

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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Contemporary
Literary Criticism

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Volume 131

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Paul Auster

1947-

American novelist, poet, memoirist, essayist, critic, screenplay writer, translator, and editor.

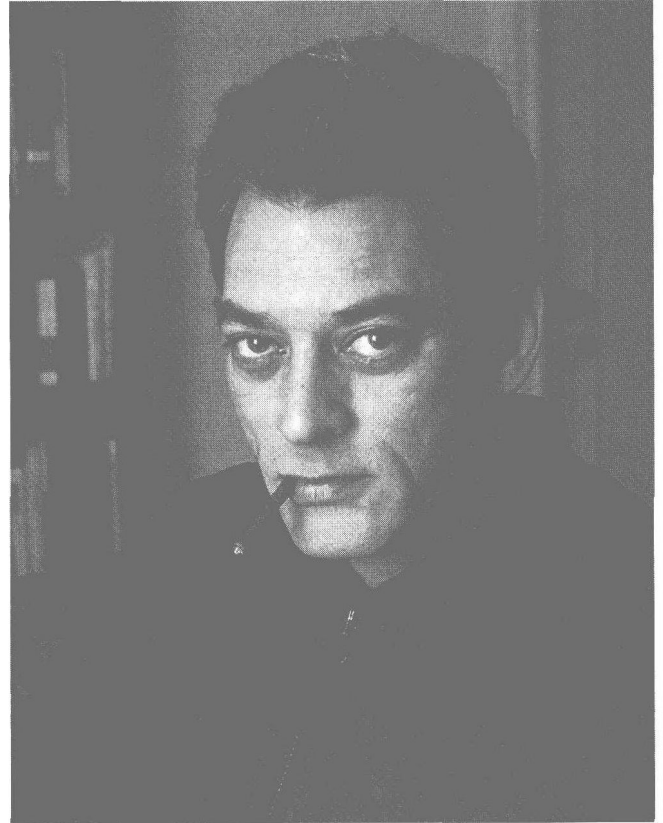
The following entry presents an overview of Auster's career through 1999. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 47.

INTRODUCTION

A provocative experimental novelist whose work represents an amalgam of several genres, Paul Auster is best known for his *New York Trilogy*, which consists of *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1987). In these novels and others, he combines elements of hard-boiled detective fiction, *film noir*, dystopian fantasy, and postmodern narrative strategies to address the possibility of certain knowledge, human redemption, and the function of language. His ambitious work is distinguished for challenging the limits of the novel form and tackling difficult epistemological concepts.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Newark, New Jersey, Auster was raised by parents Samuel, a landlord, and Queenie on the outskirts of New York City in the North Jersey suburbs. His interest in literature is indirectly attributed to his uncle, translator Allan Mandelbaum, who left a box of books at the Auster home while away in Europe. The teenaged Auster began reading them and soon resolved to become a writer himself. Upon graduating from high school, he attended Columbia University, where he earned a B.A. in English in 1969 and an M.A. in 1970. While still in college, he wrote both poetry and prose and participated in campus protests against the Vietnam War. He then worked as a merchant seaman for several months to fund a move to France, where he remained for four years and worked a variety of odd jobs to make ends meet. In 1974, he married writer and translator Lydia Davis, with whom he shares a son; they divorced in 1979 and Auster remarried Siri Hustvedt in 1981. After returning to New York, Auster published his first two books—the thin poetry collections *Unearth* (1974) and *Wall Writing* (1976). He was awarded Ingram Merrill Foundation grants in 1975 and 1982, as well as National Endowment of the Arts fellowships in 1979 and 1985. Auster continued to labor in relative obscurity as a poet, essayist, and translator of French literature until the publication of his first novel, *City of Glass*, which was rejected by seventeen publishers before



Sun & Moon Press finally issued the book in 1985. The novel was nominated for an Edgar Award for best mystery novel in 1986. The third volume of his *New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room*, was also nominated for several awards. Auster taught creative writing at Princeton University from 1986 to 1990. In 1994 he collaborated with director Wayne Wang on the films *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*, which he co-directed. Auster was awarded the prestigious Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts des et des Lettres in 1993.

