The Starving Artist as Dying Author

Paul Auster and Aesthetic Autonomy after 1968

Alys Moody

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the questions raised about the role of art in the aftermath of the 1968 student protests in France and the US, as aesthetic autonomy was being absorbed into the university and the university itself was changing in response to the emergence of what in the US became known as “French theory.” Paul Auster, who was a student at Columbia in 1968 and spent the early 1970s in Paris, moves between these two milieus, using his commitment to the art of hunger to locate himself outside both. In the process, Auster reinvents the art of hunger in line with the preoccupations of his own historical moment, locating the beseiged author at the center of the tradition, and linking the art of hunger’s preoccupation with aesthetic autonomy to the 1960s’ and 1970s’ quest for personal authenticity.

Keywords: Paul Auster, 1968, student activism, metamodernism, postmodernism, literature in the university, the author, hunger
Before speech, the hunger of a dissident scribe,
attendant eye at banquets, carving his name into the
edge of the table: precursor of famine.

To found a self among the morsels, from what is swept
away, and leaves the table bare.

Paul Auster, “Stele”¹

In the second half of 1970 Paul Auster was living in Paris, a
young poet who had recently graduated with an MA from
Columbia University for a thesis entitled “The Art of Hunger.”
As he tells it in later memoirs, he was poor and stubborn,
caught between an inability to earn a living as a writer and a
refusal to supplement his income with more financially sound
employment. In this account, the young Auster is an exemplary
participant in the art of hunger tradition, an exemplary
“starving artist,” beating his retreat from the demands of the
literary market without a plausible alternative structure to
catch his fall. His poems of the period—of which the lines
quoted above are an example²—replay this reticence on the
level of form, troubling modernist claims to impersonality in
the echo they establish between poem and poet. They assert
their status as literature through their abstraction and heavy
symbolism, divorcing themselves from the specifics of their
historical moment and the details of material (p.113) existence. The hostility of this early poetry to any co-optation
by a mass market or broad readership replicates and
reinforces the biographical claim to autonomy from the
market, and it achieves this by simultaneously claiming its
autonomy from both history and politics. Framing his writing
as “the hunger of a dissident scribe,” Auster positions these
overlapping claims to autonomy within the tradition of hunger
and asociality that he described in his MA thesis as having
Hamsun, Kafka, and Beckett as its central proponents.
This account of Auster as an exemplary starving artist is complicated by his belatedness with respect to the modernist tradition. Auster’s claim to write an art of hunger takes place under the shadow of his historical distance from modernism itself, a distance of fifty years, which separates the high point of anglophone modernism in Europe from the beginning of Auster’s writing career in the early 1970s. The aspiration in the lines above to “found a self among the morsels, from what is swept away” recalls Nietzsche’s excoriation of second-generation Greek tragedians, whom he condemns to “eat your fill on the crumbs of the masters of a previous age.” Like these tragedians, Auster, in his attempt to affiliate himself with modernism at the height of the period we subsequently came to call postmodern, is coming too late to the modernist feast. Rejecting the forms in which modernism and aesthetic autonomy had been institutionalized in the mid-century, Auster seeks to retain his affiliation to a previous generation of the literary field at a moment of generational change.
For a brief but defining moment as Auster was coming of age, the situation appeared even more grave: not merely that Auster was taking an unfashionable and outdated position in the literary field, but that the field itself lacked the autonomy on which modernist literature had depended. In the milieu of 1960s student radicalism, aesthetic autonomy was judged to be complicit in the violent status quo that produced the Vietnam War and racial segregation. The student protestors, like the post-war French intellectuals of Chapter 2, developed a theory of art that took politics to be inescapable, and autonomy itself merely a ruse. At the same time, their protests briefly threatened to destroy the structural conditions of the university that permitted the literary and intellectual fields’ autonomy in mid-century US. Auster’s aesthetics, formed in this moment of historical crisis, sought to de-institutionalize autonomy, investing it instead in the figure of the author, the “dissident scribe” who attempts to “found a self” among the ruins of modernism. Even as the immediate crisis of 1968 passed without destroying the institutions or ideology of aesthetic autonomy, Auster retained the innovation within the art of hunger that developed in response to this moment: his equation of aesthetic autonomy with the personal autonomy of the artist. As his writing career developed across the 1970s and 1980s, he reimagined the art of hunger of his 1970 Masters thesis as a commitment to the figure of the starving artist—a figure who, as we saw in Chapter 1, represents the domestication of the art of hunger within a literary field.
This chapter focuses on Auster’s writing of the 1970s and 1980s, the period during which his interest in both hunger and aesthetic autonomy are at their height. This period covers his entire output of poetry, his most important critical essays, his prose memoir, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), and his first three novels, *The New York Trilogy* (1985–6), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), and *Moon Palace* (1989). Despite their relatively late publication dates, these novels share a manuscript genesis that dates to Auster’s college years in the late 1960s, when he penned a series of abortive novel drafts that provide many of the characters, situations, and plot points of his early published novels. Given their roots in this earlier historical moment, I read these novels of the 1980s, along with the earlier poetry and non-fiction prose, as engaged in a two-decade-long investigation of the aesthetic consequences of the social and intellectual tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. This investigation develops in the context of lively transnational exchange between French and US intellectual cultures, with thought on both sides of the Atlantic seeking new ways of understanding art’s relation to society and literature’s relation to non-literary language. In this context, Auster uses the art of hunger to stake out a position that defends aesthetic autonomy by investing it in the figure of a dying, but not yet dead, author.

1. Aesthetic Autonomy In The University
By the 1960s, a version of aesthetic autonomy, commonly attributed to modernism, had become firmly institutionalized within the American university. The key agent of its institutionalization was the New Criticism, whose methodological emphasis on “the text itself” and on what Douglas Bush critically described as its tendency “to analyze the work in vacuo as a timeless autonomous entity,” translated modernism’s perceived promotion of aesthetic autonomy into a critical principle. 4 Indeed, the New Criticism itself helped to construct this perception of modernism’s autonomy, by taking modern literature, especially modern poetry, as its favored object of study and by setting out to defend contemporary writing against the indifference or hostility of the historicist “scholars” to whom the New Critics opposed themselves. 5 But if its roots were initially in modernism, by the 1940s this method had expanded to colonize literary studies more broadly, reading “earlier literature in the light of a modernist poetics that said poetry is neither rhetorical persuasion nor self-expression but an autonomous discourse that cannot be reduced to its constituent concepts or emotions.” 6
From the beginning, this New Critical investment in literary autonomy was as much an institutional as a critical stance. John Crowe Ransom’s influential article “Criticism, Inc.,” for instance, laid the groundwork for the New Criticism in its linkage of “the autonomy of the work itself as existing for its own sake” to the autonomy of the English department (especially its autonomy from the claims of historicism) and of scholarly inquiry generally. In this period of academic professionalization, literary studies departments established themselves in opposition to departments of history, sociology, philosophy, and related disciplines, entrenching the aesthetic claim to autonomy as a brute fact of the institutional landscape. Meanwhile, over the same period, the university as an institution was asserting its own claims to autonomy from society, with the bedding down of the concept of academic freedom and its eventual acceptance as a bedrock of the post-war university. As the New Criticism went from “rags to riches to routine” over the course of the post-war period, this increasingly dominant methodological approach combined with the disciplinary and institutional autonomy of the English department within the university and the university within the society, to wrap university-level literary studies in several layers of autonomy. In the process, aesthetic autonomy became an increasingly institutional and institutionalized affair.
The lingering effects of this link between institutional and aesthetic autonomy were felt most forcefully in the field of undergraduate education. At Columbia, where Auster was an undergraduate from 1965 to 1969 and a Masters student in 1969–70, this institutionalized autonomy achieved perhaps its most paradigmatic form in the division between the two compulsory Core (general education) courses, Contemporary Civilization (CC) and Literature Humanities (Lit Hum). The English faculty at Columbia represented a range of methodological stances, including some, like Lionel Trilling’s liberal humanism, that do not fit comfortably within the broad-brush debates between “critics” and “scholars” of the era. But despite this faculty-level diversity, the compulsory Literature Humanities sequence, like many general education and introductory English courses in the period, cleaved closely to the New Critics’ preferred method of decontextualized close reading. In this, as Daniel Bell argued in a 1966 review of Columbia’s Core sequence, Lit Hum failed in its original intention “to parallel the Contemporary Civilization course: to provide in the realm of ideas and imagination a concurrent sense of the movement of thought with events.” Instead, he worried, “The temptation of this approach is that it leads to an extreme ‘New Criticism,’ of reading the work in se, without reference to any external context.”

Auster’s relationship to the critical and institutional consensus around aesthetic autonomy was somewhat ambivalent. Despite Bell’s concerns, Auster was an extremely enthusiastic student of Literature Humanities, which he has described in a recent memoir (written in the second person) as “without question the most invigorating intellectual challenge of your life so far.” Indeed, from Paradise Lost, which appears in his MA thesis as a touchstone for his theory of language, to Don Quixote, which is the subject of an extensive meditation in City of Glass, to Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground, whose spirit and attitude pervade Auster’s early writing, the set texts of Lit Hum have proven formative for Auster’s writing and thought. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Auster’s early writing is in part the history of his creative and intellectual engagement with the readings of this course, an engagement that was in turn shaped by the treatment of these texts as decontextualized aesthetic objects.
The environment in which Auster studied in the late 1960s was already marked by the generational decline of the New Criticism, in anticipation of the discipline’s slow shift towards the “French theory” that would transform literary studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite his enthusiasm for Lit Hum, Auster’s early essays suggest incipient reservations about the New Critical methods he was encouraged to follow. He opens an undergraduate essay on one of Beckett’s French poems, for instance, by ironically declaring his intention to “hack it to pieces, in the best tradition of the academy”—a disparaging allusion to New Critical close reading—while retaining a New Critical conviction that the work’s internal integrity will render it “capable of bearing the blows of the butcher’s cleaver.” Similarly, while in the paper itself he has “confined myself as rigorously as possible to the text,” the paper’s extensive notes, which he commends as “no doubt more interesting and readable than what precedes them,” contextualize the poem in relation to Beckett’s other writing and the sources and intertexts of his work, combining New Critical approaches with an author-centric historicism. Auster’s very early solution to the critical vacuum created by the decline of the New Criticism supplements attention to the text as an autonomous object with attention to the author. It prefigures Auster’s characteristic defense of aesthetic autonomy, which breaks with the New Criticism in its identification between the formal autonomy of the work and the personal autonomy of the author.

2. Art And Politics In 1968: The Autonomous University In Crisis
The shift from New Criticism to French theory represents a generational changing of the guard, a jostling for positions within a Bourdieusian literary field. The unrest that swept university campuses in the late 1960s, however, mounted a more serious challenge to the concept of autonomous art, casting doubt not just on the old positions but on the structural autonomy of the field as a whole. In the spring of 1968, Auster’s junior year of college, Columbia erupted in protest, making headlines nationally and internationally and becoming synonymous with college unrest across the US (the slogan “One, two, many Columbias,” adapted from Che Guevera’s “one, two, many Vietnams,” emphasized the university’s germinal role in nationwide student protest). Between 23 and 30 April, students occupied five buildings on the central university campus, forcing the suspension of classes and other university business. After the university sent the police to violently break up the occupation, university closures and a student strike persisted through the first weeks of May.

