny, but an error, a failure to reach the Orient. Moreover, as all but the empty, oracular *os* disappear, Fogg foregoes this potentially subversive knowledge, as well as recognition of immigration and diversity's central role in shaping American culture and economy, in favour of seeking Christian authority in the form of the eyes of God. Although the similarities should not be exaggerated, Hopper's "Chop Suey" (1929) portrays a pair of flappers situated within, yet by means of shadows and ambiguous geometric shapes divided from, an immigrant history symbolised by the light of the eponymous neon sign, which is itself obscured, truncated, the merest glimpse of light in a scene of soberness and inertia.

If the first dream implies a suspicion of traditional melting pot historiography (tantamount to a *bleaching* of difference under a totalising deity, not a true appreciation of it), Fogg's second makes it more explicit. As the sun comes out, heralding some unspecified revelation or transcendence, Fogg begins "to dream of Indians," conjuring romanticised visions which lead him to believe he is "closer to understanding the spirit of the forest" (70). Several boundaries are transgressed here—between past and present, civility and "savagism," urban and rural—and it appears that in Gombrich's terms, the "primitive religious attitudes," the "Dionysiac," antic impulses of the pathos formula are surfacing in the form of a formerly forgotten indigenous history.

However, Fogg is connected by the multiple puns on his name and by his ancestors, to exploration and the archetypal crossing of the Atlantic, and so by analogy to the white man's violent appropriation of American space. Indeed, he conceptualises himself as "[a] bird flying through fog ... a giant bird flying across the ocean, not stopping until it reached America" (3-4). As the quotation suggests, we are not to forget the connotations of obscurity in his name.<sup>12</sup> For when David Zimmer and Kitty Wu come to rescue Marco, his reactions are narrated in distinctly puritan spectral terms:

Kitty was the one I saw first, but I didn't recognise her, even though I sensed that she was familiar to me. She was wearing her Navaho



headband, and my initial response was to take her for an afterimage, a shadow-woman incubated in the darkness of my dream. Later on, she told me that I smiled at her, and when she bent down to look at me more closely, I called her Pocahontas. I remember that I had trouble seeing her because of the sunlight ... (70-1)

Kitty connects several webs of imagery: her headband references the native history which underpins the whole narrative, and her Chinese origin associates her with the restaurant, the eyes of God and perhaps Fogg's incipient guilt.

What is fundamental here is Fogg's misrecognition. Echoes of puritanism abound in the image of the "shadow-woman" incubated in "darkness." Nowhere does she appear *real* to him: she resembles more one of Ahab's pasteboard masks, and the sun—symbol of revelation, of knowledge, of the deity—only exacerbates the problem. On a physical, cultural, historical and metaphorical level, he really cannot see her. Instead, he has recourse to romanticisation and cliché by dubbing her Pocahontas. Auster is subtly pointing up certain paradoxical aspects of American historiography—the need to obliterate and consign to the past, and yet to resurrect as safe, saccharine representations.<sup>13</sup> So as Blakelock's "Moonlight" serves in actual fact to emphasise the past-ness of the pastoral scene, Fogg's dream dissolves in a hazy (indeed foggy) parade of spectral images which exemplify memory and historiography as subsisting in the order of subjective representation or dreams, not uncontested fact or reality.

As one of his frontier paintings, Hopper's "Seven A.M." (1948) eerily and somewhat more obliquely decomposes a classic American wilderness/civilization dichotomy. Abrupt and dogmatic though the boundary between them appears to be, implying mutual exclusiveness, the forest and the building are compositionally linked by their shadowy spaces, perspectival depth and air of foreboding. In short, neither area looks especially inviting. Assuming that somebody lives in the house, we are discouraged from inferring any cosy domesticity from the image by the drawn-down blind to the right and the artist's decision not to depict the inhabited side of the house. Instead we are forced into gazing at a closed store in the window of which a few ostensibly random objects are situated.