MAJOR WORKS

Though Auster's fiction eludes easy classification, his novels embody several recurring elements: the use of metafictional narrative techniques, textual puzzles, doppelgangers, ironic distancing, and self-reflexivity to underscore the relationship between past and present and the ambiguous nature of language and identity. While instances of confused or mistaken identity are common in the mystery genre, Auster adapts this stock device into a metaphor for contemporary urban life in his *New York*

Trilogy, deliberately blurring the distinction between author and text. *City of Glass*, a grim and intellectually puzzling story, superficially resembles a mystery novel that exploits the conventions of the detective genre. The protagonist, Quinn, is a pseudonymous mystery novelist who assumes the identity of a real detective, named Paul Auster, after receiving a phone call intended for Auster. Lonely and bored, Quinn accepts the case in Auster's place. His assignment is to shadow Stillman, a brilliant linguistics professor whose obsessive quest to rediscover humanity's primordial language compelled him to isolate his own son in a closet for nine years. Newly released from a mental hospital, Stillman poses a threat to his son's life, prompting the need for a detective. In *Ghosts*, the second volume of the trilogy, Auster continues his investigation into lost identity with increasing abstraction, including characters identified only as Blue, White, and Black. The novel's coy tone and austere plot—a detective named Blue is contracted by a client named White to pursue a man named Black—places the action in a cerebral context largely disconnected from reality. The trilogy's concluding volume, *The Locked Room*, is less abstract and more accessible than the previous two. This novel features flesh and blood characters with whom readers can easily identify, including a nameless first-person narrator who ostensibly represents Auster himself. The narrator is summoned by the wife of a childhood friend named Fanshawe who has disappeared and is presumed dead. A fantastically gifted writer, Fanshawe has left behind some unpublished writings as well as instructions for his friend to see them into print. As time passes, the narrator easily moves into Fanshawe's existence, marrying his wife, publishing his work, and eventually engendering rumors that he is actually Fanshawe or, at least, the man who created the works. His deception is finally jeopardized when he receives a communication from the real Fanshawe.

In the Country of Last Things (1987), published the same year as *The Locked Room*, is an epistolary novel depicting a dystopian American city of the future. As in previous works, this novel evinces Auster's abiding interest in the nature of language and reality. The protagonist, Anna Blume, travels from one continent to a large metropolis on another, where she hopes to find her missing brother. Instead, she discovers a city in chaos where criminals brazenly exploit the desperate and homeless, "Runners" trot themselves to death, and "Leapers" jump to their deaths from the city's crumbling skyscrapers. Anna relates her search through this hellish environment in a letter to someone left behind on the other continent. Though Auster seems to have shifted from mystery to science fiction, *In the Country of Last Things* shares many of the narrative devices and thematic preoccupations of his *New York Trilogy*, most apparently the search for identity, also the central theme of *Moon Palace* (1989), a postmodern bildungsroman around the theme of lost family. In this story, the protagonist is Marco Stanley Fogg, an orphan who eventually becomes homeless in New York City after running out of money while studying at Columbia University. After recovering in the care of a college friend and a Chinese

