

(But we know that one cannot sustain this, we know...). (Lyotard 1993: 72-73)

Lolita is Humbert's phantasm. She is his product and she is the excess of that production. While he hopes to control the means of his production, the product escapes his grip, renders him passive to its impossibility, and its dissimulatory power. The narrative can offer neither the calming succour of return to the same (equivalence), nor redemption through eschatological mimicry (full signification). The story of Lolita cannot be Humbert's manifesto. But the name, the name "Lolita," has been set off into the world. She is a good intensity-conducting body. Through her, however unknowingly, Humbert has "set dissimulation to work on behalf of intensities" (Lyotard 1993: 262). The Lolita that Humbert thinks he has invented is the signifying Lolita. The libidinal Lolita veers off wildly, unconstrained and unchecked, headless, homeless. Humbert has invented nothing, that's it, yes, yes, yes, yes.

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### DIRE STRAITS: PAUL AUSTER'S *THE MUSIC OF CHANCE* AND THE ECONOMIC LOSS

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This essay focuses on the relationship of writing to economy as it has been elaborated by Derrida, Bataille and others. It discusses Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance* in light of these theories of expenditure and discourse, that is, as a text which thematically and "structurally" foregrounds gambling. It also shows how economic risk is represented in the novel as a subversive mode of exchange against the dominant economy, both in discursive as well as in monetary terms.

### Introduction

In his essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss brought the potlatch and the broader notion of gift exchange economics to the attention of Western scholars (Mauss 1950). This form of exchange is one aspect of "premodern" economics, and constitutes a mode of expenditure that is radically different from what is often referred to as modern economics. According to Mauss, the potlatch typifies the gift-exchange economy and it is the oldest economic system of which we have knowledge. The potlatch, writes Mauss, is based on the lavish expenditure of surplus wealth "often at pure loss with tremendous extravagance and without a trace of mercenariness" (Mauss 1950: 70). And because gift or premodern economic systems are based on unrestricted and seemingly open expenditure they fail to conform to the "so-called *natural* economy of utilitarianism" (*ibid.*, my italics). In a perfectly contained utilitarian economic system as opposed to a "premodern" one, surplus wealth would be continuously recuperated as a product and reabsorbed back into a balanced system without waste or loss. Importantly, this form of economic rationalism reflects the principle of individual interest, so that circulation writ large becomes a catachresis for the circulation of material wealth through the "body politick." This said, however, Mauss points out that such a perfectly balanced system has never existed, and that lavish expenditure is always there as a disruptive presence in the form of activities such as gaming.

The sort of utilitarian economic theory and practice to which Mauss reacts in *The Essay on the Gift*, was probably most systematically and

expansively set down in the work of Jeremy Bentham. The basic tenet of Bentham's utilitarianism is that pleasure and pain exist in direct economic relation to one another and must be regulated by the principle of utility. In this way the utility of human actions, most importantly expenditure, is measured in terms of the augmentation or diminution of the happiness of the party whose interest is in question. Of course, the notion of individual interest in Bentham's writing has its constant counterpart in monetary interest. This is very much Bentham's concern in *The True Alarm: A View of Paper Money*, and more particularly "money given for evanescent services" such as singing, dancing, prostitution and gaming (Bentham 1805: 14). Understandably, while the above activities may augment human pleasure and diminish pain they have no intrinsic utility and they therefore, elude systems bent on the control and recirculation of capital. This is why gaming adventures fall within Bentham's "Division of Offences," while lotteries are condoned as a less "burthensome" mode of taxation, provided that "personal expenditure amounts to no more than a percentage of the yield" (*ibid.*: 536). In the utilitarian scheme of things, it is hoped that lotteries can be regulated by the state to channel money back into the system, thus preventing individuals who are wont to gamble from losing large sums of money in unauthorised activities such as card playing.

According to Mauss however, unrestricted (and often illegal) gambling is a modern manifestation of the potlatch and, therefore, a distinct form of expenditure. It is the distinct character of the wager that Bataille takes up in "*La notion de dépense*," and which further constitutes the grounding concept of expenditure in *La part maudite*. Bataille's principle of loss and unproductive expenditure is typified by games, arts, and perverse sexual activities, that is to say, those aspects of life for which we are not compensated by directly proportional acquisition. Hence, because gambling has no apparent utility, it is a luxury similar to art, literature, and forms of debauchery and play that are of little or no value to the utilitarian. Importantly, in the case of gamblers, the orgiastic release of loss is often highly disproportionate to their means, and is frequently linked to an unconscious attraction to death. This Bataille refers to as the "delirium of ritual poker," or the loss of agency experienced by the addicted gambler (*ibid.*: 367).

Finally, Derrida takes Mauss and Bataille one step further in the direction of writing in his *Writing and Difference*. In the chapter entitled "From Restricted to General Economy," Derrida picks up the link between "potlatch" activities, and arts and literature, focussing on poetic writing as the negative expenditure of signs, a celebration of transgression and excess. "It is the poetic or ecstatic element in every discourse which opens itself up to the absolute loss of sense, the un-knowledge of playfulness, the swoon of the throw of the dice" (Derrida 1978: 261). In fact, the very stock-in-trade of poetic writing in this view is

indeterminacy, and unproductive expenditure, hence it is impossible to subsume literature or ludic writing in a restricted economy of discourses, where it is wrongly assumed that the free play of the signifier has been halted and little is left to chance.