The protests were driven by the students’ realization of the university’s complicity in the major political struggles of their day. They were reacting against, on the one hand, Columbia’s plans to construct a new university gym in a local park, which was seen as extending the largely white university’s colonization of the poor black Harlem neighborhoods that surrounded it, and, on the other, the administration’s involvement in government and military research, which was seen as providing covert support for the Vietnam War. These events suggested that the university’s role as a guarantor of both intellectual and aesthetic autonomy was a fraud—that it was instead deeply invested in and complicit with the politics of segregation and militarism. In this context, autonomy itself seemed, from the students’ perspective, to lose both its institutional grounds and its intellectual legitimacy.
As a junior at Columbia in the spring of 1968, Auster participated in the occupation as an occupant of the Mathematics Building, one of the more radical, primarily undergraduate buildings. After the university called police to end the occupation, sporadic protests and campaigns continued throughout the remaining years of the decade and into the early 1970s, shaping the academic environment of the second half of Auster’s college life. Auster himself was fully immersed in this environment. His 1997 memoir *Hand to Mouth* recounts his friendship with several leading activists, including Mark Rudd, the leader of the student protests, whom Auster describes as “a childhood friend and Columbia dorm neighbor.” As the leaders of the protests radicalized and went underground, he recalls standing in a post office, studying “the posters of the (p.119) FBI’s ten most wanted men pinned to the wall. It turned out that I knew seven of them.”

Coming of age in this radicalized environment, Auster’s understanding of autonomy—personal, aesthetic, and institutional—was shaped by the assumptions of the student protests. Critics of the protests, especially among faculty, saw them as direct attacks on the autonomy of the university. Lionel Trilling, a professor of English at Columbia, found the students to be “wrong in dealing with the university as if it were perfectly continuous with the society,” worrying that under such circumstances, “the academic life will soon be made impossible.” Sidney Hook, a philosophy professor, concurred: “If the university is conceived of as an agency of action to transform society in behalf of a cause, no matter how exalted, it loses its relative autonomy, imperils both its independence and objectivity, and subjects itself to retaliatory curbs and controls on the part of society on whose support and largesse it ultimately depends.” For these faculty members, the student protests threatened to undermine and undo the structural autonomy that the university was afforded.
These writers are correct in their sense that the autonomy of the university was a central preoccupation for student protestors, but their analysis does not capture the depth of the activists’ concerns. Where Trilling and Hook saw student protestors as attacking university autonomy, the student protestors instead believed that there was nothing to attack: that the university had always been complicit in systems of US inequality and militarism. By highlighting the ways in which the university’s professed autonomy masked its actual complicity in the defense of a violent status quo, student protestors sought to show that neither the administration nor the research of universities was in fact autonomous, and that claims to autonomy functioned merely as a smokescreen for the university’s political activities. At the same time, they reinterpreted these professions of autonomy as themselves political gestures. When the 1966 French Situationist pamphlet “On the Poverty of Student Life”—which was influential in both the US and France—attacked the university as “totally cut off from historical reality, both of the individual and of society,” the implicit accusation was that to profess to stand apart from “historical reality” during what both French and American students took to be a period of profound crisis was to adopt a political stance that (p.120) defended the status quo.21 What the students propose here is not merely a new position of autonomy that will supersede that of the previous generation, but rather a new conviction that autonomy itself is structurally impossible under current circumstances. They maintain that in the 1960s US, as in France under German occupation, there is no position from which autonomy can be practiced, no position free from the contamination of the field’s over-politicization. The students made this analogy to the hyper-politicized social context of World War II explicit, warning each other against being a “good German,” one of “the great mass of Germans who, in their ignorance, in their denial, and especially in their silence, allowed the Nazis to do their work.”22 While such an analogy may seem somewhat overblown from a contemporary vantage point, its considerable influence persuaded student protestors that their intellectual field, like that of wartime and post-war France, was experiencing an acute crisis in its structural autonomy.
In place of the complicity that student protestors found in the university’s commitment to autonomy, their own “liberation classes”—held by students and sympathetic faculty during the May strike—envisioned an open, democratic university, an educational institution devoid of the traditional university’s structural or conceptual commitment to autonomy. Crucial to this vision was an emphasis on the “relevance” of education to the world beyond academia. One document outlining the rationale for these classes argues that, “In order to be responsive to the interests of its real constituency—students, faculty, employees, and community—the university has to be a critical, participatory institution which prepares people to control their own lives and change society.” Another affirms that, “In all cases, the relevance of the topics to the participants’ lives will be constantly examined and emphasized.” These classes, in other words, sought to provide an alternative to what they saw as the discredited, impossible fiction of the autonomous university, advancing a new model of education in which specialist knowledge was to be alive (p.121) to students’ experiences and active in producing social change, and in which the heteronomy of the university would be harnessed to foment political change.

If the activists’ critique of the autonomy of the university was grounded in an analogy between the contemporary US and World War II-era Europe, its solution had a similar provenance, in the students’ rediscovery of the French existentialists’ post-war concept of authenticity. In their goal of overthrowing the “authoritarian structures” of the university in order to allow students to “take control of their own lives,” the organizers of the liberation classes foresaw a new form of education that would allow students to nurture their authentic selves. This educational philosophy supported the broader orientation of the New Left towards the “search for authenticity,” which Doug Rossinow has argued “lay at the heart” of 1960s radicalism. As the Port Huron Statement—the 1962 manifesto of the Students for a Democratic Society—proclaimed, the organization advocated for “finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.” The liberation classes, by reorienting education towards the goal of self-determination and relevance, opposed the autonomous university in crisis with a new model of authentic education, and of education for authenticity.
Given the institutionalization of aesthetic autonomy in this period, this challenge to the autonomy of the university also threatened the structural basis for the autonomy of art. And as the autonomy of the literary field—to the extent that it was institutionalized in the university—was called into question, so too was the philosophical concept of aesthetic autonomy. Quentin Anderson, a Columbia English professor who chaired its Joint Committee of Disciplinary Affairs in the aftermath of the unrest, makes the link between the decline of aesthetic and university autonomy explicit in the preface to his 1971 study of nineteenth-century American literature, *The Imperial Self*: “In our very different period—post-modernist, post-new-critical—there are no hedges about the sacred realm of art. Like the formerly sacrosanct plot of green on the university campus, it is now crisscrossed by the paths made by those who are rather frantically seeking to define their humanity, and in the process find art rather more a means than a refuge.”

Similarly, when Mark Rudd, leader of the Columbia Chapter of activist organization Students for a Democratic Society, traces his frustration with Columbia’s mode of education to a poetry class where he recalls being “overcome by a wave of despair,” he makes the teaching of literature into the paradigmatic site of the university’s problematic autonomy. Despite their very different politics, Rudd and Anderson agree that the attack on the autonomy of the university necessarily entails an attack on the aesthetic autonomy that has been identified with it in this period. In this new environment, “The ‘New Criticism’ will not be tolerated,” as one liberation class proudly advertised. Both the institutional structure of the autonomous university and the philosophical and critical commitment to aesthetic autonomy that this structure housed were placed in question by the student protesters’ claims.
Art did remain an important feature of the student protests, but it was a form of art that explicitly sought to undo both the institutional and the philosophical supports on which aesthetic autonomy rested. The organizers of the liberation classes were careful to emphasize that their vision of a relevant education included cultural and aesthetic subjects and not merely practical, applied, or scientific ones. As one of their pamphlets insisted, “Balkan Dancing is just as relevant as chemical engineering”—and indeed, Balkan Dancing was a charmingly persistent presence on liberation class schedules. In their aesthetic and cultural education, they attempted to bring literature into contact with their world and concerns. Literary offerings featured strongly on the programme, including classes on modern poetry from Kenneth Koch, on Victorian and avant-garde literature by Kate Millett, and several classes led by Paul Zweig, then a junior faculty member in the English and Comparative Literature department. Many of these classes, in keeping with the strike committee’s goals of providing a “relevant” education, sought to tie their literary subjects to politics and revolution. Students were offered classes on “Literature and Revolution,” “Thoreau on the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” “The Methodology of Marxist Literary Criticism,” and “Wm. Blake: A Radical Discussion of the Songs of Early Prophetic Books.” Another, entitled “Our Own Poems,” promised to discuss poetry “in ways that relate directly to our own lives and thoughts and the events around us.”
Through poetry readings and theatre, literature also became an important feature of the protests and associated fundraising activities at Columbia. The activists’ literary preferences inclined strongly towards engaged and performative modes. “Guerilla theatre” was popular, as were readings by poets like Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, David Shapiro, and Ron Padgett, suggesting a preference for literary forms that privileged the poet’s voice and the physical presence of actors or writers. This preference is in line with what Mark McGurl has called the “phonocentric literary historical moment” of the 1960s, with its emphasis on “a textual performance of vocal authenticity.”\(^{32}\) In this, the Columbia student movement inclined towards what Marjorie Perloff has called “the dominant poetic of the sixties, a poetic...of strenuous authenticity, the desire to present a self as natural, as organic, and as unmediated as possible.”\(^{33}\) As Kenneth Koch, a poet and teacher at Columbia who emerged as one of the dominant literary voices in the Columbia student protests, writes in his 1975 verse manifesto “The Art of Poetry,” poetry aspires towards “the perfection of an original style which is yours alone” and whose quality is measured by the extent to which it is “in my own voice.”\(^{34}\) The students’ belief that they were living through the de-institutionalization of literature, and the consequent loss of the structural conditions on which literary autonomy was based, thus engendered a shift in the conceptual frameworks to which literature was subjected. As the quest for an authentic poetics of voice came to replace the New Critical admiration for impersonal, textual poetry, authenticity replaced autonomy as the chief value by which literary prestige and success were measured.
In France—where Auster lived from 1970 to 1974, in the wake of the May ‘68 student protests—the literary field also saw the decline of aesthetic autonomy, in favor of a more relevant, revolutionary art. The events of May 1968 have frequently been understood as primarily aesthetic or linguistic. Both Roland Barthes and Michel de Certeau have called the protests a “prise de parole,” a taking or seizing of speech, on analogy to the “prise de Bastille” of an earlier French revolution. As Barthes argued: “Not only did the crisis have its language, the crisis was language.” This “verbal revolution” was allegedly shaped—and has certainly been remembered—as taking place in and through the creative use and appropriation of language, of “words on tracts, on posters, on walls, on banners, on placards, words of protests, of speeches, spoken and stuck to the wall, hurled, transcribed in the heat of the moment.” In its creativity, its spontaneity, its imaginativeness, and its formal inventiveness, this revolutionary language is frequently understood as a kind of avant-garde poetry: as one of the iconic pieces of graffiti from this period proclaimed, in the revolution, “poetry is in the streets.” Like the Columbia protests, May ‘68 in France insisted that poetry was not autonomous but revolutionary.
As at Columbia, the French retreat from the philosophical commitment to aesthetic autonomy was intimately related to the student protestors’ attack on university autonomy. Gérard Fromanger, a member of the Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, the group of artists responsible for the iconic posters of May ‘68, describes the protests as a crumbling of aesthetic autonomy, recalling that, “’68 comes to prove that we [artists] must necessarily have a relation to the real and no longer only to the imaginary of the museum, the imaginary of painting, solitude, the indeterminate universe of shapes, absolute theorisation, the coldness of the minimal…We are finally necessary.”