woman, Marco goes to work for an eccentric old man who turns out to be his paternal grandfather. The remainder of the narrative follows Marco's journey of discovery and loss as he encounters his previously unknown relatives and records the fantastic tales of his grandfather's youth. Auster's next novel, *The Music of Chance* (1990), begins as a generative personal journey, bringing to mind such fictional characters as Mark Twain's Huck Finn, John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom, and Jack Kerouac's Dean Moriarty. Protagonist Jim Nashe hits the road in search of self-knowledge after his wife leaves him and he receives an inheritance from his deceased father. His tour of the country winds down at about the same time as his money runs out, whereupon he meets a young gambler, Pozzi, who entices him into a poker game with two eccentric lottery winners from Pennsylvania. The two lose what they have and fall further into debt. In order to pay off the debt, Nashe and Pozzi are forced to build a stone wall for the eccentrics. Auster continued the thematic and stylistic concerns of his previous novels in *Leviathan* (1992), whose title brings to mind the legendary ocean beast and the seventeenth-century political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. The opening event of this novel is actually its denouement—the death by explosion of a New York writer, Benjamin Sachs. What follows—a reconstruction of precipitating events—is facilitated by Peter Aaron, another New York writer who learns of Sachs's bizarre death and becomes obsessed with writing the story of his friend. Aaron's investigation uncovers a world of secrets, multiple and exchanged identities, and previously unknown connections between characters.

In *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), Auster relates the story of Walter Rawley, also known as "Walt the Wonder Boy" and "Mr. Vertigo." Set in the Midwest of the 1920s, Walt is an orphaned street urchin who is offered a new life by a mystical showman, named Master Yehudi, who teaches Walt to levitate. The two, along with a Sioux Indian woman and an Ethiopian boy, barnstorm the country, growing increasingly famous on their way toward Broadway. However, on the verge of stardom, Walt loses his gift for levitating. He begins to wander and eventually ends up in the mobster underworld of Chicago. *Timbuktu* (1999) revolves around a poignant relationship between a middle-aged homeless man named Willy G. Christmas and his dog, Mr. Bones. The narrative is notable for its unusual dog's-eye perspective, as an omniscient narrator relates the story through the observations of Mr. Bones. In anticipation of his death, Willy travels with Mr. Bones from Brooklyn to Baltimore to establish a new home for his dog and to vouchsafe the manuscript of his epic lifework with a former high school English teacher. After Willy's death, Mr. Bones passes through a succession of new owners—some loving, some cruel—as he traverses rural, suburban, and urban America. Throughout, Mr. Bones is sustained by his continuing love for the deceased Willy and the promise of their reunion in an afterlife destination called Timbuktu. Auster's various volumes of nonfiction and translation further display his diverse literary talents and knowledge of international literature. *The Invention of*

Solitude (1982), a memoir written after the death of his father, details Auster's relationship with and impressions of his father. Through a discursive and fragmented presentation, this book also contains discussions of authors such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Carlos Collodi. In addition, Auster has translated works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Dupin, and Mallarmé, edited the *Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (1982), and published a collection of essays and interviews entitled *The Art of Hunger* (1992).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Often regarded as a postmodern writer, a default classification due to his metafictional techniques and ironic posturing, Auster is noted for his idiosyncratic work, which resists simple categorization. His critical reputation rests largely upon his *New York Trilogy*, which was enthusiastically received by reviewers, winning him respect as a formidable new literary talent during the mid-1980s. While *The Locked Room* is judged by many to be the richest and most compelling book of the trilogy, all three volumes have been commended for their facile appropriation—and dismantling—of conventional detective motifs to expose contradictory aspects of reality, literary artifice, and self-perception. Additional genre-defying novels such as *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan*, *Mr. Vertigo*, and *Timbuktu* won critical approval for tackling difficult themes without sacrificing the pleasures of entertainment or alienating the reader. Though some commentators have dismissed Auster's intellectual game-playing as unconvincing and gratuitous, and others find his wit and symbolism labored, most critics praise his sophisticated narrative structures, lucid prose, and daring forays into the philosophical paradoxes surrounding issues of linguistic self-invention and metaphysical doubt. Auster's innovative work is appreciated by many critics for reclaiming the vitality of contemporary experimental literature, for which he is widely regarded as one of the foremost American novelists of his generation.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Unearth: Poems (poetry) 1974
Wall Writing: Poems, 1971-1975 (poetry) 1976
Facing the Music (poetry) 1980
White Spaces (prose) 1980
The Invention of Solitude (memoir) 1982
Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry [editor] (poetry) 1982
City of Glass (novel) 1985
Ghosts (novel) 1986
The Locked Room (novel) 1987
In the Country of Last Things (novel) 1987
Disappearances: Selected Poems (poetry) 1988
Moon Palace (novel) 1989

