

“CHANCE IS A FOOL’S NAME FOR [LOVING] FATE;” PAUL AUSTER’S *THE MUSIC OF CHANCE*

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To date his effort steadfastly, though provisionally, subscribes to that “fear” welling up from “the just measure of himself” and from that “wall” of “stones” profiting an alien “city” (“all that he is not”)--- factors of urgency to his poems from the 1970’s.¹ As such it constitutes a litany of failure to overcome resentment, unfurled as a primeval constant of human action. There is a novel, *The Music of Chance* (1990), produced soon after the *Trilogy*, which, by complementing cinematic initiatives of *Kiss Me Deadly*, and *Fred and Ginger* (as tempered along lines of the above-cited presentiment of doom) with those of French New Wave filmmaker, Jacques Demy (who died in 1990),² may be taken as the novelist’s, if not farthest, most circumspect reach into the menace at hand.

Nashe, a former *fireman*, has inherited \$200,000, quit his job, bought some hot wheels and hit the road, “...a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared.”³ After thirteen months of this intermittent ritual of heightened sensuality on the expressways of America,⁴ and at the point of realizing he was “stuck,” he encounters by chance on a quiet stretch of highway a figure “lurching forward in spasms.”⁵ Not being able to ignore that distress, he offers a ride to one Jack Pozzi, known to his friends as “Jackpot” for his prowess in poker. After driving a few miles, Nashe pulls into a *Texaco* station to tend to the car, and his passenger goes to the washroom to get cleaned up from his beating.⁶ “For better or worse, that was how the whole business started...”⁷

It’s hard to say how much better or worse this gambit leaves us; but what can’t be doubted is the extraordinary load of kinetic fire power this baby is carrying. Mike and Christina, of course. But this Mike does not channel the likes of “Rather Have the Blues” on the sound system; no, he has a preference for *classical* music, “...the endless tapes of Bach and Mozart and Verdi that he listened to while sitting behind the wheel, as if the sounds were somehow emanating from him and drenching the landscape, turning the visible world into a reflection of his own thoughts.”⁸ We first meet the roaming “Michel,” driving into the home town where he has a seven year old son whom he’s never seen, in Demy’s *Lola* (1961)--dressed in white, in his white Cadillac, with a Beethoven Quartet streaming out. A few days into their friendship, Pozzi tells Nashe about a day, as an eight year old sitting on the front steps “...and all of a sudden this big white Cadillac comes inching down the street... ‘Hold onto your hat, little guy... you’re looking at your father.’”⁹ As “Jackpot,” Pozzi brings along Jeanne Moreau’s “Jackie,” the diva of roulette, in Demy’s *Baie des Anges* (*Bay of Angels*) (1963). He also has his eye on a poker night with multimillionaires, “Stone” and “Flower.” “Stone had a taut, emaciated look to him that recalled Fred Astaire...and Flower was more burly than rotund, with a jowly face...” far removed from “light-footed.”¹⁰ (Though a male figure in this outing, Ginger has been captured in her later, overweight bearing. She reappears, in the same weight-class, in *Mr. Vertigo* [1994], partnering the protagonist’s voracious “Uncle Slim” or “Sparks” [an emanation of stone].)¹¹ Nashe discerns “stillness and serenity” in Stone’s eyes, someone “who sat comfortably in his own skin” (while noting Flower’s “lunging goodwill” and crudity.¹²)

Thus the novel serves up a metaphorical diorama, whirring in the distance, while it tries to figure out where to land. Its busiest production floor has to do with Fred and Ginger as Stone and Flower. The narrative’s coagulative, ascetic take on Fred’s spare sensibility and on Ginger’s boundless capitalizing upon the prospect of well-being in its many forms is prefigured by the shadows of Soberin and Lily. This was not to be a gracious encounter, despite the rhetoric of the pregame tour of the mansion. In a “barnlike” dimension of the dream house--- which had been introduced in design terms melding deco musicals, Jackie’s Cote d’Azure casinos and *Last Year at Marienbad*¹³--- there is an elaborate wooden scale model of a city. This “City of the World” was Stone’s “labor of love,” a utopian prospect (akin to that of Soberin, the humanitarian free-lancer) of harmony amongst “Four Realms of Togetherness” (the Hall of Justice, the Library, the Bank, and the Prison).¹⁴ Before coming to terms with the horror of that intent, we must notice that there is indeed a redolence of Fred’s career’s palpable love. With traces of quantum dynamic compellingness, the theme of Stone’s construct, as tour-guided by the loquacious and down to earth (Newtonian) Flower, includes a sense of human originary scope. “Wisdom reigns here, but the struggle is nevertheless constant, and great vigilance is required of all the citizens---each of whom carries the entire city within himself.”¹⁵ The cusp of the plummet performed by Stone and Flower would be Flower’s, “If there’s no passion in your life, it’s not worth living,”¹⁶ as given specificity, concerning the “artistic vision of mankind,”¹⁷ by, “Evil still exists, but the powers