The Atelier Populaire linked this collapse of aesthetic autonomy to a collapse in the autonomy of the university. In a manifesto from July 1968, they profess their aim of “better connect[ing artists] to all other categories of worker,” a goal which forces them outside the university, for “No professor can help us to better attend to [mieux fréquenter] this reality.”

Kristin Ross has argued that the collapse of aesthetic autonomy in France in 1968 was part of a larger revolt against the compartmentalization of society into discrete “sociological categories,” a social division of labor that permits both aesthetic and university autonomy. As a result, she sees May ‘68 as a period in which “politics was exerting a magnetic pull on culture, yanking it out of its specific and (p.125) specialized realm.” For Ross, in other words, the Atelier Populaire’s repudiation of the twinned realms of aesthetic and university autonomy was not merely a position in a literary field, but part of the field’s new precariousness as a field—that is, as a sociological category or a world apart. In France, as in the US, then, the upheaval of the late 1960s imagined a new, more relevant art, born of the demise of aesthetic and university autonomy not only as ideas, but also as structural positions. The post-war consensus around the overlapping categories of aesthetic and academic autonomy, epitomized in the US by the hegemony of the New Criticism and the modernist literary canon that it promoted, was temporarily replaced by an avant-gardist commitment to literature’s acting in and on the world.
Auster’s 1997 memoir, *Hand to Mouth*, revisits these early years of his writing career, retrospectively constructing his youthful self along the model of the starving artist. While he was personally and politically sympathetic to the student activists, in *Hand to Mouth* he constructs an image of himself as a young man “temperamentally unfit for group activities,” endowed with “loner instincts,” who, throughout the campus unrest, “went on paddling my little canoe—a bit more desperately, perhaps, a bit less sure of where I was going now, but much too stubborn to get out.”

Investing his fledgling writing career in the trope of a beleaguered craft paddling against the stream, Auster’s memoir persistently identifies writing with brooding isolation. He recalls of his final years at Columbia that, “In spite of the distractions and constant turmoil, I managed to do a fair amount of writing,” a claim whose “In spite of” jars sharply against activist hopes for the integration of protest and art. While the leaders of the Columbia strikes sought ways of understanding literature as continuous with the “distractions and constant turmoil” of social activism, Auster imagines writing as intrinsically opposed to, even imperilled by, such activity.
In rejecting the activists’ socially engaged theory of art, Auster insists on the writer’s autonomy from political and social demands, as well as from community itself. In fact, *Hand to Mouth* folds together several different modes of autonomy. Not only does Auster maintain his autonomy in political and social terms by resisting the student activists’ incorporation of art into social activism or politics, he also refuses the New Critical position that preserves aesthetic autonomy by linking it to institutional autonomy, arguing that “on principle, it felt wrong to me for a writer to hide out in a university.” At the same time, *Hand to Mouth* as a whole is a classic story (p.126) of “the life of a starving poet,” defined by a persistent refusal of work and the market and a consequent “constant, grinding, almost suffocating lack of money.”44 Auster, in other words, imagines himself to be simultaneously autonomous from the market, from politics, from social contexts, and from the institution of the university. His claim to this multiply inflected personal autonomy functions as a simultaneous assertion of the autonomy of his writing, while suggesting, in line with the student protestors’ conviction that autonomy is undergoing a structural crisis, that there are no more institutions and no more social contexts within which this autonomous writing might take place.

By translating his claims for the autonomy of art into the realm of the personal, Auster’s autonomy becomes bound up with an appeal to authenticity. His suggestion that any affiliation with an institution or group represents a necessary compromise of autonomy is born, as we have seen, of the student activists’ conviction that structural autonomy was never actually autonomous, that it was always a mask for complicity and suspect politics. But this rejection of autonomy as a structural force also allows him to reimagine autonomy as a form of authentic selfhood, in the mode of the post-war culture of authenticity that, according to Abigail Cheever, “separates the individual from the social world” and embraces “that which might be uniquely one’s own rather than a product of social influence.”45 By conceiving of his autonomy as a mode of authenticity, Auster both justifies his rejection of the politicized aesthetics of the student movement on its own terms, and reconfigures aesthetic autonomy in the terms of one of the decade’s most influential ideas. In the process, he forges a new line of continuity between the modernist concept of aesthetic autonomy and the sixties’ embrace of authenticity.
In fact, Marshall Berman suggested in the preface to his 1970 book *The Politics of Authenticity* that a concern with “the political consequences of the search for personal authenticity” provided a rare point of intergenerational continuity between student radicals (among whom he counted himself) and the professors who had taught him at Columbia College a decade earlier.\(^{46}\) Two years after Berman’s book was released, Lionel Trilling confirmed Berman’s evaluation of the Columbia faculty with the release of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, still a landmark study of authenticity in literature. In this book, Trilling traces the emergence of *authenticity* as a literary value to eighteenth-century aestheticians’ disdain for art’s capacity to please and, with it, their disdain for the audience of the artwork.\(^{47}\) Like Auster, Trilling imagines authenticity to be intimately bound up with aesthetic autonomy and sees this union as inhering in the person of the artist, whose “reference is to himself only” and who “regards his audience with indifference, or with hostility and contempt.”\(^{48}\) Equating the oppositional authenticity of student activism with the autonomous authenticity described by his professors, Auster’s portrait of the young artist imagines a writer whose “imaginative desocialization” (as Quentin Anderson described the attitude of the student activists and their nineteenth-century American precursors) allows him to carve out an authentically autonomous art that crosses the generational gulf of the 1960s.\(^{49}\) In doing so, Auster reimagines the relation between personal autonomy and authenticity to include *aesthetic* autonomy. In contrast to student protestors for whom authenticity was opposed to aesthetic autonomy, Auster offers a Trilling-esque model of authenticity in art as the conjunction of personal and aesthetic autonomy.
Auster, however, breaks with both his professors and his peers on the point of authenticity’s relationship to freedom. Both Trilling and the student movement take it for granted that the quest for authenticity is a quest for freedom. This is what Berman means by evoking the “political consequences of the search for personal authenticity.” It lies behind Trilling’s extensive engagement with Hegel, whose conception of positive freedom approaches the notion of authenticity, as well as the Port Huron Statement’s claim that “The goal of man and society should be human independence,” which the authors define as “finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.”

But Auster, in the tradition of earlier writers of the art of hunger, describes authenticity in the language of necessity, not freedom, appealing to his “need to affirm myself as an outsider,” and wrestling with the problem of “how to reconcile the needs of the body with the needs of the soul.”

This account of autonomous authenticity as a form of necessity, not of freedom—and as one that might have a plausible claim to compete with such basic necessities as the need to eat—explains the narrative trajectory of *Hand to Mouth*, which moves unstoppably towards not liberation, but suffering and catastrophe. As the first page of the memoir announces, this book describes a period in which the “constant, grinding, almost suffocating lack of money... poisoned my soul and kept me in a state of never-ending panic.”

Conceding that “There was no one to blame but myself” but suggesting, through the language of necessity, that he could nonetheless not do otherwise, Auster’s problems arise not from any external oppression, but from his incapacity to experience an authentic life as a free life. *Hand to Mouth*, in other words, describes the impossibility of imagining an authentic autonomy, an autonomy that is conceptual but not structural, as a path to freedom.
The starving artist, which dramatizes Auster’s dual commitment to autonomy and authenticity, is both a legacy of modernism and a mark of Auster’s negotiation with his immediate context, where hunger played a small but persistent role in the student protests. The Columbia SDS used fasts as a tool of protest, a way of “draw[ing] people’s attention to the immorality of the Vietnam War,” and at least one liberation class promised to discuss “Vegetarianism and Fasting.” At the same time, hunger sometimes featured as a metonym for poverty in SDS propaganda material, as in one flyer that railed against “Humans starving in Mississippi, animals gorging in Scarsdale.” The Port Huron Statement similarly declares that “The United States’ principal goal should be creating a world where hunger, poverty, disease, ignorance, violence, and exploitation are replaced as central features by abundance, reason, love, and international cooperation.” For these students, hunger is a dramatization of shared oppression. Its use in activist literature and protest was intended to demonstrate solidarity with, and to recognize the shared humanity of, those suffering this most basic of catastrophes.

In this collectivizing model of hunger, some of the students—who, as Mark Rudd has observed, were disproportionately Jewish—were drawing on a much longer religious and ethnic tradition. Both Josh Cohen and Derek Rubin have argued that Auster’s sense of hunger as that which “must be preserved at all costs” reflects a Jewish experience of endlessly deferred longing, derived from the long experience of exile. Moreover, (p.129) for Jewish-Americans born around the end of World War II and entering university in the late 1960s, images of the emaciated Jews of the Holocaust were haunting symbols of an atrocity that was evolving in this period, as Herbert Gans has argued, into “a new symbol for the threat of group destruction.” As a marker of both shared humanity and a specific ethnic identity—and as a symbol for the threat of the annihilation of both—hunger recurs throughout Auster’s various social contexts as a powerful symbol of oppression. Auster’s portrayal of his younger self as a starving artist activates this association between hunger and the loss of freedom, but it does so by removing the connotations of collectivity that attach to both hunger’s activist and Jewish lineages.
The role of Auster’s Jewish identity in informing his use of hunger gestures towards the changing meaning of authenticity in the late 1960s. Cheever describes authenticity as shifting in this period “from an existential emphasis on self-constitution to a more postmodern view of the self as an embodiment of culture.”60 As Auster began his literary career, individualist notions of authenticity were losing ground to the argument that authenticity inhered in group or ethnic identifications. Hunger, with its group associations, locates Auster on the cusp of this movement, showing where he could tip forward into a mode of authenticity defined by cultural identifications. His insistence on autonomy as the vehicle of authenticity, however, keeps him wedded to the individualist, existentialist version of the idea. Holding aesthetic autonomy, personal autonomy, and authenticity together in a single gesture, Auster’s early work tells the story of modernism made new through its commitment to 1960s’ modes of authentic individuality.

