

# Frontier and Urban Writing in *Moon Palace*\*

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In *Moon Palace*, on the surface, there are loosely unbelievable adventurous experiences of three generations, but at depth, it examines the wild west and urban civilization and their roles in American history as initiator of the myths of the frontier and the urban progress. In this novel, Auster uncovers how American history and myth of frontier are constructed by describing the wildness and Auster reflects and criticize urban civilization by depicting the cities.

*Keywords:* *Moon Palace*, frontier, urban civilization

## I. Introduction

The conquest of wildness and expansion of frontier results in the rise and prosperity of city. As Richard Lehan argues, “The close of frontier ended a way of life, locking America into urban powers” (Richard Lehan, 1998, p. 193). Lehan points out that the difference lies in the historical origin of city between in America and Europe, “In Europe, the city had to define itself against its medieval origins and the transformations from feudalism; in America, against the wildness and the frontier experience” (Richard Lehan, 1998, p. 167). In America, encountering the frontier meant encountering the wildness, wildness is the source of frontier spirit. In many interpretations of Auster’s novels, critics pay too much attention to his postmodern narrative as something overt, including the use of metafiction, intertextuality, indeterminacy, etc. However, *Moon Palace*, Paul Auster’s fourth novel which is published in 1989, turns to city and the history of frontier, especially with his novels involved in city, *City of Glass* (1985), *The New York Trilogy* (1987) and *Brooklyn Follies* (2005). As Varvogli argues that “it is the first work in which the author engages in questions pertaining to American history and mythology” (Varvogli, 2001, p. 124). Since *Moon Palace*, the American West frontier occupies an outstanding part in some of his novels, such as *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), *The Book of Illusions* (2002), and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006).

## II. The Heritage of Frontier-Conquest

The term “WILDERNESS” goes through a long and partially contradictory process, in which the word works as an adjective, although it’s a noun. Wilderness is so heavily loaded with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist easy definition. Until the second part of nineteenth century, wilderness remained as a fought and feared place, where the “wild” native needs to be “civilized”, humanity is “an alien presence”. Even in early and medieval Christianity, wilderness was taken as the earthly field of the evil powers which needs to be

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overcome with the Church.

Even today's dictionaries define wilderness as uncultivated, alien, inhospitable, and otherwise undeveloped, threatening and mysterious land, where full of wild animals, but with the absence of men. The word also refers to other non-human environments where a person feels lost, confused and with the absence of guidance. By the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, an appreciable attitude extended to the idea of wilderness's beauty, which is promoted with Romanticism with the idea that wilderness is friendly, beautiful and capable of delighting and elevating the beholder with aesthetic values. American appreciation of wilderness is driven by the idea of the Promised Land and the cause of God, at least, not primarily for aesthetic values, romantic enthusiasm was a cover.

In the Bible, "wildness" is given a symbolic concept with its important position. The rise of the city also endows "wildness" with a symbolic concept. In recent urban studies, "new wilderness" is used to designate metropolitan areas, implying the feelings how the modern man feel unsafe and feared in cities as they once felt in the wilderness with wild beasts.

The debt American thought and culture owed to wilderness is noted with the works of Turner's "frontier thesis", in which the influence of wildness on the development of American traits is well interpreted. Turner declared, "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.", "we note that the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people"<sup>1</sup>, Turner argued that the frontier not only made the American different from the European but better.

Wilderness was indispensable to pioneering: without frontier, the concepts of pioneer and wildness were pointless. Pioneering, in short, came to be taken as important not only for spearheading the advance of civilization but also for bringing Americans the spirit of being a pioneer nation. Fogg's story, to some extent, is a record of journey of discovery; the young protagonist sets about a quest for his own identity, as well as for his country's identity and the two quests are often hard to separate.

