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The Legacy of Samuel Beckett in Paul Auster's Work

Beckett's presence can be strongly sensed in Auster's work, especially in his early novels. It seems to me unmistakable in *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and in the fascinating biography of his father, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), which I find a remarkable work. These works have a sparseness and an abstract quality which encourage a sense of being plunged into an atmosphere very reminiscent of the kind we meet in a Beckett text, with strong imagery of aloneness, of life lived at the margins, of deprivation and hunger. Yet when we move onto a novel such as *Moon Palace* (1989), which can be described as a "baggy monster" in relation to its range of characters, its diverse settings, its embedded narratives and breadth of vision, references to Beckett's work are still strongly present, and I am thinking especially of allusions to *Endgame* (1958).

I think it is important to recognize that Auster has his own voice, and his own specific themes and situations which he returns to again and again. Family relationships are very often examined, especially the relationship (or more pertinently, the lack of one) between father and son, explored with such poetic intensity in *The Invention of Solitude*. Hunger and solitude become an intrinsic part of his wider interest in journeys and quests, allowing a inward journey into the psyche, which provides an opportunity to explore and discover identity while displaced from the world of competition, consumerism and the various ways that the outer world forces us to ignore and reject the inner self in the ongoing struggle to make a living, make a "success" of our lives. His work often features journeys, money gained and money lost, chance and coincidence, love and death, and mysteries without solutions.

It seems to me that Beckett holds an important place in Auster's development as a writer, and this is especially true in the early stages. I am going to begin by discussing an early play, which Auster himself describes as a bit of a disaster, "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven" (written 1976/77; published in *Hand to Mouth* in 1997) which is somehow too close to Beckett, too derivative, in the sense that it can be seen to have stifled his own artistry and his own

imagination. In order to find a voice of his own Auster needed to get further away from Beckett. But this does happen, and rather triumphantly, later on. The early play is very much a reworking of *Waiting for Godot*. It is not a slavish reproduction, but it is hedged around on all sides by what appears as a need, conscious or not, to write a play like Beckett, or more particularly, a play like *Godot*. (It is interesting to recognize that Beckett chose never to write a play quite like *Godot* again). I think we need to go to *The Music of Chance* to find “Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven,” completely refashioned and reconceptualized, resurfacing within the novel form, and now really working on its own terms. The original play can be glimpsed lying beneath and operating as a central core of the narrative. It is a fascinating revision, and in a sense we come full circle in that the novel was adapted into a film (directed by Peter Haas, 1993), and very effectively. It still holds onto its strangeness and mystery, a feat not always pulled off when experimental fiction is converted into film. And Beckett is still there, but by 1990, when the novel was first published, Auster’s own voice has developed and moved further towards what is unmistakably his. It clarifies that he used Beckett, in a sense, as a mentor, learned from him and moved forward. Beckett could have been a dangerous influence, and blocked this movement forward, but instead, for Auster, he was a place to start from, to develop from, as he created his own voice.

“Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven” was one of three plays written during a six-month stay in Berkeley in 1976. In *Hand to Mouth* Auster (1998: 101) writes that

The farthest thing from my mind was to do anything with them in a practical sense. As far as I was concerned, they were hardly more than spare, minimalist exercises, an initial stab at something. [...]

But John Bernard Myers decided to stage the Laurel and Hardy play. It was not a success. The version published in *Hand to Mouth* is the result of a thorough reworking. Auster (1998: 104–5) considers that

The performances had been only part of the problem, and I wasn’t about to palm off responsibility for what had happened on the director or the actors. The play was far too long, I realized, too rambling and diffuse, and radical surgery was needed to mend it. I began chopping and trimming, hacking away at everything that felt weak or superfluous. [...]

It is still not great drama, but does hold interest, and I do admire Auster’s decision to publish it.