3. The Dying Author: “French Theory” And The Autonomy of The Artist
Unlike either post-Vichy France or late-apartheid South Africa, the shock that the literary field experienced in the aftermath of 1968 was short-lived (p.130) and localized. While in both the US and France 1968 is often taken to have marked a major turning point in political and social life, it did not necessarily have an equally profound impact on the structure of the literary field. To the contrary, the sense of crisis that shaped the student activists’ attitudes to university and aesthetic autonomy did not endure substantially beyond this period, nor did it spread much beyond the university milieu in which it originated. Nonetheless, within this milieu, the crisis was serious and profound. The intense and rapid radicalization of the Columbia activists—Mark Rudd and others in his circle progressed from student protests to domestic terrorism in less than eighteen months—reflected the gravity of Auster’s peers’ belief that supposedly autonomous institutions were in fact complicit in the violence of the state. This crisis, then, is best understood as simultaneously real and formative from the perspective of Auster and his peers, and ephemeral and minor from the perspective of the US literary field as a whole. This double perspective clarifies the historical provenance of Auster’s aesthetics, which were formed in the crisis years around 1968, but subsequently imported into a literary field in which autonomy was being readily recuperated as both a concept and an institutional position. The starving artist, as we saw in Chapter 1, embodies this domestication of the art of hunger within a fully constituted literary field; its return in Auster’s mid-career work, such as the 1994 memoir *Hand to Mouth*, is a product of his attempt to bring a theory of autonomy developed in the period of its crisis into a field whose autonomy had been reconstituted.
As we saw in Section 2, the theory of autonomy that Auster develops during and in the aftermath of the 1968 crisis invests aesthetic autonomy in the personal authenticity of the author. Despite the claims of modernist impersonality, this personalization of aesthetic autonomy is a characteristically modernist move. Andrew Goldstone’s *Fictions of Autonomy* suggests that modernist aesthetic autonomy is as often imagined to inhere in the life of the author as in the status of the text, and we have already seen how this impulse creates the iconic figure of the starving artist in inter-war modernism. By the time Auster took up this theme in the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the intellectual climate had shifted. The New Criticism influentially reimagined aesthetic autonomy as a purely textual affair, contingent on the excision of the author from the poem. Wimsatt and Beardsley’s influential “intentional fallacy” epitomizes this shift, elevating evidence “internal” to the poem over the “private or idiosyncratic” evidence of authorial intention or biography. In a context where the New Criticism was understood as part of the university’s complicit autonomy, and where students were rejecting institutions in favor of a claim to personal authenticity, Auster’s return to a modernist vision of personalized aesthetic autonomy offered an intellectually respectable way of keeping the position alive.
While the twinned autonomies of art and the university managed to outlive the shock of 1968, the new critical approaches that sprung up in its wake did little to rehabilitate the personal vision of aesthetic autonomy. As the student protests raged, the academy was undergoing a generational change in the forms of aesthetic autonomy it enshrined, as the New Criticism was slowly supplanted by the first stirrings of what would come to be known as “French theory.” François Cusset traces the latter’s arrival in the US—and the invention of poststructuralism itself—to The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man conference at Johns Hopkins in October 1966 (coinciding with the beginning of Auster’s sophomore year of college). Although it would not be fully absorbed into the US academy until well after 1968, Auster, as a French-speaker and student of French literature, was better positioned than most to feel its first reverberations in the US. Indeed, his Masters thesis, submitted in May 1970, supervised by Edward Said, and drawing heavily on Roland Barthes, reveals his early engagement with then-recent French thought.
As a young poet in Paris between 1970 and 1974, contemporary French thought was central to his professional and social life. Working as a translator during the 1970s, he translated works by Bataille and Blanchot; a book-length study by Pierre Clastres, one of Lévi-Strauss’s disciples; a collection of essays and interviews from the 1970s by Sartre; and what he describes as “op-ed pieces” by Foucault and Sartre. Lydia Davis, his girlfriend and then wife until their divorce in 1979, who frequently collaborated with him on translations (including several of those listed above), has gone on to become one of Blanchot’s major translators. His social circles in Paris reinforced this professional familiarity with current French thought. Although not highly theoretical, the French poets of his acquaintance were woven into—if, like Auster, generally intent on holding themselves apart from—the milieu out of which theory sprang. Edmond Jabès, whom Auster admired, befriended, and interviewed, is the subject of one of the essays in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* (1967). André Du Bouchet and Jacques Dupin, friends whose aid Auster has described as “essential” to his survival in Paris, edited the journal *L’Ephémère* (1967–72), which regularly published essays by Bataille and Blanchot. Working closely as a translator with the work of such a wide range of leading writers of this period, and active in social and literary worlds that intersected theirs, Auster was immersed in the major debates and themes of French thought of the 1970s.
France offered Auster the promise of expatriation as a form of autonomy, allowing him—like Andrew Goldstone’s modernists and like Beckett himself—to reject the “solidarity of political community” that, in the US context, denied art’s autonomy, in favor of “a relatively autonomous artistic practice.” Auster reinforced this effect by assembling around himself a notably autonomous version of the French literary field. His MA thesis relies heavily on the Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero* and his translation work privileged writers like Blanchot. He thus built a paraliterary career around writers who, as we saw in Chapter 2, were and remained the chief theorists of aesthetic autonomy in the post-war period. At the same time, the circle of poets around *L’Éphémère* represented one of the more autonomous poles of the French literary field among the younger generation. A 1976 study of the journal in the inaugural issue of *French Forum* described the review as standing for “the case of *Littérature,*” a position that was emphasized by both Du Bouchet’s and Dupin’s relative silence on the events of May ‘68 and, in the aftermath of these events, the question of politics itself. As Dupin explained in an interview in the 1990s, espousing a position whose roots critics have traced to the 1960s, “I do not believe for all that that the writer must sign up for a party, for a group, and sign indiscriminately all the circulating letters of protest, manifestos and petitions.”
But if France offered Auster a literary field whose distance from his own US context re legitimized aesthetic autonomy for him, it offered little support for the personal autonomy with which he continued to identify it. One of the great themes—by some accounts, the great theme—of French thought in the aftermath of 1968 was the intertwined deaths of the subject and the author. As Luc Ferry and Alain Renault argue, the thread that holds together what they call the philosophy of ’68 is the belief (p.133) that “the autonomy of the subject is an illusion.” While the central claim of Ferry and Renault’s study—that there is a direct line between the philosophy of ’68, especially the death of the subject, and 1980s individualism—is hotly contested, their basic characterization of its dominant philosophical thrust is much more widely accepted. Julia Kristeva remembers Tel quel, the journal around which so much of this thought gravitated in the 1970s, as “the privileged link where the structuralist advance turned into an analysis of subjectivity,” and for many, this analysis of subjectivity necessarily entailed the death of the subject. In the closing pages of The Order of Things, Foucault famously proclaims “the death of man,” by which he means the death of the autonomous subject, “the subject as foundation of Knowledge, of Freedom, of Language, of History.”
The death of the subject naturally casts the author—the autonomous subject conceived as foundation and origin of a text—into doubt. Barthes’s famous proclamation of the “death of the author” and Foucault’s of the “author function” therefore arise as the literary correlates of French theory’s broader critique of the subject.\(^7\) Where the New Critical intentional fallacy amplified the autonomy of the text, the poststructuralist death of the author has more ambiguous consequences for aesthetic autonomy. Barthes opens his essay by attributing the death of the author and the beginning of écriture to a version of aesthetic autonomy in which writing exists “no longer with a view to acting on reality but intransitively, that is to say, outside of any function.”\(^7\) This link between the death of the author and literary autonomy is quickly eroded, however, and within a few pages we find Barthes “[l]eaving aside literature itself (such distinctions becoming invalid)” to argue that it is not literature but language which “knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’” and which makes this subject “empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it.”\(^7\) Although the death of the author begins as a specifically literary affair, a way of distinguishing literary from other uses of language, it ultimately entails the end of literature (p.134) as a specialized mode of language. Without the capacity to separate literary uses of language from language in general, aesthetic autonomy becomes unthinkable in the domain of literature. At the same time, Barthes erodes the New Critical defense of textual autonomy, imagining the text as dissolving into a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”\(^7\) Thus while poststructuralism, and Barthes himself, retain an ambivalent attachment to aesthetic autonomy, the logic of the death of the author tends to erase the autonomy of art in general and any given literary text in particular, by removing the borders of both.\(^7\)
In this context, Auster’s early theory of aesthetics identifies the structural crisis in aesthetic autonomy precipitated by the 1968 protests with the poststructuralist and New Critical critique of authorial autonomy, which posed an intellectual, but not a structural, challenge to his thought. Like other writers in this book, Auster records what he takes to be autonomy’s crisis in the figure of hunger. The besieged aesthetic that he develops out of this trope has its fullest theoretical elaboration in his 1970 Masters thesis, “The Art of Hunger,” on Hamsun, Kafka, Céline, and Beckett, and in a 1970 essay of the same title, which adapts the material on Hamsun. The Art of Hunger subsequently becomes the title of his collected essays, in which he works through the key aesthetic problems of his early writing career, pointing to the centrality of hunger, especially his theoretical elaboration of the art of hunger, to his early writing.
For Auster, hunger allows the prolongation of the author’s survival in the face of the twin threats of the New Criticism and the emergent poststructuralism. Where Barthes had declared the death of the author in 1967, Auster in 1970 emphasizes that “hunger presupposes dying, but not death.” His art of hunger develops in the space where the author’s death is imminent but deferred, the autonomous subject on the point of collapse but, in the defiant final words of his thesis, “Not Dead Yet.” The dying author foregrounds the writer as the site of aesthetic autonomy’s crisis and of Auster’s resistance to this crisis. It offers a prehistory for Hand to Mouth’s equation of aesthetic autonomy with the personal autonomy of the author, which, in its emphasis on authorial will and intention, departs from earlier writers in the art of hunger tradition. Where Beckett’s B. sees van Velde as “the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail,” a formulation that implies that failure is inherent in the nature of art itself, Auster proposes instead that Hamsun “does not want to succeed. He wants to fail,” recasting authorial failure as a willed, personal choice. Auster’s account of Hamsun’s novel, in particular, repeatedly highlights the protagonist’s active choice to starve: he is “wag-[ing] a hunger strike against himself” and “refusing to live the life he has been given.” The result for Auster is “an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it,” in which “the radical subjectivity of the narrator effectively eliminates the basic concerns of the traditional novel.” Positing the author’s “radical subjectivity” as the loci of the art of hunger, Auster suggests that, even in the shadow of the death of the author, aesthetic autonomy presupposes authorial autonomy.
Auster’s starving author keeps alive the intricacy and depth of
the author’s interiority, making the introverted exploration of
self into the site of aesthetic autonomy. Replacing “historical
time” with “inner duration,” he presents hunger as
precipitating an inward turn that makes the text coextensive
with the author’s interiority. In this sense, Auster can be
read as using hunger to negotiate between different
commonplaces of modernism’s reception, rejecting the New
Critical touchstone of impersonality in favor of the novelistic
exploration of inner subjectivity and consciousness. For
Auster, however, this turn reflects not an interest in
psychology or subjectivity per se, but, more specifically, a
fascination with the author’s interiority as the site and source
of art. In this, Auster finds a way of reading modernism
against both the New Critics, for whom the author was beside
the point, and the poststructuralists, whose theories of the
“scriptor” and the “author function” reject authorial interiority
in favor of an understanding of the author as an effect of
discourse or the depthless point at which discourses intersect.
The interiorized author produced by the experience of starvation is, in Auster’s reading, at once autonomous and authentic. His “radical subjectivity” echoes the “radical individualism” that Marshall Berman sees as the source of authenticity, and, like Lionel Tilling’s artist, he “seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomousness.” Like these contemporaries, Auster imagines the author’s authenticity as residing in his capacity to hold himself apart from society—as Trilling writes, “what destroys our authenticity is society.” The risk of this position is that, in their refusal of the social, these artists might come to embody not authenticity but, instead, its opposite: alienation. For a theorist like Berman, the “radical individualism” of authenticity is distinguished from alienation by its promise of “a dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed.” Auster’s “radical subjectivity,” in contrast, relies for its autonomy on the fact that it is staunchly anti-communal and anti-communitarian—even anti-social. As he argues of Hamsun’s narrator, the dying author becomes “introverted to a degree that precludes the possibility of human contact.” The hunger of the dying author therefore preserves the writer’s interiorized subjectivity at the center of the creative act, but in the process it turns this gesture of authenticity into alienation: “the suicide that is the search for the Self.”
The question of alienation’s relationship to authenticity is what, for Auster, distinguishes hunger from nausea—those two great metaphors of non-consumption and social isolation. Throughout his thesis, he develops this theme through a sustained comparison between Hamsun’s narrator and Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s *Nausea*. The disanalogy is sufficiently belabored that one reader of his thesis, presumably his thesis adviser Edward Said, wonders with some exasperation in the margins, “Why do you always refer to Roquentin?” But Roquentin—the hero of existentialist alienation and its overcoming in the discovery of personal authenticity—is an important counterpoint to Auster’s reading of Hamsun’s narrator. As Auster argues, “Whereas Roquentin wants nothing more than to be cured of his nausea, to escape from the ambiguities that fetter him, Hamsun’s hero embraces his own confusion and systematizes it to a degree that almost transforms it into an art.” Sartre—like the student activists described by Rossinow—imagines alienation and authenticity to exist in an essentially narrative relation, where alienation, becoming intolerable, prompts the subject to search for and eventually attain authenticity. But, Auster suggests, Hamsun and his fellow hunger artists accomplish quite a different feat, turning inward to find authenticity within their alienation, in a move that, he implies, can be productive of art itself.
As Auster’s reference to Roquentin’s fetters implies, the equation of authenticity with alienation forecloses on the possibility of freedom. For both the existentialists and the 1960s student radicals, the narrative movement from alienation to authenticity is the process by which the freedom of authenticity emerges from the unfreedom of alienation. By (p.137) equating these states, Auster closes off the path by which freedom might be realized. Instead, his reading of the art of hunger tradition dispenses with the “assumption that art is an essentially free enterprise” in favor of an art—the art of hunger—that “emerges from the viscera as a necessary act.”