Rolf Renner is wrong to state that the painting is "without any human figures" (59), for one of the photographs in the window portrays what looks like a man. Apart from the fact that the photograph, rather like a Hopper

painting, sublates its selectedness, its constructedness and its connotation under the guise of apparently uncoded denotation, it is significant in relegating the human element to the precincts of representation. Of course, any Hopper figure, by virtue of being painted, is a representation, but here there is a process of *double* abstraction at work: not only do we initially see the man through the frame of the artist's eyes, he is also confined within the second frame of the photograph. Arguably, the window itself, in the sense that it functions as a screen or a lens through which objects are but dimly or partially viewed, interposes a *third* layer of abstraction, in the same way that Auster's characteristic multiple layers of narration in novels such as *Leviathan* and *The Book of Illusions* (A narrates B's story narrating C's story) denude authoritative meaning. Moreover, a photograph is, as Susan Sontag has argued "a token of absence" (16). In her words:

All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. (15)

So the opposition of wilderness as past versus civilization as present or future is radically destabilised. Inhabited by ghosts and shadows (the pathos formula, or D.H. Lawrence's "post-mortem effects?" [171]), the painting reveals the mythological duality to be retroactively fabricated in the act of metaphorical representation through the narrative gaze. It is an opposition that has always already been untenable. That gaze, which is reflected back by the windows and the photo, can never be anything other than subjective and internally contradictory, placing a human subject at the centre which is always split from itself and others and thus effectively dead.

Hopper's complex abstraction counteracts a romanticised American transcendentalist message. Far from invigorating the poet-observer, turning him into Emerson's "transparent eyeball" and offering the potential for visionary selflessness, nature here attests to the "superficial seeing" we are all too frequently prone to ("Nature" 184). In this painting, as in other Hopper images like "Rooms by the Sea" (1951) and "South Carolina Morning" (1955), nature comes close to liberating the subject (and by analogy us as viewers) yet is prevented from so doing by its status as viewed or represented from elsewhere. The mythologising of the wilderness which has saturated American culture from Thomas Cole through to the road narrative is predicated on our being trapped within a "civilized" wilderness, looking out.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, when Hopper spoke of “decay” (quoted in O’Doherty 22), he was referring to the inevitable degradation from thought to execution, from idea to representation of idea. Immediacy of perception is inevitably lost when one encounters canvas, or in Auster’s case the page. Sincerely, Hopper believed that he could never paint what he set out to. Yet in the light of my analysis I would say it is possible to extrapolate more facets of this process of decay. Any other human being looked at through the multiple frames of canvas, or window, or our own preconceptions, or linguistic signs, is decayed. Decay may in fact be another way of conceptualising puritan masks or shadows, and it is the default mode of looking.

Furthermore, as my readings of Auster’s *Moon Palace* and Hopper’s “Seven A.M.” illustrate, dyadic American myths of wilderness and civilization, of the enlightened and the savage are, by virtue of their being manufactured by man and reliant themselves on volatile symbolisation, always already under decay and subject to the vagaries of memory, language and the re-emergence of suppressed desires or past histories. Any attempt to reinforce strict boundaries is, in the words of Rolf Renner, “a fraud, a deceitful fiction. It is an attempt to maintain the pretence of an orderly reality that is capable of representation, a reality such as the individual has long since ceased to experience” (92). For Auster, as for American Renaissance writers before him, decay is inherent in the paranoid symbolism forced by our limited powers of perception and the loss of legitimate signifying authorities, both of which ideas stem perforce from the very puritan myths of exceptionalism and divine sanction which aim to negate them. Thus Hopper and Auster’s work is “about” criticism in relation to an American imagination, about the necessity of literary responses,<sup>15</sup> of inserting verbal signs into an incomplete and frustratingly oblique picture or narrative in order to create an illusion of wholeness (the work of articulated memory, in fact). And by extension, it is therefore about an American obsession with collective myth and a view of America and the world as inherently, necessarily, neurotically *readable*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is one of the possible interpretations of the title of the first part of *The New York Trilogy*: *City of Glass*. The partiality and incompleteness of our view through these windows (or frames) is made more explicit in the recent graphic novel of *City of Glass*, in which the narrative is made up precisely of frames of varying sizes which frequently disallow access to the full spectrum of events.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the interview with Christopher Bigsby in *Writers in Conversation: Volume 2* (Norwich: EAS Publishing, 2001) 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Times Higher Education Supplement* 20 August 2004. <http://www.thes.co.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> I have deliberately opted for “puritan” without a capital letter because I wish to emphasise, particularly in Auster’s case, that rather than being a direct descendant of the Puritans he has chosen instead to have his protagonists exemplify and explore certain puritan themes as a result of his imaginative engagement with his literary antecedents, notably Hawthorne, Melville and Poe.