It is useful to consider the play in relation to *Godot*, and I will put forward a few ideas about links that can be made between the two plays. "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven" is a two-hander: the two characters are described as "Stan Laurel, a builder of walls; Oliver Hardy, a builder of walls" (Auster 1998: 109). Thus, immediately we are introduced to them, the characters are defined by what they do. Unlike *Godot* this will be a play in which something will be done, where something happens: a wall is built. The stage is bare, apart from a "heap of stones," which might well bring to mind the "abode of stones," a phrase so often repeated in Lucky's tirade. I visualize the two actors as looking as much like Laurel and Hardy as possible. This would provoke strong expectations in the audience, especially signalling the kind of comedy that is associated with this famous double act. Here is how the play begins:

Laurel enters right. Slowly, cautiously, as if in a daze. He is wearing denim overalls and work boots and carries a satchel over his shoulder. A bowler hat sits on his head. He stops, turns, and stares back in the direction he has just come from.

Hardy enters left. Same clothing, same satchel, same bowler hat. He moves purposefully, crossing the stage with great strides. In the dimness he crushes into Laurel from behind. They both fall down, groaning. (Auster 1998: 109)

The two characters are clearly distinguished by their movements and body language: one cautious, the other purposeful. This also brings to mind the characters in *Act Without Words II* (1959), which also fits in with the focus on doing, rather than waiting, in this play. And the dialogue begins:

HARDY: (*Recovering. Touching Laurel's face.*) Is it you?

LAUREL: Yes, yes. (*Pause.*) I think so. (*Doubtful, touching his face.*) Is it me?

HARDY: Yes. Of course it's you.

LAUREL: And you? Are you you?

HARDY: Yes. Of course I'm me. (*Pause.*) I'm me, and you're you.

LAUREL: It looks like we're both here, then, doesn't it?

HARDY: (*Standing up, stretching. Enthusiastically.*) And so . . . another day begins.

LAUREL: You don't have to be so happy about it.

HARDY: (*Stops. Seriously.*) You shouldn't talk like that. You know I'm not happy.

LAUREL: You certainly look happy. You certainly sound happy.

HARDY: That's what we call "putting up a good front." It's a way of tricking myself into being something other than what I really am. (*Pause. Brightly.*) I pretend. (*Begins walking toward the heap of stones.*) (Auster 1998: 109–10)

And that's enough to give you the idea. If you are like me you may well be groaning at this stage, alongside the characters, because it does have that off-

putting flavour of a none-too-expert stab at “doing Beckett.” It reminds me of the opening of Act 2 of *Godot*. I’m trying my best to “see” it as a performance. This is Laurel and Hardy, not Didi and Gogo, and if the actors play this aspect up sufficiently there is plenty of room for comedy, but on the page none of this comes alive for me. It is not a comic play in any straightforward sense, and maybe, like *Godot*, it could be termed a tragicomedy. There are many direct, as well as less direct echoes: “This can’t go on” (Auster 1998: 141); “Do you think we’re alive?” (Auster 1998: 143); “Has it ever occurred to you that we’re already dead?” (Auster 1998: 153); “Do you think someone is watching us?” (Auster 1998: 158); “Nothing is going to happen” (Auster 1998: 164). Auster has, however, chosen to have two trees rather than one (Auster 1998: 147). There are hints that this is some kind of purgatory, that the two characters are being punished for unnamed sins. “Heaven,” it would appear, is a gloomy, barren place, full of toil and suffering.

It could be suggested that this is a kind of sequel to *Godot*. The two characters have at last met Godot, and he has set them a task: to build a wall. And they do build a wall. No reason is given for this, and it is possible that they build this same wall every day. But at the end of the play, when darkness falls, the wall has been built. Something has been done.

I think it is only when “Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven” is looked at again from the new perspective provided by *The Music of Chance* that this “spare minimalist exercise” begins to gain an identity of its own. This novel has this early play embedded within it, but the abstractions have been concretized, fleshed out, and to some extent, made explicable. But there is still a mystery at the core, and although many questions are answered, many are not, and new questions are posed. *Godot* can also be glimpsed, almost unrecognizable now, but still holding an important place. The two main characters, Pozzi and Nashe, could be read as allusions to Pozzo and Lucky, but they are more akin to Didi and Gogo. We witness their first meeting, unlike the characters in *Godot* and “Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven.” Pozzi has been beaten, but we are told why and by whom. Things are being explained to us. Things would seem to be making sense. As I have suggested, certain abstractions have been concretized for us, but mysteries remain. There is an underlying sense of threat and an uneasiness that is reminiscent of *Godot*. In *Godot* Gogo and Didi discuss salvation, and Didi’s suggestion: “Suppose we repented” is met with Estragon’s questions: “Repented what?” “Our being born?” (Beckett 1978: 11). Such an idea is unsettling within the bleak atmosphere of the play, and it is very definitely present in Auster’s novel. The ideas of having “no rights” (Beckett 1978: 19),