The hunger artist’s autonomy, in Auster’s reading, keeps him imprisoned within his own interiority, subject to a visceral necessity and an “inner compulsion.” If this sense of necessity remains “a matter of choice” for Auster’s hunger artists, it does so in order to dramatize the impossibility of their situation, caught between a commitment to autonomous subjectivity and the extinction of that position. Auster’s paradoxically chosen necessity, his willed unfreedom, reflects his theory of art’s impossible attempt to unite opposites, producing an art that is simultaneously alienated and authentic, embracing the personal autonomy of the author in the moment of his death and the aesthetic autonomy of the work in an era of relevant art. Auster’s theory of the starving author as a dying author is his solution to this impossibility: a theory of art that imagines aesthetic autonomy as the author’s imprisonment within his own interiority, figured through an account of hunger that sees it as radically isolating and interiorizing.

4. Poetry And Utopia
“The Art of Hunger” is unusual among Auster’s essays from this period in its focus on fiction rather than poetry. Nonetheless, to the extent that it describes what Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero*, calls “the inhuman experience of the poet, who accepts the most momentous of all breaks, that from the language of society,” Auster’s thesis might be understood as laying out an essentially poetic theory of literature.\(^9^2\) Where for Beckett the art of hunger approached painting, for Auster it finds its home in poetry. His decade-long body of poetic work—which spans the 1970s but remains relatively neglected by critics—stands at the center of his attempt to develop an art of hunger, reflecting poetry’s importance for debates about aesthetic autonomy at this time. While for both Barthes and the New Critics, modernist poetry was the privileged site of aesthetic autonomy, for the student radicals, poetry was in the streets, the genre reimagined as the site of socially relevant, engaged art. Poetry therefore became the primary site of the scuffle over the viability of aesthetic autonomy (p.138) during Auster’s formative years; in the late 1960s, settling the question of poetry’s autonomy meant settling the question of literary autonomy per se.
Auster’s own poetry—tight, spare, and abstract, in the cast of the American Objectivists and the French school of André Du Bouchet and Jacques Dupin—stakes its position with those for whom poetry epitomizes an autonomous and asocial literature. It carries forward the doubling of personal and aesthetic autonomy in a body of writing that is rife with images of hunger and its cognates. Auster’s use of hunger in the poetry follows the logic of the starving artist that he develops in his thesis, imagining the poet or the speaker to be caught in the suspended state of a dying that defers death. In the poetry, however, this role for hunger is bound up with a theory of language’s fallen state. In “Notes from a Composition Book,” written in 1967 and collected with his poetry, he describes the “fall of man” as “a question of language conquering experience: the fall of the world into the word, experience descending from the eye to the mouth.”

The mouth’s dual function as the site of speaking and of eating structures Auster’s argument. The descent from eye to mouth is a way of describing an alienated language, one that no longer perfectly expresses the world it seeks to describe, but it also ties this fallenness to the act of eating, alluding to the Biblical story that locates the Fall in Eve’s eating of the fruit. The art of hunger, then, becomes an art that takes place in the hiatus before the fruit is eaten, in the suspended state in which eating is deferred and language remains temporarily and impossibly whole.

This understanding of the art of hunger as an imperfect attempt to preserve or re-create a perfect language runs throughout Auster’s poetry. In an untitled poem from the 1970–2 collection Unearth, for instance, Auster writes:

Night, as though tasted
within. And of us, each lie
the tongue would know
when it draws back and sinks
into its poison.
We would sleep, side by side
with such hunger, and from the fruit
we war with, become the name
of what we name.
These lines work through the different faces of a fallen language: from night, the time of unseeing, in which the prospect of speaking a perfect language that comes “from the eye” is foreclosed; to the lie, which “The (p.139) Art of Hunger” reads as the final, wilful rupture of word and world, in which language’s imperfection is harnessed in a violent repudiation of society and ethics; to the fruit, symbol and source of the biblical Fall and thus, in Auster’s mythology, the origin of language’s imperfection. Each phase of this fallen language is linked to eating—to taste, to the tongue, and finally to the implied consumption of “the fruit | we war with”—but the moment of eating is always held in suspense, deferred to the ambivalence of the simile (“as though”) and the conditional tense. By suspending eating, Auster prolongs the moment of hunger, allowing it to emerge as an almost physical presence, that which we sleep “side by side | with.” But the deferral of eating also collapses the distinction between eating and speaking, so that taste becomes metaphor, and the tongue, in a gentle pun on sapere, the Latin for both knowing and tasting, “knows” the lie—that is, “knows” language. Hunger becomes the prolonged moment, then, before the Fall of the authentic language of the prelapsarian world into the inauthenticity of a world where everything is named falsely. By suspending the act of eating, this poem seeks to hold off the moment of the Fall, holding the poem in the moment of hunger, when word and thing are still coextensive. Its suspension of eating is reimagined as the dream of holding open a precarious moment of full linguistic autonomy, in which the utopia of language might emerge.
As the plural first person of this poem suggests, the univocality of the Adamic poet holds the germ of a new sociality. Whereas both *Hand to Mouth* and “The Art of Hunger” are militant in imagining the author as a singular, isolated figure, Auster’s early poetry makes frequent use of the collective voice and the intimacy of the second person, both of which imply forms of relation that are largely absent from his other theorizations of the art of hunger. On the one hand, this “we” is a mark of the utopian orientation of the poetic work, signaling the poet’s desire to speak on behalf of many. In this sense, it returns the art of hunger to the orbit of student activism, with its hopes for a transformative poetics and its imagination of hunger as a symbol of solidarity. It connects with other early works that imagine Auster’s poetry as participating in a poetic uprising, such as the first poem of *Unearth*:

Your ink has learned  
the violence of the wall. Banished,  
but always to the heart  
of brothering quiet...  
...Each syllable  
is the work of sabotage.95

*(p.140)*

Here, the banishment of exile is imagined as maintaining a kind of solidarity, a “brothering quiet,” and the act of writing is described in the language of subversive violence. In this context, the “violence of the wall” evokes the graffiti—poetry on the walls—of the May ’68 Paris uprisings. It implies that “wall writing,” the title of one of Auster’s collections, might be read as suggesting its affiliation to this tradition of activist literature.
But the plural first person (as well as the second person that also runs through this poetry) also suggests a pluralization of the self that marks the perpetual frustration of the poet’s desire for “uni-vocal expression.” Instead, the poet experiences the traumatic process of writing described by Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, in which the writer “does not discover the admirable language which speaks honorably for all. What speaks in him is the fact that, in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn’t anyone any more.” This sense that writing, far from attaining the universal, instead represents a crisis for the self, a form of self-alienation that entails the collapse of the unitary subject, is widespread in the poetry. In “Scribe,” “he talked himself | into another body.” “Viaticum” speaks of “your voice, | your other voice,” and poem 13 of *Unearth* of the “Other of I.” The “we” in this context—as well as the “you” that often seems addressed back to the poet or speaker himself—represents a desperate attempt to hold the multiplying subject together; a plural Adam that approaches not the voice of the people but instead the dying (but not yet dead) author, fracturing on his way out. As Blanchot goes on to argue, “he who sings must jeopardize himself entirely and, in the end, perish, for he speaks only when the anticipated approach toward death, the premature separation, the adieu given in advance obliterates in him the false certitude of being.” Ultimately, the utopian voice that would make Auster’s poetry a truly new language, one that could provide the foundation for a new collectivity, is indistinguishable from the fracturing first person that cannot even speak on his own behalf. The promise of an authentic language that would unify word and world is attainable only through the collapse of the author into a state of permanent self-alienation. The slipperiness of the voice in these poems gestures towards the self-annulling paradoxes inherent in Auster’s formulation of the art of hunger—the need to create an asocial language so as to open the way for a new sociality; the attempt to harness alienation towards the end of authenticity—paradoxes that reflect Auster’s attempt (p.141) to create an autonomous language and an autonomous subject in an intellectual environment that disavows both.
This complex, multiple interiority is an art of hunger in the sense that it is an art of the dying author. It achieves its completion and its annulment in the figure of the stone, one of the central images of Auster’s poetry and a metaphor for both death and the absoluteness of the Edenic language. In the art of hunger tradition, the eating of stones has a long history as a kind of anti-eating that keeps hunger alive, as in Rimbaud’s declaration that “If I have any taste, it is for hardly | Anything but earth and stones” (“Si j’ai du goût, ce n’est guères | que pour la terre et les pierres”) or the sucking stones in Beckett’s *Molloy*. In Auster, however, the stone is a figure not for the prolongation of hunger but for its annulment. The stone is what does not consume and what cannot experience hunger. Whereas Auster’s starving writers are always in the deferred process of dying, his stones are metaphors for death, for the end of the multiplying and collapsing interiority of hunger. This is why Auster’s critics have tended to gloss the stone in terms that evoke the self-reflexive opacity of his art of hunger, describing it as “the irreducible element which refers to nothing but itself” and a trope that “stand[s] variously for material fragments, the impermeability of language and resistance to interpretation.”99
Like the art of hunger, Auster’s stones are identified with the possibility of an Edenic language in which words and things conform fully to one another. As he writes in an early poem, the poetry seeks to make the transition from “one stone touched | to the next stone | named,” performing the Adamic leap by which word and thing are brought together, which is also the leap by which the poem assumes the stone’s perfected autonomy. But whereas the art of hunger’s attempt to undo the Fall of language is provisional, temporary, and imperfect, the stone’s materiality represents a state of perfected, absolute meaning. In this, Auster’s use of the trope differs from the more common late twentieth-century figure of what Walter Benn Michaels calls the “meaningless stone,” where the stone becomes a figure for the text’s polysemy, its endless availability for interpretation. While Michaels and Auster both probe the implications of imagining a text as a stone, and a stone as a text, the significance of this material language ends in quite different formulations: for Michaels, the stone represents materiality without meaning; for Auster, it represents the infusion of materiality with absolute meaning. When he imagines that “our voice | is in league | with the stones of the field,” Auster imagines a state in which the poet’s voice acquires the materiality of the stone, but also a state in which the stone acquires the meaningfulness of language. The autonomy, in other words, that Auster imagines in the stone is not one that destroys language or leaves it open to endless interpretation, but one that sees language perfected, meaning fixed in the perfect identity between word and thing.
For both Auster and Michaels, what is ultimately at stake in the figure of the stone is an anxiety about the speaker’s relationship to the text—a concern, ultimately, about intentionality. Michaels borrows the image of the stone from Paul de Man, who distinguishes between “intentional objects,” exemplified by the chair, which are organized around the use for which they are intended (for chairs: to be sat on), and “natural objects,” exemplified by the stone, whose “‘meaning’…could only refer to a totality of sensory appearances.” The stone, in this account, is the paradigmatically intention-less object. Its meaningless materiality and its openness to interpretation are both functions of the fact that it is an object without an author; one whose meaning is not determined at the point of production, but rather at the point of reception. Auster’s stone, as we have seen, offers a third model of interpretation, locating the stone’s meaning within the stone itself. On the one hand, this departs from the reading of both Michaels and de Man in that, insofar as the stone is a figure for perfect and immanent meaning, it is not open to endless interpretation and the reader, therefore, has no more purchase on the stone than on the intentional object. But Auster also agrees with Michaels and de Man that the stone is a figure for the author-less text. Because the stone, in Auster’s ideal language, contains its own perfectly self-sufficient meaning, it has no need of an author. In this Edenic “language of stones” there is only one conceivable word for each thing and therefore no choice to be made, no space for the governing consciousness of the speaker or writer.