The Music of Chance (novel) 1990
The New York Trilogy [contains *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*] (novels) 1990
The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews (essays and interviews) 1992
Leviathan (novel) 1992
Mr. Vertigo (novel) 1994
The Red Notebook and Other Writings (prose) 1995
Smoke and Blue in the Face: Two Screenplays (screenplays) 1995
Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure (memoir, novel, and dramas) 1997
Timbuktu (novel) 1999

CRITICISM

Carolyn See (review date 17 November 1985)

SOURCE: A review of *City of Glass*, in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, November 17, 1985, pp. 3-4.

[In the following review, See offers positive assessment of *City of Glass*.]

"I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap. It suits my purpose admirably. I find the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things. Each day I go out with my bag and collect object that seem worthy of investigation. My samples now number in the hundreds—from the chipped to the smashed, from the dented to the squashed, from the pulverized to the putrid."

City of Glass is the first in a New York trilogy, an experimental novel that wanders and digresses and loses its own narrative thread, but with all that, keeps offering bits of dialogue or scenes or "ideas" that make the whole thing much like a very good day for a street scavenger: In among the nondescript junk, there are maybe a hundred little treasures. . . .

City of Glass is about the degeneration of language, the shiftings of identity, the struggle to remain human in a great metropolis, when the city itself is cranking on its own falling-apart mechanical life that completely overrides any and every individual. Our hero, our narrator, has already gone through several lives, several identities. His name, he tells us, is Quinn (which rhymes with *twin* and *bin*). For a while he was "William Wilson," but before that "he had published several books of poetry, had written plays, critical essays, and worked on a number of long translations. . . ."

But quite abruptly, he has changed all that. As Wilson, he took a pseudonym within a pseudonym, and began to write a series of detective novels about a private eye named Max Work: "In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise."

Once all this has been established, we are instructed to see Quinn as bereft of a wife and child, a "bachelor" living alone, interested in the fate of the Mets, one of those sad, single guys who eat breakfast alone at lunch counters. The author then allows him to get a phone call (put through by mistake?) asking for Paul Auster (the author of this book). This is a plea for some detective work and Quinn/twin, after hesitating, answers that request.

A loving wife has a crazy husband, who has been locked up in a dark room for the first nine years of his life by a mad dad, who sometimes takes the name of "Henry Dark" to use as a mouthpiece for some of his more revolutionary scholarly ideas about language, civilization, Paradise and child-rearing. This mad dad, whose name is Stillman, has been put in jail some years before for abusing his son, and is just now returning to New York. Quinn/Auster, because of his stories about Max Work, and because he has nothing else to do, agrees to watch for the elder Mr. Stillman.

Except, of course, when Mr. Stillman gets off the train at Grand Central, there are *two* of him—one shabby, one perfectly dressed. Quinn makes an arbitrary decision and begins to shadow the shabby one, starting a long journey through the city to his ultimate destiny.

Walking through the city! This really is a New York novel. Quinn walks the length and breadth of Manhattan Island just for the heck of it, and the elder Mr. Stillman, in *his* walks, manages literally to spell out cryptic messages about the meaning of life. It is Stillman who sees the great Metropolis as a city "of broken people, broken things, broken thoughts," but that falls right in with his theory that we are to return soon to a "prelapsarian" condition: a universal language, a universal state of well-being. Of course, Stillman has cracked completely, as Quinn realizes, as he presents himself to him in a series of interlocking identities.

Quinn, at one point, begins to wonder about the "real" Paul Auster and goes to see *him*—and if you're thinking that Pirandello and Unamuno and a hundred other serious writers and tens of thousands of undergraduates have pondered the relationship between character and author, it really is OK, since those "identities" are only two among 20 or so.