of being punished (Beckett 1978: 93) and, alternatively, the prospect of being "saved" (Beckett 1978: 94), which go so far in creating that strangely fascinating sense of threat in *Godot*, when they resurface in *The Music of Chance* – which is, in so many ways, so different in its richness, colour, movement and interest – still retain their power. There is a bleakness underlying the surface vibrancy, a dark allegory concerning punishment, retribution, somehow to do with the sin of having been born.

My thesis is that there is a perceptible line that links the three texts, leading from *Godot* to "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven" to *The Music of Chance*. Auster's fascination with the idea of two characters being punished, seemingly forever, by being forced to build a wall, a futile purposeless wall, was not filed away in his desk along with the play. He returned to it. He spoke about how he "couldn't get rid of the idea. It plagued me and haunted me for [...] years"; "the wall – those stones had been standing inside me for years" (Auster 1996: 153). The task was how to place this central image within a novel. How would he get the characters into this situation? How could it happen in a way that could be made acceptable within a prose fiction format? And this is what *The Music of Chance* achieves. A set of circumstances, chance and coincidence, bring the two protagonists together at just that moment when they can be of use to each other: "It was one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air" (Auster 1992: 1). It could be suggested, as it could with "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven," that they meet their Godot – in this case, in Flower and Stone. Flower and Stone are not Pozzo and Lucky, although Flower's overbearing and self-satisfied demeanour is reminiscent of Pozzo. Flower and Stone are the god-like figures who mete out the punishment: paternal but without love; absent, but unfailing in their power to control, to create suffering and to deny freedom.

I am particularly interested in this idea of punishment. It is the central focus of "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven." The building of the wall seems completely futile and pointless, as we are given no sense of the purpose of the wall. Laurel suggests they stop building it:

LAUREL: If we stopped working now, if we both just refused to go on, don't you think it would force them to act? (Auster 1998: 158)

We are kept in the dark as to who or what "them" refers to. But Hardy decides that if they (Laurel and Hardy) do stop "they" (the unnamed persecutors) would "give us more work tomorrow to make up for it" (Auster 1998: 158). So whoever "they" are, it seems, they are relentless in their persecution, and

there is no escaping the hard, exhausting work. In *The Music of Chance* Pozzi and Nashe are forced to build a wall to settle a gambling debt. As soon as the question of how they will repay what they owe is raised, the idea of punishment is also put forward: "A punishment would have to be meted out, that was certain" (Auster 1992: 105). Nashe compares their predicament to being in prison (Auster 1992: 119); he will be "like some convict sentenced to a term of hard labor" (Auster 1992: 127). But Nashe also sees building the wall as a chance of salvation. He says nothing to Pozzi

about what truly concerned him – nothing about the struggle to put his life together again, nothing about how he saw the wall as a chance to redeem himself in his own eyes, nothing about how he welcomed the hardships of the meadow as a way to atone for his recklessness and self-pity [. . .]. (Auster 1992: 127)

It seems to me to be a strange reaction. He seems to be welcoming the task as a punishment that will involve atonement and bring redemption. Again the building of the wall, as in the play, seems quite futile. Flower and Stone bought a ruined Irish castle on a visit to Ireland, basically just a heap of stones, and had it shipped back to America. Their plan is, not to have the castle rebuilt, but to have the stones built into a wall that will be situated diagonally across a field. Flower envisages it as "a monument":

"Rather than try to reconstruct the castle, we're going to turn it into a work of art. To my mind, there's nothing more mysterious or beautiful than a wall. I can already see it: standing out there in the meadow, rising up like some enormous barrier against time. It will be a memorial to itself, gentleman, a symphony of resurrected stones, and every day it will sing a dirge for the past we carry within us."