In this sense, the language of stones is the endpoint for poetry and for the art of hunger, insofar as Auster imagines both as vehicles of autonomous subjectivity. It is the point at which Auster’s poetry perfects itself out of existence: the death of the author. If the dream of a prelapsarian language implies a poet-Adam who alone can speak it, the image of the stone suggests that the realization of this perfect language requires that the speaker be already dead—beyond the prolongation of the dying author’s hunger. In “Viaticum,” for instance, he describes:

the second
and brighter terror
of living in your death, and speaking
the stone
you will become.\textsuperscript{105}

In a poem whose title evokes eating preparatory to death—a viaticum is the Roman Catholic term for the administration of the Eucharist as part of last rites—the stone is a placeholder for the still impenetrability of impending mortality, as it moves within the liminal time of “living in your death,” the time of the art of hunger, in which the author is not dead yet. The act of “speaking | the stone | you will become”—both speaking death, and speaking the Edenic language that entails the author’s death—suggests that the approach to this perfect materiality of language is simultaneously an approach towards death. Neither speech nor the speaker can survive the achievement of this literary goal, the perfection of the language of the stone. Poetry itself, therefore, exists in the attempt to manifest the stone at a remove, in the approach towards but not the achievement of the Edenic language, and in the suspended time of the art of hunger. Poetry, like the art of hunger, is the not-quite of the author’s death and the not-quite of the text’s self-cancelling autonomy. Auster’s stone, in this sense, is simultaneously a figure for a perfectly inhuman—unconsuming and unconsumable—language, devoid of author or reader, as well as an image for an absolutely authentic language, perfectly true to the nature of the thing being expressed. It is the end point of the art of hunger, replacing the prolongation of dying with the finality of death and the intricate interiority of hunger with the blank impenetrability of stone.

5. A Genealogy of Solipsists: Inheriting Modernism In The Novels

Auster’s Eden is a utopian project, one that looks back to a lost paradise in order to orient itself towards an unachievable language-to-come. In this, it distinguishes itself both from more purely nostalgic Edens, shaped out of the lament for a lost Golden Age, as well as those more optimistic, typically American versions, for which the trope implies a \textbf{(p.144)} realizable—perhaps already realized—paradise.\textsuperscript{106} In fact, this recursive temporality, the hope for novelty through recuperation, structures Auster’s early writing. It underpins, in particular, his relationship to literary history, with his implicit claim for a modernist lineage in “The Art of Hunger” and other early essays, and the subsequent attempt, through tropes such as the stone and Eden, to reanimate this modernist tradition and work through its implications and legacies in the poetry.\textsuperscript{107}
This recuperative relationship to modernism appears in Auster’s early writing as a problem of filiation. In an unpublished interview with James Knowlson, Beckett’s biographer, Auster evokes Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” to explain his relationship with Beckett, writing that “in a way you have to kill off your father in order to do your own work.” Auster’s representations of fathers and fatherhood, however, suggest that questions of inheritance and descent are complicated matters in his work. In a late poem, written on the occasion of his own father’s death, Auster describes his father as “Stone wall. Stone heart,” implying a continuity between paternity and the stone of the poetry. But the stone, as a figure for that which is self-contained and devoid of a reader, is an intrinsically anti-social and therefore anti-genealogical figure. As Auster writes of his father in his memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, he was, “A man without appetites. You felt that nothing could ever intrude on him, that he had no need of anything the world had to offer.” His father’s self-sufficiency is related to the solipsism of the modernist writers in Auster’s Masters thesis as the stone is related to the art of hunger: the former standing as the perfection and the end of the latter’s impossible quest for autonomy. As the memoir makes clear, however, the autonomous father is a bad father; a figure whose opacity and self-containment risks making filiation and inheritance impossible. Against this backdrop, the Bloomian anxiety of influence morphs into a new form of anxiety specific to the modernist inheritance. If the art of hunger is solipsistic and solitary, if autonomy is conceived as intrinsically anti-social, then Auster’s attempt to position himself as the son to modernism’s father engenders not just the anxiety that Auster might end up too close to these literary patriarchs, but also the fear that by organizing them into a genealogy he will undo the tortured isolation that he seeks to replicate. This is a variant of the familiar problem of modernist inheritance, the fact that, as Derek Attridge puts it, “nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes.” But for Auster, the problem is not so much that modernist novelty, once repeated, is no longer new, but instead that his formulation of modernist autonomy brooks no society, while literary genealogy is by definition a way of conceptualizing relation.
This problem of establishing a literary genealogy pervades Auster’s early oeuvre. We find traces of it in “The Art of Hunger,” where Auster links the modernist hunger artists according to a logic of analogy and resemblance, producing a configuration that evades issues of genealogy and influence in favor of something more like Deleuze’s “community of celibates.” It is also present in the suspended Eden of the poetry, which avows the impossibility of inheriting the lost, dreamed-of paradise. But Auster’s early novels, where an explicit concern with failed paternity intersects with a sustained interrogation of Auster’s modernist forebears, show the most sustained and complex theorization of the difficulties of positioning oneself as heir to the art of hunger. Reflecting back on the theories of literature developed through his early essays and poetry, novels such as The New York Trilogy (especially City of Glass, the first novel of the trilogy) and Moon Palace inscribe the equation of failing literary autonomy and failing authorial autonomy, which I traced in Sections 2–4, onto this problem of modernist inheritance.