In fact, Auster's laconic, throwaway, often very funny tone keeps this book (and many of its ideas) fresh. If, during the middle of the narrative, the reader entertains a few vagrant thoughts about where this novel is going, what Quinn/Wilson/Work/Auster is up to anyway, that question

is satisfactorily answered in a series of ending scenes that mustn't be given away—except that there's a clue hidden in this sentence.

It's true, in a small town we are born, live and die as more or less one person, because that's the way our family and friends know us. In cities, we either rush to change our identities—or they are changed brutally for us. *City of Glass* thoughtfully and cleverly draws our attention to these questions of self.

E. F. Bleiler (review date 29 March 1987)

SOURCE: "Almanacs of Urban Decay," in *Washington Post Book World*, March 28, 1987, p. 11.

[In the following review, Bleiler offers positive estimation of *The Locked Room* and *In the Country of Last Things*.]

In *City of Glass*, the first volume of *The New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster wrote of his character Quinn/William Wilson that "what interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories." This is perhaps also true of Paul Auster.

In *The Locked Room*, the third volume of the trilogy, Auster builds on *Fanshawe* (1828), Nathaniel Hawthorne's suppressed first novel, which is a secularization of the demon-lover motif with strong mythic elements. *Fanshawe* is generally rated a bad book, but it has one interesting point: After rescuing a fair maiden from the fate worse than death, Fanshawe rejects her and a worldly life because of a spiritual leprosy that gnaws at his soul.

Auster, who is saturated in 19th-century fiction, in *The Locked Room* creates another Fanshawe, who, suffering from spiritual death, withdraws from life and passes the possibility of worldliness on to another, normal man. This, however, is not Auster's only theme; he enriches his story with concepts of metaphysical dual identity and interpenetration of author and work. The narrator both is and is not the great writer Fanshawe, and part of his story is the possibility that he will become Fanshawe.

According to the plot line, which is that of a mystery story, the narrator is summoned by the widow of his childhood friend Fanshawe, with whom he has long been out of touch. Fanshawe, it turns out, has simply disappeared and is presumably dead. His task, set up by Fanshawe, is to act as literary executor and place the novels, short stories, plays and poems that Fanshawe created. Since (ironically) they are all great, the narrator succeeds, but there are complexities when he is commissioned to write a life of Fanshawe.

The narrator (who is both a character and Paul Auster) wanders in and out of Fanshawe's life, compulsively, convulsively, seeking Fanshawe, until a melodramatic climax. Along the way he receives a letter from the sup-

posedly dead man, warning him that if he ever finds Fanshawe, Fanshawe will kill him. The letter urges the narrator to "be who you are," which the narrator unwittingly alters to "remain who you are."

In summary *The Locked Room* sounds much like one of Claude Houghton's neglected metaphysical novels of the 1930s, a comparison that is not improper. But there are differences. Houghton wrote about quests for a self, with an exuberant, optimistic, yet elegantly styled mysticism, while Auster is concerned with darker shadows of personality, and the inevitable conclusion is not enhancement but death.

The Locked Room is well worth reading. It lacks the brilliance and wild imagination of *City of Glass*, but it conveys a message of somber doom through a rhythmic, austere (to make a necessary word-play) style and excellent characterizations.

If the members of *The New York Trilogy* are presented as extrapolations of the detective story, *In the Country of Last Things* is a similar extension of the dystopia and the journey through Hell. The subject is "the city," a horrible place not geographically identified, but certainly the faulty side of the United States. The author focuses on milieu more than on individual spiritual downfall, and the book tends to be an ethnographic survey of death and degradation. Hawthorne, now cited by the author, is again the historical germ, with perhaps links back to John Bunyan and forward to the *Land of Darkness* of the prolific Victorian Mrs. Oliphant.