"A Wailing Wall," Nashe said. (Auster 1992: 86)

So we see that this wall is endowed with huge symbolic significance, including religious resonances. We also discover that the name of the man who will be in charge of the work has the ominous name of Calvin. It will be a "monument," "a work of art," "a barrier against time," "a symphony." The only utilitarian purpose this wall has is the "educational value"; it is "something that will teach the culprits a lesson" (Auster 1992: 105). But what are these "culprits" being punished for? For losing at cards? And why does Nashe welcome the punishment? I think that, in order to try and shed some light on these questions, it is interesting to consider a theme often returned to in Auster's work: the absent father.

When Nashe learns of his father's death "he had not seen his father in over thirty years" (Auster 1992: 2). His father had walked out when he was two.

Nashe's wife has left him, and their two-year-old daughter is now living with Nashe's sister. His mother died four years ago. Against this background Nashe discovers that his father has left him "a colossal sum – close to two hundred thousand dollars" (Auster 1992: 2). Nashe considers it "a peculiar way to make amends" (Auster 1992: 3). This is true. The father has absented himself from his children's lives, and this can never be "amended." There is a strange parallel in Pozzi's childhood. He can remember meeting his father only twice in his life: once when he was eight, once when he was "eleven, maybe twelve" (Auster 1992: 40). On both occasions he turns up in a big Cadillac and gives him a hundred-dollar bill – again "a peculiar way to make amends" for his absence.

Reading *The Invention of Solitude* provides very strong evidence of why the idea of an absent father has such an important place in Auster's work. Auster writes about his father directly after his death. He tells us:

Even before his death he had been absent, and long ago the people closest to him had learned to accept this absence, to treat it as the fundamental quality of his being. (Auster 1989: 6)

It was never possible for him to be where he was. For as long as he lived, he was somewhere else, between here and there. But never really here. And never really there. (Auster 1989: 19)

It is a fascinating story, not least, for me, because there is so much in his portrait of his father that reminds me of my own. His words: "You do not stop hungering after your father's love, even after you are grown up" (Auster 1989: 19) affect me deeply, and this strikes me as a statement of truth, along with all the enormity of the feelings it involves, including a sense of failure, loss, a fundamental feeling of not being good enough, somehow not being authenticated. I would take the statement further, to suggest that this hunger does not stop, even after your father's death. It then moves from hungering after the impossible to hungering after the totally impossible. "From the beginning, it seems," Auster recognizes, "I was looking for my father. Looking frantically for anyone who resembled him" (Auster 1989: 21). He speaks of a "craving" (Auster 1989: 21) and "a desire to do something extraordinary, to impress him with an act of heroic proportions" (Auster 1989: 23). He cannot really believe in the man his father appears to be,

so implacably neutral on the surface [...] who lacked feeling, who wanted so little of others. And if there was not such a man, that means that there was another man,

a man hidden inside the man who was not there, and the trick of it, then, was to find him. On the condition that he is there to be found.

To recognize, right from the start, that the essence of this project is failure.

(Auster 1989: 20)

He realizes that his parents' relationship is loveless, and considers his own conception: "a passionless embrace, a blind, dutiful groping between chilly hotel sheets [which] has never failed to humble me into an awareness of my own contingency" (Auster 1989: 18). It is a powerful and moving account of an absent father who "was never really there."

If we consider again Auster's recognition that "From the beginning, it seems, I was looking for my father. Looking frantically for anyone who resembled him" (Auster 1989: 21), I think we can gain an insight into Nashe's own quest for some kind of salvation. After his father's death, Nashe's life changes. This can be related to Auster's own experience. At a time when, Auster recalls, "I don't think I've ever been closer to feeling that I was at the end of my rope" he learns of his father's death, and his inheritance; "The money changed everything for me; it set my life on an entirely different course" (Auster 1996: 128). He considers that "In some sense, all the novels I've written have come out of that money my father gave me":

It's impossible to sit down and write without thinking about it. It's a terrible equation, finally. To think that my father's death saved my life. (Auster 1996: 132)

With Nashe the result of the inheritance does not bring about this kind of rebirth, or salvation, yet when Nashe's feelings are described we have a strange mix of allusions to death and life, and to a detonation, a "big bang":

He felt like a man who had finally found the courage to put a bullet through his head – but in this case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds. (Auster 1992: 10)

But in a very real sense he is turning his back on life. One by one he discards all the people and things that have given him rootedness and a reason for living. He decides to leave his daughter with his sister, becoming an absent father himself; he gives up his job, sells his house; he takes to the road in a new red two-door Saab 900. Is he looking for a father substitute? Is he escaping? The opening sentence of the novel describes his constant driving, constant movement: "For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America

as he waited for the money to run out" (Auster 1992: 1). It is aimless, continuous, with no apparent goal, "no definite plan" (Auster 1992: 11).