*Moon Palace*, brimming with references to American historical events, should be read within a specific historical context. The novel spans three generations, covering most of the twentieth century. From the very outset of the novel, Auster achieves the effect that set the background in specific historical time with important events in America's history related to the narrator's story, which becomes the story of his times.

The protagonist's full name, Marco Stanley Fogg, is symbolic with his and his country's identity, and history, which reveals his thirst for voyages of discovery and is well expounded by his uncle:

Uncle Victor... never tired of expounding on the glories hidden in my name... Marco, naturally enough, was for Marco Polo, the first European to visit China; Stanley was for the American journalist who had tracked down Dr Livingstone 'in the heart of darkest Africa'; and Fogg was for Phileas, the man who had stormed around the globe in less than three months... (Auster, 1990, pp. 6-7)

Fogg's identity is constructed with the names of famous people who are connected with the history, it

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from Turner's paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". A paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, July 12, 1893. It first appeared in the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, December 14, 1893.

implies that Fogg can form his identity and write his own history as his country does. He is also a MS means that he is a page of the history.

Turner argues, "The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West" (*Significance of the Frontier* 1). At the beginning, the New World was wilderness at the time of discovery because Europeans considered it such. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the west of north American become the frontier of east coast of the nation, "frontier" became more and more American. The ending of the frontier on the continent lead to the outer space: the moon as the last frontier. To appreciate the value of wilderness began in the cities. Auster explains: "First there's Columbus, then there was the discovery of the West, then finally there is outer space: the moon as the last frontier" (Auster, 1993, p. 317). Auster may not expect that the word "last" has not the meaning of last, the moon may not be the last frontier. In the novel, the ultimate frontier, the three generations, Effing, Barber, and Fogg, try to explore is the inner frontier geography by reconstructing their self-identity by way of narrating their traveling stories in the wildness.

### III. Exodus from the City

In the *Old Testament*, the wildness appears to be the antipode of the Garden of Eden where Edam and Eve are relieved of the hard working for survival and any kinds of worries. However, in Auster's *Moon Palace*, the city appears to be the antipode of the Garden of Eden, the characters, such as Fogg's uncle, his grandpa and himself flee the city to the wildness to pursue something lacking in the city. The story of the *Exodus* is embedded into western culture and the idea that going to the wildness for freedom, inspiration and redemption is reflected in *Moon Palace*.

After being saved by Zimmer and Kitty Wu who later became his girlfriend, Fogg finds a job as live-in company for an elderly blind gentleman, Thomas Effing, who proves to be Fogg's grandfather. Effing's running away to the west frontier is accompanied with his hostile attitude towards urban civilization. It is the early years of 1920s that Effing lived, in which time the science and technology developed quickly. Effing sensed the changes brought by the "progress", "that was a long time ago, and things moves on, as they say. Progress. The bungalows and tract houses have taken over, every nitwit drives his own car. Hallelujah" (Auster, 1990, p. 166). Two scientists, Edison, Tesla who invented the electricity is the object of Effing's contempt and irony. In 1893, when Effing was a kid, his father took him to Chicago to see the Columbian Exposition, which was to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, "bring out all the gadgets and inventions and show them how clever our scientists were" (Auster, 1990, p. 168). Tesla became some prophet of the future age, people made all sorts of speculations about Tesla, the most outrageous bit of nonsense is that "it wasn't possible that he could be human. He had been born on another planet Venus... There's a cult out in California today that worships Tesla as an extraterrestrial" (Auster, 1990, p. 168). In contrast, the second time Effing saw Tesla, "The one-time genius from outer space, the hero of my youth. He was nothing but a broken-down old man now, a bum" (Auster, 1990, p. 168). When Effing gave Tesla ten-dollar bill, "I'll never forget the confusion in that son of bitch's eyes" (Auster, 1990, p. 169). On the other hand, The World's Fair had just started when Effing and his servant arrived back in New York in 1939, 1940. "Another hymn to progress, but it didn't do much for me this time not after what I'd seen in Europe. It was all a sham. Progress was going to blow us up" (Auster, 1990, p. 169).