who rule over the city have figured out how to transform that evil into good.”¹⁸ Quantum-implicated intent (that which brought forward Heraclitus’ remarks upon the way up and the way down¹⁹) puts in an appearance apropos of that civility; but so does Flower’s (and Stone’s) Newtonian bent upon social engineering. “If you look at the Prison, you’ll see that all the prisoners are working happily at various tasks, that they all have smiles on their faces. That’s because they’re glad they’ve been punished for their crimes, and now they’re learning how to recover the goodness within them through hard work.”²⁰

Jack, as so often with Jackie, loses all the money he has (via Nashe) and Nashe tosses in his car in a last-ditch recovery bid. That too is lost--- Fred, as “Lucky” in *Swing Time* (1936), being an experienced though far from invincible card sharp--- and, in the course of trying to depart the remote site (the classy couple would force them to walk [an option the protagonists of *Marienbad* would tackle]), they find themselves compelled to recoup the ten thousand by way of building for Stone and Flower a wall, stone by stone (from a venerable European castle). Enlisted to give a material form to the obsession with advantage on the part of “all-American” heroism “turned fascist” (as in the career of Lindbergh, recounted by Nashe to Jack²¹ before meeting the other two American sweethearts), the freewheelers become unfree as befits their own unresolved concessions to the coursing of advantage. Nashe’s driving addiction left him “no longer in control of himself,”²² though it also left him with a vague sense of his own superiority, for “he had taken his life into his own hands.”²³ Jack’s devotion to poker (like Jackie’s being in thrall to roulette) likewise wobbled between gusto for intensities of risk and gorging on rising above middling actions. (Jack’s modus operandi as a gambler even goes so far as to toy with building a wall from the perspective of poise not there for the long haul. “The important thing was to remain inscrutable, to build a wall around yourself and not let²⁴ anyone in.” Whereas Jackie saw the point in the skydiving of sheer luck, Jack had become enamored with a process of machination, driving his rewards closer to Main Street. Nashe, clever college dropout that he was (like Fanshawe), a sometime habitué of Berkeley, where, during his tour, he comes across an old flame in a bookstore, who helps him select a one-volume Shakespeare for the motels (“It has the best notes”²⁵), would sneer at the “voodoo logic” of Stone’s utopia, ticking it off for the “...bizarre, totalitarian world...hint of violence...atmosphere of cruelty and revenge.”²⁶ Both he and Jack have a chuckle over the latter’s “little boy logic” of saving the hundred-dollar gift from daddy Michel in hopes he’d come back.²⁷

“You’re so dumb when you’re a kid, it’s pathetic. I can’t believe I used to think like that.”
“We all did. It’s a part of growing up.”²⁸

And yet, during the game, Nashe slips away to the wooden city and steals small models of Stone and Flower. On finding themselves in a low-key, but hard labor, concentration camp under the surveillance of “Calvin Murks,” the “handyman”²⁹ of the estate, whose fluency with contract law (and Edwardian phraseology³⁰) brings to mind Edward Everett Horton’s “Egbert Fitzgerald,” the less than scintillating lawyer friend of Guy in *The Gay Divorcee* (and promoter of the adage, “Chance is a fool’s name for fate”), Nashe the “grownup” torches those figures in a telling action to break the hold of their creditors. No slouch himself at voodoo logic, he remarks, “With the proper medicine, any illness can be cured.”³¹ (The little figures in the bright light recall Guy’s utterly pragmatic paper cutouts of himself and Mimi, in a bid to escape their imprisonment and get out for a night of dancing “The Continental.”)

Plodding along for months at the work camp under the generally kind supervision (though replete with a pistol) of Murks, they plot an escape—under the wall, for diminutive Jack—bring it off and Jack’s mutilated body is dumped by their trailer the next day. Nashe swerves through several—now quite predictable—maudlin episodes, discharges in full his debts (“You’re a free man now!”³²) goes out for a celebration with Murks and an associate, persuades them to let him drive what was his car—now the property of Murks—(the beloved—as per Mike—red Saab) and he skyrockets it into oncoming traffic, the radio tuned to a classical station. The last sentence takes us back to the end of *Kiss Me Deadly*, where being inept with Pandora’s Box means trouble for all.