<sup>5</sup> “It is perhaps no more impossible to give a vague idea of Brancusi’s sculpture in words than to give it in photographs, but it is equally impossible to give an exact sculptural idea in either words or photography.” (441)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Semon, in his 1908 work *Die Mneme als erhaltendes Princip im Wechsel des organischen Geschehens* called the traces of memorial energy left by an event “engrams.” I am indebted once more to E.H. Gombrich for his analysis of this concept and its influence on Warburg.

<sup>7</sup> The similarity between the flowing curtains and the drapes to which Warburg refers cannot be ignored.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, some years before, Herman Melville had promulgated a similar idea, further reinforcing the spectral nature of life: “all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents. There’s a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most malicious difference!” (*Moby Dick* 526). Thus we must infer that Ahab’s problems and obsessions lie elsewhere than in the relentless bodily solidity of the whale.

<sup>9</sup> It could be argued that Donatello is the living embodiment of the pathos formula, the faun as pagan, possibly dionysiac spirit sublimated into the cold stone of Praxiteles’ classical sculpture.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Auster’s poem “White Spaces” (1978-9) marks the transitional stage between his poetry and his prose, so is pivotal in the search for forms of expression for his recurring themes. As its title suggests, the poem is partly concerned with the terrifying whiteness of the page and the artist’s delusional, paranoid impulse that to fill it with signs constitutes an emergence into both ontological and epistemological certitude: “It will not do, then, to ask questions. For this is a landscape of random impulse, of knowledge for its own sake – which is to say, a knowledge exists that comes into being beyond any possibility of putting it into words. And if just this once we were to abandon ourselves to the supreme indifference of simply being wherever we happen to be, then perhaps we would not be deluding ourselves into thinking that we, too, had at last become a part of it all.” In *Disappearances: Selected Poems* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Without being fanciful, or just plain unpleasant, we might speculate that constipation represents the closing up of meaning in the picture. The “Ex-lax” sign promises release, but nobody is there to buy it.

<sup>12</sup> It is worthwhile noting that the title of the film *Smoke*, for which Auster wrote the screenplay, similarly plays on the notion of obscurity in relations with others. Throughout the movie there are shots heavily indebted to Edward Hopper, from the interior of Paul Benjamin’s Brooklyn apartment (“Room in Brooklyn” [1932]) to the petrol station owned by Cyrus Cole (“Four Lane Road” [1956]).

<sup>13</sup> In this, it predicts *The Music of Chance*, in which an Irish castle is bought, dismantled and re-assembled as a wall in the grounds of the home of two eccentric American millionaires. One is reminded of the exploits of wealthy philanthropists at the turn of the twentieth century

such as J.P. Morgan, giving their lives a patina of Old World culture simply by hoarding artefacts, and of the dismantling and re-assembling of London Bridge in Arizona.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny Emerson's influence on Hopper, which has been succinctly described by Janet McKenzie in her recent notes to accompany the Tate Modern exhibition in London. See <http://www.studio-international.co.uk/painting/hopper.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Auster's *Ghosts* feels like a literary response to a Hopper paradigm of inconclusive urban looking. It is what might emerge when such a Hopper painting were put into words.

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