In contrast to this, the West wildness, as the natural scenery and the real world, has become a place to pursue the ideal. After a couple of months in the cave, Effing found a strength that had never been present in any of his other work, he continues to paint, it lasted for two and a half months, and in that time, he managed to finish nearly forty canvases. “without any question, he told me, it was the happiest period of his life” (Auster, 1990, p. 170). At the same time, Effing’s aesthetic view changed, Effing’s new aesthetics might be served as a proof that there is a link between wilderness and the creative process, and wildness is vital to fresh thinking.

As will be readily seen, in the eyes of Victor, city is a symbol of sophistication, and the wild symbol of innocence and simplicity and has the significance of Revelation, Victor expects a mythical American frontier where he may fulfil his dreams. The wild where he has not yet paid a visit hold the promise of a promising future. The western view on the postcard uncle sent brought him the experience of western journey, “Rocky Mountain sunsets, publicity shots of roadside motels, cactus plants and rodeos, dude ranches, ghost towns, desert panoramas” (Auster, 1990, p. 5), which meets the need of Fogg’s curiosity for western frontier. Thus, the American continent was transformed into “a vast danger zone, a perilous nightmare of traps and mazes” (Auster, 1990, p. 7), which poses the contrast with the myth of the west.

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche says: “Believe me! The secret of reaping the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously” (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 15). Fogg’s life view in *Moon Palace* echoes Nietzsche’s immortal line. At the beginning of the novel, Fogg says, “I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there” (Auster, 1990, p. 1). The first dangerous circumstance happened when he found his savings were down to zero, as a result of which he became homeless. In *New York Trilogy*, Auster presents the reader with the New York as a mysterious maze of city. In *Moon Palace*, Auster depicts New York with more direct realism to expose the shortcomings of the cities and question the American urban civilization.

Auster exposes the homogeneity and exclusivity of mainstream city building and place through Fogg’s experience as a homeless. On the first days of his wandering, Fogg is lured in by the air conditioning of the triple-feature movie theaters on Forty-second Street near Time Square. However, Fogg sees “New York’s derelict population seemed to be in attendance”, “There were drunks and addicts in there, men with scabs on their faces, men who muttered to themselves and talked back to the actors on the screen, men who snored and farted, men who sat there pissing in their pants” (Auster, 1990, p. 6). In contrast to this, Fogg sees people on holiday in Central Park where is a world of goodness and full of amusements.

At the same time, the city is full of starving people and waste of food. There is no doubt, Central Park can be taken as the core of the city and one of the most notable places in New York, the perfect place for Fogg to experience the “real” city. When the weather is good, enormous numbers of people came into the park, most of them had something to eat, “all manner of lunches and snacks, stuffing themselves to their hearts’ content. This inevitably led to waste, gargantuan quantities of discarded but edible food... Pizza crusts, fragments of hot dogs, the butt ends of hero sandwiches, partially filled cans of soda—the meadows and rocks were strewn with them, the trash bins were fairly bursting with the abundance” (Auster, 1990, p. 39).

Daniel Bell argues, “A city is not only a place but a state of mind, a symbol of a distinctive style of life whose major attributes are variety and excitement; a city also presents a sense of scale that dwarfs any single effort to encompass its meaning. To “know” a city, one must walk its streets” (Bell, 1976, p. 106). What Auster

tries to expose in the novel is the repression of people's personality and interpersonal indifference under the urban order. "a rigid protocol of behavior" and "a particular glaze that comes over the eyes of New Yorkers" clearly expresses the alienation and coldness between people in the city (Auster, 1990, p. 34).

During the day, the city becomes an ordered place. However, when night falls, the city is transformed into a hazardous place, Fogg encounters many dangers, most of them he can manage to run away from, but others have a more menacing air to them.