Speed was of the essence, the joy of sitting in the car and hurtling himself forward through space. That became a good beyond all others, a hunger to be fed at any price. Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment, and as one moment followed another, it was as though he alone continued to exist. He was a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared. The car became a sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore. As long as he was driving, he carried no burdens, was unencumbered by even the slightest particle of his former life. That is not to say that memories did not rise up in him, but they no longer seemed to bring any of the old anguish. (Auster 1992: 11–12)

This speaks of escape. The car is a "refuge" from the world. He is, in a sense, absenting himself from life, and from the "old anguish." It is possible to read this constant driving, constant movement, as creating the kind of absence Auster recognized in his father: "he was somewhere else, between here and there. But never really here. And never really there" (Auster 1989: 19). Auster has described the "true subject" of *The Music of Chance* as an exploration of the "question of freedom" (Auster 1996: 153), and has also stated that it is "a book about walls and slavery and freedom" (Auster 1996: 122). "Little by little," we are told, Nashe "had fallen in love with his new life of freedom and irresponsibility" (Auster 1992: 11), but the car, his "refuge" from the world is also a kind of cage, whilst the endless driving is also a kind of enslavement. In time the money begins to run out, and Nashe is forced back into the world; something must be done, and the card game between Pozzi and Flower and Stone would seem to be the answer, in order to ensure that the "freedom and irresponsibility" does not have to end. Auster speaks of how he "wanted to explore the implications of the windfall I had received after my father's death" in this novel (Auster 1996: 153), and the implications, in relation to Nashe, are very different from Auster's. Auster's movement is into creativity: life out of death; Nashe moves, it seems inexorably, from life into slavery and death. Freedom itself becomes like a kind of death: an absence from life.

Entering Flower and Stone's house is like entering an unreal world: "it was difficult for him not to think of the house as an illusion" (Auster 1992: 69). Pozzi has described Flower and Stone as like Laurel and Hardy:

That's what I call them, Laurel and Hardy. One's fat and the other's thin, just like old Stan and Ollie. They're genuine pea-brains, my friend, a pair of poor chumps.
(Auster 1992: 30)

Nashe recalls this description as they enter the house: "More than anything else it made him think of a movie set" (Auster 1992: 69). But Pozzi's assessment is only taking in their superficial appearance. They are not the Laurel and Hardy from Auster's play – these are the roles forced on Pozzi and Nashe – and there is something far more threatening about them than is ever apparent in the comic films of the actual Laurel and Hardy, as Nashe begins to recognize.

They are about to play a game of cards, an adult form of a play with a purpose: making money. But before they begin to play we learn how Flower and Stone spend a great deal of their time. Stone spends his time creating a miniature scale model of a city: "the City of the World" (Auster 1992: 79). Flower declaims that it "is more than just a toy" (Auster 1992: 79); there is a childlike quality to this occupation, but it goes further than this. In this house of illusion Stone has created a miniature world in which time is simultaneous: "Everything in it happens at once" (Auster 1992: 79). Ominously there is a prison, with prisoners "working happily at their various tasks [. . .]. They're glad they've been punished for their crimes" (Auster 1992: 80). It is, for Stone, "a utopia"; a model of how the world should be. Nashe can think of the model as "charming [. . .] deft and brilliant and admirable," but at the same time as "bizarre" and "totalitarian," with a "hint of violence, an atmosphere of cruelty and revenge" (Auster 1992: 87). When Nashe revisits the model, whilst the poker game is being played, he finds that

the overriding mood was one of terror, of dark dreams sauntering down the avenues in broad daylight. A threat of punishment seemed to hang in the air.