To describe the city in any detail would be beyond the scope of this review. Let it be enough to say that it is a world of entropy, where everything runs down into decay, and that the central metaphor is cannibalism, both literal and figurative. The city's ailment is not so much political (as is most common in such dystopias) as spiritual. Creation has ended. Life persists by devouring the past and recycling it in ever more inferior forms. On the specific, material side, there is no housing, though sharpers survive by selling its non-existence; there is little food, and that little is obtainable only by violence or an exchange system based on scavenging. Life is so miserable that the will to live diminishes, and there are institutionalized ways of dying. Not just in euthanasia chambers, but with bands that starve themselves to death, troupes that race until they drop dead and fanatics that leap in exaltation off high places. (The exact analogies to our world are clear in Auster's text.) All these horrors are told in a bald style with little emotional tone, as passionless as an almanac.

The story vehicle is a long letter written in a small notebook that Anna Blume sends back to her friends across the sea. Anna, who in addition to being a well-rounded character is a type representing the will to live and perhaps Judaism, has come to the city to find her brother, a journalist who disappeared some time before. Her quest, at first arrogant and ill-planned, is predictably unsuccessful, but

she gradually adapts to the city and survives. She becomes a professional scavenger; pushing a small cart that is chained to her to prevent its being stolen, she prowls the streets looking for things edible or barterable. Her adventures take her through violence, privation, cold, disease and hunger.

In the Country of Last Things is a painful, horrible book, and it cannot be called enjoyable in terms of light reading. But it is powerful, original, imaginative and handled with artistry. It is one of the better modern attempts at describing Hell.

Michael Dirda (review date 26 March 1989)

SOURCE: "Marvels and Mysteries," in *Washington Post Book World*, March 26, 1989, pp. 3, 10.

[In the following review, Dirda offers positive assessment of *Moon Palace*.]

Hemingway once remarked that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." That story of a boy's passage toward maturity, told against the astounding dreamscape of America, has since been repeated in the adventures of Nick Carraway, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and countless others. *Moon Palace*, which relates the growing up of Marco Stanley Fogg, shows that there's a dance in the old theme yet, especially when a brilliant writer takes the floor.

After working for many years as a translator of modern French poetry, Paul Auster rocketed into semi-celebrity with the publication of his New York trilogy: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*.

The first of these novels played with the conventions of the hard-boiled detective story, as a mystery writer finds himself impersonating a private eye in order to help a beautiful dark-haired woman. The second, displaying a more austere Auster, worked a series of Beckett-like permutations on the relationship between observer and observed: a p.i. named Blue spends years shadowing a character named Black. The concluding volume of the trilogy took up the modernist conceit of a shamus-like biographer compelled to learn the truth about a writer, no matter what the personal costs.

Chock-a-block with arcana about language, responsibility and identity, the novels might have been nothing more than a high-brow snooze were it not for their author's commanding narrative skills. For all his post-modern reflexivity, Auster is a masterly, often autobiographical, storyteller, one whose voice—unruffled, meditative, intelligent—quickly snares a reader. His memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*, points up the personal element in much of his writing—from the recurrent obsession with fathers and sons to details about life in Paris and his characters'

refined taste in reading. Anyone who likes, say, the philosophical melodramas of Robertson Davies, the melancholy comedies of Russell Hoban or the intellectual fantasies of John Crowley should try Auster. He's of their company.

His latest book, *Moon Palace*, divides roughly into three main sections. In the first we meet the hero, Marco Stanley Fogg, an orphan—named after three explorers—who has just enough money to finish Columbia University. But, “like all the Fogs, he had a penchant for aimlessness and reverie, for sudden bolts and lengthy torpors.” Acting purely out of a kind of existentialist obstinacy, M.S., as he likes to be called, ends up starving on the street, dimly surviving as a wanderer in Central Park, living on discarded food and sleeping under bushes.