Studded with failed fathers and interrupted genealogies, these novels are centrally concerned with the problem of paternity. City of Glass features a reclusive protagonist, Quinn, who “had once been a father,” until the death of his wife and son. Quinn finds himself caught up in the disastrous father-son relationship of two men, both named Peter Stillman, the elder of whom is recently released from prison, where he had been held for keeping his young son in complete isolation in a bid to discover “God’s language.” Quinn’s task—to protect the younger Stillman from his (p.146) father—speaks to the complete breakdown of this abusive father-son relationship. Moon Palace features a different kind of genealogical anxiety, with a melodramatic story of an apparent orphan, Marco Stanley Fogg, who through a series of coincidences comes to find both his father, who had been unaware of Marco’s existence, and his grandfather, who had abandoned his own son at a young age. Similarly, in The Locked Room, the last book of the Trilogy, the narrator acts as an adoptive father to the protagonist, Fanshawe’s, abandoned son, while Fanshawe himself has a father who is described as a “cipher” and who dies when his son is in his late teens. These narratives collectively imagine paternity as unstable and impermanent, presenting filiation and fatherhood not as givens but as tasks to be achieved and endlessly renewed.
Once uncoupled from these father-son relationships, however, Auster’s abandoned sons and bereaved fathers become taciturn, solipsistic recluses. In the aftermath of his family’s death, Quinn retreats from social interaction, embarking on what he describes as a “posthumous life.” Fanshawe, concluding that “I wasn’t meant to live like other people,” abandons his family and dies a recluse in Boston, where “no one knows who I am. I never go out.” Marco in Moon Palace, after the death of his uncle, enters a downward spiral marked by “a militant refusal to take any action at all” until he can see his life becoming “a gathering zero.” Each of these retreats resembles the isolation that Auster has long associated with writers in general, and the art of hunger in particular, but—as Quinn’s “posthumous life” suggests—each goes beyond it, entering the perfected state of the stone or the death of the author. In this state, Quinn, formerly a poet, becomes a pseudonymous detective writer, who “did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote,” while Fanshawe disavows his large body of writing. Marco, never a writer, instead marks his downward spiral by divesting himself of the books he inherited from his uncle. At the extremity of family breakdown, where genealogy disappears or is renounced entirely, Auster’s protagonists become so isolated that they stage a different kind of authorial death, a social death. Just as the perfected Edenic language ends in the author’s obsolescence, the severing of all genealogical ties entails such a renunciation of society that authorship is no longer possible. The end of genealogy, in other words, repeats on the plane of authorial biography the same dilemma that the stone represents in the domain of poetic language, recasting the author’s isolation, like the poet’s language, as fundamentally unperfectable and therefore in some sense unachievable.
The anxiety about genealogy has a specific valence for a writer who came of age in the late 1960s. Kristin Ross has written that the “official story” of the 1960s and their mass revolts “is one of family or generational drama,” an interpretation that she rejects but that has nonetheless been tremendously influential in shaping contemporary and later understandings of the period.\(^{119}\) Herbert Marcuse, one of the defining thinkers of the 1960s student revolts in both France and the US, hailed the prospect of breaking “the chain which linked the fathers and the sons from generation to generation.”\(^{120}\) Quentin Anderson, one of Columbia’s senior professors during the protests, agrees with Marcuse’s evaluation, despite their vastly different politics, observing among both his students and American writers of the nineteenth century “an alternate mode of self-validation that openly proclaims its independence of the fostering and authenticating offices of the family and society.”\(^{121}\) Indeed, one way of understanding the contested fate of modernism and modernist autonomy in this period is as a generational conflict: modernism, particularly in its institutionalized form, has become the literature of the fathers, both literally in that modernists belong to these students’ fathers’ or grandfathers’ generation, and symbolically, in that its writing and its reading practices are now being taught by the institutions, acting \textit{in loco parentis}, against which the students are rebelling. In this context, Auster’s early interest in modernists who sit on the margins of modernism’s genealogical narratives can be understood as an attempt to establish a genealogy of the anti-genealogical, mimicking Anderson’s project in \textit{The Imperial Self} (1971).
In the novels, where Auster frames these questions in more explicitly familial terms, modernist intertexts make their appearances precisely where genealogy is collapsing but not eclipsed. Most prominent here is Marco’s early flirtation with solipsism in *Moon Palace*, a project that he describes as “nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition,” echoing the claims in “The Art of Hunger” that see Hamsun’s protagonist as “the living embodiment of nihilism itself” and Céline as “the first novelist to fully accept nihilism as the inheritance of the twentieth century.” Indeed, several critics have pointed out that the plot and intensely focalized characterization of the opening section of *Moon Palace* (p. 148) echo the catastrophic starvation of Hamsun’s *Hunger*. While the immediate context here is the severing of familial ties, however, the broader narrative focuses on recuperating the Hamsunian Marco into an intergenerational saga. It therefore emphasizes the long, if sometimes hidden, roots of modernist solipsism, even as, in resocializing Marco, it irrevocably removes him from the Hamsunian narrative. This novel, the last of Auster’s career to engage substantially with the thematics of hunger, is in some ways his farewell to the towering role the art of hunger played in his earliest writing, but it bids this adieu, not by repudiating the logic of modernist autonomy but simply by pulling back to recontextualize it within a larger genealogical arc.
Where *Moon Palace* rewrites Hamsun as the prelude to a family reunion, *City of Glass* inscribes modernist texts within a genealogical project in order to produce a surprisingly coherent literary history. At the head of this lineage stands Peter Stillman the father, who, before his incarceration, presents as an American Milton: his thesis develops an absolutist version of the Edenic language theory, through a fabricated historical figure, Henry Dark, a supposed disciple of Milton who emigrated to the New World. Stillman’s fire-and-brimstone religiosity, which fuels his quest for a perfect language and his delusional faith that it is within reach, has its roots in Auster’s own thesis, where Milton functions as Auster’s embodiment of the belief, impossible for modern writers, that “with the Second Coming...language will be restored to its prelapsarian unity.” Stillman never loses his faith in this ideal language, but on his release from prison he abandons the providential faith in the son who will be born speaking a new language, preferring instead “to confine myself to physical things, to the immediate and the tangible.” Setting himself the task of creating a new language through a careful process of observation, Stillman comes to identify with the more limited, secular aspirations of poetry after the loss of religion—the aspirations, in short, of modernist and, for Auster, specifically Objectivist poetry, as worked out in his essays on Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Carl Rakosi. In fact, the late Stillman strongly resembles a Christianized Reznikoff, with both sharing a penchant for meandering walks through New York City as the foundation of their linguistic and literary activity. Stillman the father, in other words, embodies a literary historical transition from early modern to modernist (p.149) poetry, all the time working towards the impossible task of realizing a perfect language. He stages Auster’s theory of poetry as a utopian gesture, and suggests that the Objectivist strand of modernism is a secularization of a tradition of religious poetry with roots in Milton.
The younger Stillman, as both the elder’s son and the product of his single-minded quest for God’s language, tests the genealogical implications of this poetic tradition. The results are disturbing, suggesting that the quest for the Edenic language issues in both great damage to the subject and the end of genealogy itself (the young Stillman declares himself “the last of the Stillmans…the end of everyone, the last man”). The son, therefore, is a living critique of the disastrous side effects of poetry’s totalizing aspirations, in a text that marks Auster’s final and definitive turn to novels and away from poetry. But he also embodies a development internal to poetry itself—he describes himself as “mostly now a poet”—that issues in something disturbingly like the modernism of the art of hunger. Like the writers of the art of hunger who have obliterated “historical time…in favor of inner duration,” the younger Stillman “know[s] nothing of time. I am new every day.” And like Hamsun’s narrator, whose invention of new words such as “Kuboaa” Auster discusses at length in “The Art of Hunger,” the young Stillman writes poems in which “I make up all the words myself…I am the only one who knows what the words mean.” More generally, the young Stillman’s halting speech, which revels in the sound of words, in their materiality (“Peter could not think. Did he blink? Did he drink? Did he stink? Ha ha ha”), and which delights in formal inventiveness, suggests a rather juvenile parody of the self-corrective, aggressively formal language of modernist experimentation, particularly late Beckett. City of Glass, therefore, traces the issue of the poetic quest for a utopian language to two related strands of modernism: the Objectivists, who secularize this tradition but retain its utopian orientation; and the art of hunger, which lives in the shadow of this utopianism’s failure. It presents both as not just literary, but also ethical dead ends, flawed in both their comical unreadability, and their broken and disturbing renunciation of society in all its forms—flawed, in other words, in the way they insist on the autonomous writer as the vehicle for an ideal language.
The closest *City of Glass* comes to depicting a path out of the modernist impasse lies with Quinn, who is hired, in effect, to run interference between the Reznikoffian father and the Beckettian son. With a background as both a poet and a pseudonymous detective writer, Quinn’s mixed literary heritage lacks the purity of the Stillmans’, a position that grants him a liberating distance from their destructive literary and linguistic ideals. Indeed, the writing that Quinn produces which features most centrally in *City of Glass* is neither a literary text nor an attempt at a new language, but simply his notebook, a record of his involvement with the case, which the narrator uses as the basis for reconstructing the narrative. This document, which has parallels in Blue’s reports in *Ghosts* (the second novel of *The New York Trilogy*) and the narrator’s biography of Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*, signals a shift to new, more observational, more quotidian—one might even say more prosaic—modes of writing.
But while this new mode represents a shift away from the poetry and its quest for a perfect language, it does not imply a wholesale rejection of modernism. Instead, Quinn might better be understood as a figure who brings together the Objectivists' observational aesthetics with the art of hunger. On the one hand, Quinn, like the older Peter Stillman, closely resembles Auster's portrayals of Reznikoff. Like both the Jewish poet and the deluded villain, Quinn loves long walks in New York for their capacity to make him “feel that he was nowhere”—an echo of Auster's claim that Reznikoff's identity as a Jewish-American grants him “the condition of being nowhere."131 On the other hand, however, the intense, anti-social isolation with which Quinn opens the novel recalls not Reznikoff and the Objectivists—who always have ethnic and national affiliations to ground them, in Auster's reading—but the solipsists of the art of hunger. These two strands come together most clearly in the novel’s climax, in which Quinn embarks on an obsessive stake-out of the older Peter Stillman, disintegrating physically and mentally in the process. Like the modernists of “The Art of Hunger,” Quinn’s stake-out moves him asymptotically towards complete starvation, always deferring its fatal end but keeping “the total fast in his mind as an ideal, a state of perfection he could aspire to but never achieve.”132 Quinn’s art of hunger, however, only serves to bring him more firmly into the orbit of Auster’s Objectivists, combining the art of hunger’s experience of “the true nature of solitude” with such intense and devoted observation that “It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city,” following what Auster elsewhere describes as “[t]he Reznikoff equation, which weds seeing to invisibility.”133 This combination of solitude, observation, and invisibility similarly characterizes Blue and The Locked Room's narrator in the subsequent two books of The New York Trilogy, placing this quasi-modernist hybrid at the center of Auster’s shift to the novel.
What becomes of autonomy in this transition to the novel? The image of the author as an almost tragically autonomous subject, fracturing under the weight of his alienation from society, persists throughout these texts and, in fact, beyond: we see traces of it in later novels, from *Leviathan* (1992) to *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007) and *The Book of Illusions* (2002). But as Quinn’s equation of solitude with observation suggests, the point of this authorial autonomy is increasingly to afford a new vantage point on the world. The fully self-referential, self-contained text that represented the stone-like ideal is increasingly not a goal but a dead end or a false start.

Each of the volumes of *The New York Trilogy* turns around a central text that is said to explain everything: Quinn’s notebook in *City of Glass*; the manuscript that Blue has watched Black writing in *Ghosts*; and Fanshawe’s red notebook in *The Locked Room*, which he leaves for the narrator. Each of these texts, however, remains out of sight of the reader, read only by a single character who, in each case, is himself a loner who has shadowed the text’s author through the novel and who ultimately expresses his bafflement before this supposedly explanatory text. As *The Locked Room*’s narrator writes of Fanshawe’s red notebook, “Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible.”