(Auster 1992: 96)

Flower is a collector: books, cigars, and finally, his "historical memorabilia" (Auster 1992: 82). Nashe finds this collection "curious," "a monument to trivia [. . .] with articles of such marginal value that Nashe wondered if it were not some kind of joke" (Auster 1992: 83). They are relics from the past, but

It was all so random, so misconstrued, so utterly beside the point. Flower's museum was a graveyard of shadows, a demented shrine to the spirit of nothingness [. . .]. The fascination was simply for the objects as material things, and the way they had been wrenched out of any possible context, condemned by Flower to go on existing for no reason at all: defunct, devoid of purpose, alone in themselves now

for the rest of time. It was the isolation that haunted Nashe, the image of irreducible separateness that burned into his memory, and no matter how hard he struggled, he never managed to break free of it. (Auster 1992: 84)

Here Nashe is having a premonition of his own situation in the near future. He will be "condemned by Flower to go on existing for no reason: defunct, devoid of purpose," just as Didi and Gogo seem condemned to wait for a Godot who never comes, and like Laurel and Hardy in the play, will be building a wall "for no reason at all," except to create a new object for Flower's collection. There is a blank space in Stone's City in which he plans to build a model of the house and grounds, which will include the wall, and there is the fascinating image in the film of Stone erecting his tiny replica wall simultaneously with the construction of the big wall by Pozzi and Nashe. This gives us a sense of the godlike quality Flower speaks of when he declares that "at times I feel that we've become immortal" (Auster 1992: 75). Nashe steals the little models of Flower and Stone from the City, but it is they who have "wrenched" Pozzi and Nashe out of their lives and "condemned" them to build their wall. Pozzi and Nashe, like the smiling convicts, will become a part of Stone's City. They will also be featured as inhabitants of an even smaller City, "a model of the model" (Auster 1992: 81). The image created here is of complete powerlessness, the shrinking to a miniature model of the self, followed by a further shrinking to an almost unimaginably tiny size; it has the quality of nightmare. Stone, in contrast, becomes magnified into a giant, all-powerful god, ruling over a world that he has reduced to a diminutive toy.

Flower and Stone seem "essentially harmless," but Nashe sees something darker behind the appearance. Stone, "whose manner was so humble and benign," has built a City with "an atmosphere of cruelty and revenge" (Auster 1992: 87). Flower is also "ambiguous": at times "sensible," at times "like a lunatic," the "mask" always seeming in danger of slipping (Auster 1992: 87). The dinner they are served before the card playing begins is "a kiddie banquet, a dinner fit for six-year-olds" (Auster 1992: 88). Flower and Stone appear at this point as "no more than grown-up children" (Auster 1992: 87), blunting some of Nashe's earlier feelings of unease. But it seems that Flower and Stone are lulling their guests into a false state of security, and even encouraging a regression into a childlike state. They are playing at being children, and it seems that this is infectious. When Nashe steals the little figures "it is the first time he has stolen anything since he was a little boy" (Auster 1992: 97). When Pozzi loses all their money, it seems clear that the play-acting has paid off. We now

see a very different Flower: "His expression made Nashe think of a high school principal sitting in his office with a couple of delinquent kids" (Auster 1992: 105). Flower is now seen, not as childlike, but in the position of a father figure. The roles have been reversed; the power dynamics are now clear.

Nashe's compliance in the scheme of building a wall is surprising. He finds "himself giving in to the idea of the wall as the only solution to his predicament" (Auster 1992: 109). He is "giving in"; he sees it as "almost a relief to have the decision taken out of his hands" (Auster 1992: 110). It is "a chance to redeem himself," "a way to atone" (Auster 1992: 127) – but atone for what? There is a strong suggestion of Pozzi and Nashe being forced back into childhood. The ten thousand stones, when first seen, appear "like set of children's blocks" (Auster 1992: 116). The "little red wagon" (Auster 1992: 129) which they are given to haul the stones to the wall, is a "Fast Flyer, the same kind of children's wagon that Nashe had bought for his daughter on her third birthday. It seemed like a joke [...]" (Auster 1992: 130). It is a long way from the "red two-door Saab 900 – the first unused car he had ever owned" (Auster 1992: 4), which must have felt, for Nashe, like a powerful symbol of adulthood, of manhood. This car he has now lost, along with all his money, in the poker game.