“And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore.”³³

Hovering over that fireball is a constellation speaking for loving grace, courage...and compromise. The first two items key actions fully (which is to say problematically) managing advantage and resentment; the latter, taking us to the land of Jacques Demy (who *tries* to take to heart Mike Hammer’s [dismissed] adage, “What I don’t know can’t hurt me”), offers a low-cost package tempering those poisons but introducing a disclaimer to serious coherence and creative integrity. Seeing a nasty stretch of road ahead, Auster weighs these options:

- 1) Super-tough Mike or Rabelaisian Michel or “crazed animal” Mike as Nashe (nuclear ash) the speed-demon, who, on the other hand, could reflect with some subtlety and some self-indulgence upon his blues on departing the life of a firefighting Bostonian—“There was a certain pain involved in that transaction, but Nashe almost began to welcome the pain, to feel ennobled by it, as if the farther he took himself away from the person he had been, the better off he would be in the future. He felt like a man who had finally found courage to put a bullet through his head—but in this case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds.”³⁴ The outlook upon bluesy melodrama could account for Nashe’s proper name, Jim, in homage to “little Jacques” (Demy), spinner of more or less neatly sidestepped lives.
- 2) Fred and Ginger’s sentimental flippiness or Stone and Flower’s sentimental ferocity or Nashe and “Tiffany’s” sentimental blabber. This latter dash of Demy consists of an Atlantic City call-girl whom Nashe and Jack would hire to impose some luster upon their treadmill life on the rock pile. On the first visit, Nashe, an extensively-schooled devotee of classical music, impressed them with a performance of the devotional hymn, “Jerusalem” with its bathetic poetry by William Blake.³⁵ On the second visit, following Jack’s murder, he asks her to *dance* with him to what she regards as “old-fashioned music” (laments by Billie Holiday), though much to her liking.³⁶ Therewith we re-enter the remarkably truncated romance between Gene Kelly’s “Andy” (renowned concert pianist) and Françoise Dorléac’s “Solange” (who, like Tiffany dreams of going into “show business,” though in her case as a classical music composer) and who, like her thin, blond sister, “Delphine,” (bearing more resemblance to Tiffany) sports lavish accessories (sunhats resembling Tiffany lamps) and resides in the Atlantic city of Rochefort, in the musical, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967).³⁷ As in the film, Tiffany’s family is fussy about names, she having been tagged with the hateful “Dolores” (way too gloomy for a professional fun-seeker). (Vaguely) like the charmingly deluded lovers in the movie, Nashe goes into a saccharine fit and proposes to his tenuous girlfriend. She thinks he’s kidding.³⁸
- 3) Jackie’s rapidly volatilizing glamour or Jack’s tank-town notoriety (which, as with Jackie, could catch fire³⁹)?
- 4) Nashe’s self-destructive solemnity (“seriousness”) or Soberin’s over-the-top solemnity (“seriousness”) or Cassard’s (Michel’s defeated rival and subsequent “success story” in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* [1964]) self-sparing solemnity (“seriousness”)?
- 5) Mike and Velda’s short-lived escape from Soberin’s circumspect headquarters; or Jack and Nashe’s short-lived escape from Stone and Flower’s nostalgic theme-park; or Jackie’s short-lived escape from the mesmerizing casino at Nice; or Delphine’s long-shot escape from the dream factory at Marienbad?

¹ See above,

² For an account of Demy’s work, see below,

³ Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance* (New York: Viking Press, 1990), pp. 11f.

⁴ Although dedicated to reading “serious literature” and listening to “serious music,” Nashe settles for a kinetic enlightenment tightly linked to a spin dominated by chance occurrences of physical eventuation. “...Nashe realized he was no longer in control of himself, that he had fallen into the grip of some baffling, overpowering force. He was like a crazed animal, careening blindly from one nowhere to the next...” (Ibid., p. 6).

⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 41f.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

¹¹ See

¹² Auster, op. cit., p. 150.

¹³ (Regarding *Marienbad*, see below.) “...the black-and-white checkered floor of a large entrance hall that was cluttered with several pieces of broken statuary (a naked wood nymph missing her right arm, a headless hunter, a horse with no legs that floated above a stone plinth with an iron shaft connected to its belly)... a dimly lit corridor whose walls were decorated with a series of small landscape paintings... Flower and Stone were both dressed in white summer suits” (Auster, op. cit., p. 68).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁹ See above,

²⁰ Auster, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

²¹ Ibid., p. 63.

²² Ibid., p. 6.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 209.

³¹ Ibid., p. 140.

³² Ibid., p. 205.

³³ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 193f.

³⁷ See below,

³⁸ Auster, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-198.

³⁹ Even amidst the damaged goods of Tiffany, their one-night stairway to the stars, Nashe “admired the kid for making the girl laugh so hard, for loving life so much at that moment that he was able to draw out what was still alive in her” (Ibid., p.157).