These absent centers of the three novels are fundamentally unreadable as texts, standing as late examples of Auster’s readerless aesthetics of autonomy. But if the poetry aspired to this condition, to a perfect but unreadable, self-cancelling language, the novels that compose *The New York Trilogy* are neither identical with these texts nor aspire to replicate them. Aesthetic autonomy, at least as Auster had once imagined it, persists into the novels not as the goal or endpoint of literature but as a textual black hole, a series of unreadable texts written in unspeakable, self-consuming languages.
Both the literary history of modernism and the dead-end of aesthetic autonomy appear in these novels not simply as a reflection on philosophical and literary questions, but as a self-reflexive history of Auster’s own development as a writer. This is already clear from the above account, where we repeatedly find Auster alluding to, not Reznikoff himself, but his own early essays on Reznikoff; not Hamsun, but his Masters thesis and 1970 essay on Hamsun. In fact, the novels from The New York Trilogy to Moon Palace (and, to a lesser extent, beyond) draw extensively on Auster’s own archive as one of their key intertexts. All three of Auster’s (p.152) first novels—The New York Trilogy, In the Country of Last Things, and Moon Palace—spring from a series of abortive early manuscripts that date from Auster’s college days in the late 1960s. In revisiting this archive, however, Auster also builds in his own auto-critique of his earlier aesthetic positions. This shift is clearest in the treatment of the ideal of an Edenic language, which passes from a source of earnest fascination in the early drafts to a subject of scathing critique in the published texts, in line with Auster’s shifting relationship to the aspirations of the poetry. This self-critique persists down to a very granular level. The young Stillman’s halting speech, for instance, with its distant echoes of Beckett, enters more firmly into a Beckettian lineage when we understand this influence as passing through one of Auster’s own untitled early typescripts, which experiments with the kind of broken, rhythmical prose that characterizes Beckett’s late works: “My mouth is dormant,” the young Auster writes. “There is no intake, to eat, and no output, to speak. My hunger is in the words I write, each one, as if the last, dragging my dwindling body to the edge, where there is, no more” (that final Beckettian comma!). From here, the stylistic progression to Stillman the son’s speech—“This is what is called speaking. I believe that is the term. When words come out, fly into the air, live for a moment, and die”—is clear, clearer in fact than its echo of Beckett himself. Given this intermediate manuscript, then, Stillman’s language emerges less as a direct parody of modernism or Beckett, and more as a parody of Auster’s own juvenilia, of his youthful debt to modernism.
Moon Palace stages this self-critique in a more biographical mode, transplanting the plot of Hamsun’s Hunger to the scene of Auster’s own university days. Marco, like Auster, begins at Columbia in the fall of 1965. He reaches his solipsistic breakdown against the backdrop of the “tumult of politics and crowds, of outrage, bullhorns, and violence” that characterized the late 1960s, culminating in a final breakdown in the summer of 1969.\footnote{137} On the one hand, Marco replicates Auster’s later self-portrait of the author as loner, held apart from the sociality of the student protests, which would emerge in Hand to Mouth. On the other, however, he lives out the plot of Hunger, the novel that, in the 1969–70 academic year, would serve as the key text of Auster’s thesis. This doubling of biographical and literary allusion (and of literary allusion as biographical allusion) reimagines modernist aesthetics as a phase of Auster’s own life, a point not just in the larger sweep of literary history, but also in the more intimate unfolding of literary biography. The result is something like the process\HSPP{p. 153} that Quentin Anderson finds in nineteenth-century American writers, whom he takes as the precursors to the student protestors of the 1960s and who, in a process that he calls “secular incarnation,” perform “the act not of identifying oneself with the fathers, but of catching all their powers up into the self, asserting that there need be no more generations, no more history, but simply the swelling diaspason of the swelling self.”\footnote{138} If Auster’s art of hunger begins by identifying aesthetic autonomy with the autonomy of the author, it ends by suggesting that modernism and its quest for autonomy constitute just a phase in that author’s life.
It is not easy in this context to hold firmly to the (ordinarily very useful) distinction that Seshagiri and James make between postmodernism’s parodic relationship to modernism, and metamodernism’s more earnest, historicist rediscovery of periodization.139 If we understand what initially seemed to be Auster’s parodic relationship to modernist style not as a parody of modernism itself, but as a self-parody of his youthful commitment to modernism, we lose the straightforwardness of postmodernism’s supposedly unserious engagement with modernism. Instead, we are redirected towards the young Auster’s startlingly earnest attempts to write a late late modernism (or early metamodernism), both in his unpublished early prose and in his published poetry, and towards an engagement with modernism that, in his critical works, is vested in a clear sense of modernism’s location as an early twentieth-century phenomenon, with respect to which he is irrevocably belated. Indeed, the preoccupation with genealogy, including genealogies of modernism, testifies to the on-going role of literary history for Auster. In other words, what a study of the long history of Auster’s engagement with the art of hunger finally suggests is that Auster’s much-discussed postmodernism is also both a kind of metamodernism, an earnest engagement with the history and the styles of modernism as a lost past, and an “intramodernism,” an engagement with his own modernist past. In this sense, both the “mischievous self-dissection” of modernism and the “reassertion of integrity” that James identifies with the modernist turn in contemporary fiction are at play in Auster, for whom integrity and self-dissection are merely different facets of the same exploration of self and subjectivity that underpins his writing as a whole.140
Reading Auster’s early novels as hesitating between postmodernism and metamodernism illuminates the ambivalence of these texts’ relationship to autonomy. Most accounts of postmodernism treat it as the final eclipse of modernist autonomy, from Fredric Jameson’s sense that postmodernism represents the end of art’s capacity for any external critique of society, to Andreas Huyssen’s claim that postmodernism is the end of the high/low divide that characterizes his account of modernist autonomy. Auster’s turn to the postmodern novel affirms this claim insofar as it provides a way of critiquing and moving beyond the stiflingly extreme modes of autonomy that he develops in the poetry. But modernist autonomy nonetheless remains an object of fascination for Auster in the novels. The unreadable texts that represent the impossibility of absolute aesthetic autonomy may no longer offer a plausible model of writing, but they remain the empty centers around which the novels are organized.
The real problem of aesthetic autonomy in Auster’s novels, however, persists as a dilemma not about an autonomous Edenic language, but about the autonomous writer, a figure who is part mythical Adam, part social recluse. As *Hand to Mouth*—which post-dates the novels and represents Auster’s last sustained foray into the art of hunger—suggests, the starving artist remains central to his writing long after other modes of autonomy have been relegated to his poetic past. Auster’s post-modernist art of hunger, making the author the last bastion of autonomy in the shifting literary landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, therefore affirms an individualist, anti-institutional autonomy. It imagines autonomy as rebellion, as a kind of youthful dissidence, so that the work of his less autonomous novels becomes to integrate the hunger artists of his youth into a social and genealogical framework. In this sense, Auster’s novels constitute a kind of reparative project, an attempt to work through the social fractures of the 1960s without losing the era’s utopianism and to hold together the subject in the face of the poststructuralist critique. Aesthetic autonomy in Auster’s 1980s becomes both that which needs to be cherished and nurtured, kept alive as a last spark of dissidence, but also that which needs to be socialized, woven into communities and genealogies. The art of hunger as a project of authorial autonomy, even of radical individualism, is ultimately set aside in Auster’s writing precisely because it resists this socialization, even as the figure of the isolated, ideally autonomous author persists throughout his writing, achieving late-career *(p.155)* manifestations in texts like *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007) and *Man in the Dark* (2008).
The redefinition of aesthetic autonomy as authorial autonomy that Auster uses the art of hunger to articulate becomes increasingly important in late twentieth-century literature. Authors from Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee (in his later work) to Ben Lerner and Jonathan Safran Foer insist on their own status as taciturn, reclusive authors, in order to guarantee the literariness of their texts and to invest the texts they write with the aura of the autonomous author-figure lurking behind. As Benjamin Widiss argues, in a study that traces “the persistence of the author” in the face of modernism’s and then poststructuralism’s attacks, “the hermeneutic strategies we have been taught by modernism, and taught as well that they serve to elucidate texts that at the very least strive to be hermetically sealed, instead derive essential energy from the spectre of the author standing behind and beyond.”

Auster’s writing suggests that the “hermetically sealed” text, in the tradition of modernism, might be not undermined but underwritten by an autonomous “author standing behind and beyond.” His reactivation of the art of hunger tradition, therefore, points towards an alternate mode of aesthetic autonomy, one vested not in New Critical form but in the author himself. With its central figure of the dying author who is not beyond the text but in it, he reimagines aesthetic autonomy as a form of unfree authorial introversion.

Notes:

(2) This extract, from a collection entitled “Stele,” is unpublished and probably dates from late 1970. Several of the poems contained in “Stele” are republished as the collection “Spokes,” which, in Auster’s Collected Poems, is dated to 1970. Earlier drafts contained in the same archival folder are written on French-style writing paper, suggesting composition in France. David Lehman, in a poem entitled “Paris, 1971,” recalls being given a copy of “Stele” by Auster, which implies that it was written in or before 1971: Paul Auster, Collected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 19; David Lehman, New and Selected Poems (New York: Scribner, 2013), 69.


(10) Ibid.,


(13) Auster’s teacher for Lit Hum and for at least one other early undergraduate course was Angus Fletcher, a disciple of Northrop Frye, who may have brought a more archetypal angle to this course. Nonetheless, Frye followed the New Critics in their commitment to the “intentional fallacy,” and, as one review of Fletcher’s 1964 book on allegory noted, his approach shared with the more New Critical approach to Lit Hum an “essentially non-historical” orientation: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 86; Russell Fraser, “Review of *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* by Angus Fletcher,” *Modern Language Review* 62, no. 2 (1967): 298; for Auster’s discussion of Fletcher, see Auster, *Report*, 184.
I call this movement French theory, following François Cusset, in order to foreground its reception in the US as a peculiarly French way of thought. This does not, of course, fully reflect the nationality or origins of many of its key thinkers, from Kristeva to de Man: François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).


Ibid.,


(28) Rudd, Underground, 4.

(29) Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, “Four New Courses of Special Interest,” May 1968, Box 12, Folder 13, Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, Protest and Activism Collection, 1958–99, Columbia University Archives.


(31) Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, “Liberation Classes,” May 1968, Box 12, Folder 13, Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, Protest and Activism Collection, 1958–99, Columbia University Archives; Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, “Four New Courses of Special Interest.”


(35) Roland Barthes, “L’Écriture de l’événement,” 


(40) “…les relira mieux à toutes les autres catégories de travailleurs...Aucun professeur ne peut nous aider à mieux fréquenter cette réalité”: “Document: L’Atelier Populaire,” *Cahiers de mai*, 2 (July 1, 1968): 16.


(42) Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 34.

(43) Ibid.,

(44) Ibid.,


(48) Ibid.

(49) Anderson, *The Imperial Self*, 4.


(52) Ibid.

(53) Rudd, *Underground*, 24; Strike Education Committee and Liberation School, “Liberation Classes.”

(54) Students for a Democratic Society, “Dare We Be Heroes?” n.d., Box 13, Folder 8: Students for a Democratic Society, Protest and Activism Collection, 1958-99, Columbia University Archives.


(62) Cusset, French Theory, 28–32.


(64) Auster, Hand to Mouth, 69.


(66) “je ne crois pas pour autant qu’il faille que l’écrivain s’enrôle dans un parti, dans un groupe, et signe à la volée toutes les protestations qui circulent, manifestes, et pétitions”; quoted in Maryann De Julio, Jacques Dupin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 30.


(71) Barthes, Image, Music, Text, 142.

(72) Ibid.,
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(73) Ibid.,


(75) Paul Auster, “The Art of Hunger” (Columbia University, May 1970), 6,

(76) Ibid.,


(78) Auster, Art of Hunger, 12, 13.

(79) Ibid.,


(81) Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity, 99-100.

(82) Berman, The Politics of Authenticity; Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity, 93.


(84) Berman, The Politics of Authenticity, ix.


(86) Ibid.,

(87) Ibid.,

(88) Ibid.,

(89) Ibid.,

(90) Ibid.,

(91) Ibid.,


(93) Auster, Poems, 204.
Ibid.,

Ibid.,


Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 156.


Ibid.,


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(109) Auster, Poems, 102.

(110) Paul Auster, The Invention of Solitude (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 17.


(114) Ibid.,

(115) Ibid.,

(116) Ibid.,


(118) Auster, Trilogy, 4.

(119) Ross, May ’68 and its Afterlives, 5.


(121) Anderson, The Imperial Self, vii–viii.


(125) Auster, Trilogy, 76.

(126) Auster, Art of Hunger, 40.

(127) Auster, Trilogy, 19.

(128) Ibid.,


(130) Auster, Trilogy, 19.

(131) Ibid., Art of Hunger

(132) Auster, Trilogy, 114.

(133) Ibid., Art of Hunger

(134) Auster, Trilogy, 314.


(136) Auster, Trilogy, 16.

(137) Auster, Moon Palace, 24.

(138) Anderson, The Imperial Self, 58.