Auster spoke, in *The Invention of Solitude*, of "looking for my father, looking frantically for anyone that resembled him" (Auster 1989: 21). It can be suggested that Nashe was also looking for his father, and Flower and Stone now seem to resemble an idea of his father, a father that he never knew. Auster wrote of how he wanted his father "to take notice of me" (Auster 1989: 21), of "a desire to do something extraordinary, to impress him with an act of heroic proportions" (Auster 1989: 23). This seems to be how Nashe sees the building of the wall: as "an act of heroic proportions," as a way to make a father substitute "take notice" of him at last. He is certainly disappointed when Flower and Stone do not come out to watch the wall being built. Pozzi and Nashe are overseen throughout the building work, but by Calvin, employed by Flower and Stone, a mere representative. Didi and Gogo wait, Godot never comes; Laurel and Hardy build a wall, "they" never come. Flower and Stone never come to watch the building of the "monument," the "work of art" (Auster 1992: 86).

Walls can be viewed in many different ways. Flower declares that his wall will be a "barrier against time" (Auster 1992: 86). Like the fence "encompassing the entire extent of Flower and Stone's domain," barriers can "keep things out" and keep "things in as well" (Auster 1992: 126). You can be inside the prison, or you can be outside: a wall can be a barrier to freedom, or a protection from a threat. A wall can be "a symphony of resurrected stones" or a "Wailing Wall"

(Auster 1992: 86). In "Laurel and Harvey Go to Heaven" and *The Music of Chance* a wall can also be a means of punishment. A wall can also become a poignant metaphor for the absence of emotional contact. Auster recognized that no matter what he did to impress his father, "his reaction would have been exactly the same. Whether I succeeded or failed did not essentially matter to him" (Auster 1989: 24). There is "Nothing to be done" (Beckett 1978: 9), as Gogo declares so bleakly. Auster feels that he and his father "were fixed in an unmoveable relationship, cut off from each other on opposite sides of a wall" (Auster 1989: 24). A wall can symbolize the absence of love.

Auster writes of the desire to find his father, but also of the need "to recognize, right from the start, that the essence of this project is failure" (Auster 1989: 20). In *Godot*, Godot never comes, and a sense of failure haunts the play, right from the start. Godot, as the absent character, has been interpreted in many ways over the years, and of course should never be tied down to any fixed interpretation. But one way of reading the play is to see these two characters, Didi and Gogo, as lost, as Pozzi and Nashe seem lost, without direction or purpose or aim, apart from waiting for someone who will never come, someone who they seem to hope will change their destiny:

VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON: And if he comes?

VLADIMIR: We'll be saved.

(Beckett 1978: 94)

Death or Godot, this is the bleak choice. At the ending of *The Music of Chance* there is also a strong sense of failure. The wall is not finished, and although we cannot know for sure, Pozzi seems to have died, and Nashe, too, it seems, also dies when he crashes the Saab. There is an interesting codicil, however. In the film Nashe does not die. Auster, himself, in a Hitchcockian cameo, drives by and picks him up from the side of the road, mirroring the way Nashe picked up Pozzi. So there is some kind of salvation, in the film version at least, with the creator seemingly taking pity on his creation, after all the suffering he has put him through. Nashe has finally found his father.

In "Twentieth-Century French Poetry" in *The Red Notebook* Auster (1996: 46) lists poets who have translated French poetry. Auster has also translated many French poems. The list, which includes Beckett, includes "many of the most important contemporary American British poets [that] have tried their hand at translating the French," and he considers that "it would be difficult to imagine their work had they not been touched in some way by the French." This seems to me to be a very good way of considering Auster's relationship

to Beckett's work: it would be difficult to imagine his work had he not been "touched" by Beckett. He speaks about the "tremendous hold" Beckett had over him, and at one time admits that "the influence of Beckett was so strong that I couldn't see my way beyond it" (Auster 1996: 105). In terms of Auster's creative life Beckett has a role as a father figure. But Auster has had many fathers, many influences. "That's why," Auster (1996: 144) explains, that "The Book of Memory" (the second half of *The Invention of Solitude*) "is filled with so many references and quotations, in order to pay homage to all the others inside me." Auster is proud of the "dozens of authors" (Auster 1996: 144) who have gone towards making him the writer that he is. He has found his way beyond Beckett, and, refreshingly, is happy to acknowledge the legacy – of Beckett and of others – in his work. It is another kind of inheritance, which, alongside the inheritance from his father, "all the novels [he has] written have come out of" (Auster 1996: 132).

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