In the homeless wandering in New York, Fogg discovers another side of the city, one of whose existence he had been unaware of, "This was New York, but it had nothing to do with the New York I had always known. It was devoid of associations" (Auster, 1990, p. 56). Even when Fogg drifted in Central Park, he thought his behavior was a challenge to the American ways of thinking. Auster explores the paradox: on the one hand, the city is full of people with an order, on the other hand, there is a gap of the alienation and coldness between them; on the one hand, there is an abundance of material, on the other hand, many people are starving and short of clothes. All of this experience paves the way for Fogg to leave New York to go to the frontier.

This novel is the first in which Author engages in theme pertaining to city and frontier, and the first to be involved in an exclusive examination of American history and mythology. As his name, Marco Stanley Fogg, implies that his life is full of invention with identity and discovery of his own artistic sensibilities, Fogg, an artist as a young man, finally reaches the ocean, his real and metaphorical journeys come to an end and finally found his own identity as the moon found its place in the darkness.

#### IV. Mythology of Frontier and Urban Civilization

In *Moon Palace*, Auster submits non-narrative art to the critique of frontier spirit and urban civilization, and its representative works are taken from American landscape painting. In the middle of nineteenth century, American landscape painting was fully prepared to embrace the American wilderness. In this novel, a repeated image that interrupts the narrative is the name of a Chinese restaurant, Moon Palace, from which the novel is entitled and with which Blakelock's painting *Moonlight* is connected. The repeated images interrupt the plot to manifest Auster's attitude toward frontier spirit and urban civilization.

In order to prepare his obituary writing, Effing asks Fogg to go to the Brooklyn Museum to visit Blakelock's painting *Moonlight*. Fogg tried to put Effing out of his mind, Fogg first sees that the earth and the sky have been painted in green, the same color when in the real world "how could the sky be green?", he didn't want to make any wild, symbolic judgments, but the evidence of the painting leads him to think that this was to emphasize the harmony and show the connection between heaven and earth in which Indians had inhabited until the whites with their violent ideas of civilization, progress and the misconception of the American frontier spirit:

It struck me that Blakelock was painting an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it... this picture was meant to stand for everything we had lost. It was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world. (Auster, 1990, p. 139)

Here, Auster is calling attention to us that American mythology of frontier and ideology of progress and expansion are based on the cruel facts: the destruction of the world inhabited by natives, and if we do not deconstruct the myths of frontier and ideology of expansion and to try to re-understand them, we would make the same kind of mistakes as in Vietnam war and other war, like anti-terror war. Fogg recognizes the painting of

the west as an idyll, it is an idealized perspective, rather than the actual world Native Indians inhabited before the puritans settled on the land. Therefore, here, Auster questions the myth of frontier as a vanishing world, which has been destroyed under the wheels of an obsessively lineal narrative of progress and urban civilization. As Auster says, the moon acts as “repetition, the cyclical nature of human experience. There are three stories in the book, and each one is finally the same. Each generation repeats the mistakes of the previous generation. So it’s also a critique of the notion of progress” (González, 2011, p. 8). If *Moonlight*’s part as crux to understanding *Moon Palace* has already been interpreted, it is high time to analyze *Kepler’s Blood*’s similar function.

## V. Conclusion

On the whole, all the stories about the West is to deconstruct the West mythology, the history of U.S.A., to reveal that it is just a myth, an artistic creation. As Tim Woods stresses, in *Moon Palace*, “meditation on the American ideology of progress and expansion, especially as it was figured and represented in the settlement of the American wilderness” (Woods, 1995, p. 145). Auster points out this through Effing, when he told his story to Fogg, the west is always a symbol, “physical aspects... and its social aspects as expressive emblems for the invention and development of a new national civilization” (Fussell, 1965, p. 13), as Effing says, “Manifest Destiny! They mapped it out, they made pictures of it, they digested it into the great American profit machine” (Auster, 1990, p. 149).

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