Eventually, though, he is rescued by his old roommate Zimmer and a future girlfriend named Kitty Wu. They nurse him back to health, at which point he finds a job as a companion to a wealthy old man, Thomas Effing. Nearly 90, blind, confined to a wheelchair, the cantankerous Effing is a blend of magus, Ancient Mariner and the invalid Gen. Sternwood of *The Big Sleep*. In a thrilling flashback, lasting nearly a third of *Moon Palace*, he recounts his life from his youthful admiration for the inventor Nikola Tesla and his passion for the paintings of Ralph Albert Blakelock through his disorienting adventures in the Utah desert.

By the time we reach these last, “his narrative,” remarks Fogg, “had taken on a phantasmagoric quality . . . and there were times when he did not seem to be remembering the outward facts of his life so much as inventing a parable to explain its inner meanings.”

Actually all of *Moon Palace* shares this same phantasmagoric quality, this skirting around the edges of the uncanny, this sense of “subterranean vision.”

Where did Effing get his money? How can he predict the exact date of his own death? Why is he excessively thin, while his neglected son is exceedingly obese? The book shimmers with such mysteries, thematic echoes, outrageous coincidences, as well as artfully timed revelations. All three main characters, classic American loners, suffer the same pattern of madness. Allusions to the moon abound, largely as an emblem of man's deepest or most extreme desires. Unexpected paternity plays a major role, as do unwanted babies. By his story's end, the genial and likeable Fogg also manages—indirectly—to kill his grandfather, father and child.

Partly to counter these Jacobean excesses Auster chooses to have Fogg tell his tale in a voice like twilight, serene, after the fact, almost resigned. All of Auster's books follow this pattern of the French *recit*, short, introspective narratives, relying on telling as much as showing, keeping dialogue to a minimum. The effect is to grant this, and Auster's other novels, an air of wistfulness and a certain calm plausibility: I was there, I suffered, I am the man.

Auster also enjoys following a seemingly, straightforward narrative line, until everything starts to get tied up, at which point he will let the story go slack, twist and loop back on itself. In *Moon Palace* the last third of the book introduces a new character, an historian named Solomon Barber, who “was born of a madwoman and a ghost.” Naturally Barber holds the keys to several mysteries—not all of which are resolved before our hero stands, at the novel's soulful but happy end, on a California beach and stares up at the moon rising above the dark Pacific.

At one point, Fogg mentions the writing habits of his friend Zimmer, habits which clearly apply to his creator as well: “Zimmer's chief concern in life was writing . . . and he spent long, hard hours at it, laboring over each word as if the fate of the world hung in the balance—which is surely the only sensible way to go about it.”

If the result is a book as fine as *Moon Palace*, then it is unquestionably the only sensible way of going about it.

Sven Birkerts (review date 27 March 1989)

SOURCE: “Postmodern Picaresque,” in *The New Republic*, March 27, 1989, pp. 36-40.

[In the following review, Birkerts provides an overview of Auster's fiction and evaluation of *Moon Palace*, which he finds promising but ultimately disappointing.]

Paul Auster has been, until just now, the ghost at the banquet of contemporary American letters. Though unquestionably accomplished (in the last decade he has published a memoir, five novels, several collections of poetry, and a major compendium of modern French poetry, which he edited and partly translated), he has been curiously absent from the debates being waged at the far end of the table. There are reasons for this. For one thing, his work does not fit neatly into the currently active slots. While his prose has tended toward stylistic austerity, it has little in common with the water and wafer fare beloved of the minimalists. In the same way, Auster has narrowly escaped the “postmodernist” tag; for all his concern with the slipperiness of perception and identity, his writing has a solid modernist grounding. He has not given up on the idea that art can discover new meaning from experience.

This has really been the main cause of Auster's marginality: that he has favored the serious and “artistic”—the novel as epistemology—over the democratically accessible. His characters have been embodiments, players in philosophical puzzles (I'm thinking mainly of the three books of his *The New York Trilogy*), or test cases to be subjected to the pressure of extreme situations; his plots, coolly calculated. But now, quite suddenly, comes a change. *Moon Palace*, Auster's new novel, breaks the chrysalis of high seriousness and stretches out its colorful wings. And the retrospective gaze alters everything: we