### *The Music of Chance*

In light of these provisional theoretical comments, I would now like to turn to Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*, a novel about poker playing, accountancy, and extravagant losses of fortune. Interestingly enough however, it is also a novel about restrained expenditure and careful book-keeping. In what follows I will argue that, because this narrative is haunted by death and loss, it functions, to quote Derrida once again, as "a potlatch of signs that consumes and wastes words in the gay affirmation of death" (1978: 274). This is a fitting description *The Music of Chance*, an open ended and undecidable novel that produces a surplus of sense, which cannot be accounted for if one attempts to understand it as a restrictive discursive economy.

To briefly recount the plot of *The Music of Chance*: Jim Nashe, the novel's protagonist unexpectedly inherits a large sum of money from his father whom he has not seen for thirty years. Nashe buys a new car, and for the next year drives back and forth across America waiting for his money to run out. When he has spent all but his last fifteen thousand dollars, he chances to pick up Jack Pozzi, a professional poker player who is down on his luck but knows about a sure-thing game with Flower and Stone, supposedly a "couple of simpletons" who are also multimillionaires. Flower and Stone, a former accountant and optometrist, became millionaires in the state lottery, and have been thoroughly infantilised by their winnings, which it is hoped will make them an easy mark. Hearing this, Jim decides to put up ten thousand dollars as a "business expense," banking on the chance that he will win enough money to enable him to keep travelling.

When Pozzi and Jim meet up with the millionaires they discover that Flower and Stone have eccentric hobbies which involve the building of model utopias. While Stone's utopia, which he calls the City of the World, is a tiny synchronic model of a world where Good has triumphed over Evil, Flower's is a sort of museum, a random collection of items such as Woodrow Wilson's telephone, Sir Walter Raleigh's pearl earring, Voltaire's spectacles, and Babe Ruth's sweatshirt. What is more, Flower and Stone have a project they are waiting to begin which will satisfy both their shared need to build models and to conserve the past: they have bought the ruin of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Irish castle and intend to build a wall with the ten thousand remaining stones of the ruined castle

which they have imported to the United States. Unfortunately, however, Flower and Stone are not quite the ludicrous Laurel and Hardy pair they appear to be. Since their first meeting with Pozzi at which he fleeced them, they have prepared for this poker game by taking lessons from a professional poker player named Sid Zeno. The outcome is that Flower and Stone's lessons pay off substantially: Jim and Pozzi lose the initial 10 thousand, plus an additional ten thousand, including Jim's car. They agree to stay on the estate and build Flower and Stone's wall from the ruin in order to pay off their debt, however, in the process Pozzi is beaten to death for trying to escape, and Jim kills himself by driving headlong into an oncoming vehicle.

At the outset, *The Music of Chance* appears to be a novel about symmetry and balance or the "economy of exchange" as Nashe calls it (Auster, 1990, 11). To give just one example, Jim observes that the inheritance money buys him freedom and disappears in direct proportion to how much freedom he has. In other words, the money is the rigid signifier of Nashe's inner state with which, in the terms of Bentham's restrictive economics, he purchases pleasure and avoids pain. This would indeed be a perfect model of the circulation of wealth in a closed economic system if Nashe could somehow recuperate the money he spends as a source of income. But given Jim's somewhat odd relation to money, it is not surprising that he decides to back a professional poker player as a business investment, nor that he would refer to the proper business attire which he buys Pozzi for the game as "a normal business expense" (57). Pozzi is, after all, a professional card player and poker is his career, or as he explains it to Jim:

"No that's it, I just play poker."

"So you do all right for yourself."

"Yeah, I do all right... there's never been anything I couldn't handle. The main thing is I do what I want. If I lose it's my ass that loses. If I win the money's mine to keep. I don't have to take shit from anyone. I'm my own boss." (32)

In other words, Pozzi is in business for himself and his profession is no more risky than any other that involves investment and speculation. Or as he explains in another passage, "[s]ure there's a risk. We're talking poker here... but there's no way I could [lose]" (30). And this seems to be standard poker logic since, according to Herbert O. Yardley, one of the great poker authorities and the man who cracked the Japanese Diplomatic Code, "[a] sound poker player can win in any poker game" (51). Yet if the notion of a 'professional poker player' seems like something of an oxymoron, that's because it is one of sorts. Recall that Derrida, Bataille and Mauss whom I cited in the introduction, all refer to gambling and card playing as prime examples of potlatch or premodern economics. And three writers forward the notion that premodern economics and

various other forms artistic expenditure, persistently resurface like something that has been forgotten, and refuses to be re-absorbed into a restrictive economic system. Hence, the kind of exuberant loss and spending that accompanies card playing cannot be government regulated and does not simply behave. In fact all of the taxes and interdictions that have been levied against playing cards over the centuries, have not prevented people from loosing their shirts, nor have they ultimately provided governments with an additional source of revenue.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Pozzi and Jim wrongly assume that poker playing belongs to a larger restrictive economic system like state-run lotteries, that the poker game is a calculated risk for the professional poker player and his backer, and that they will indeed come out ahead.

The result of the game however, is that Jim and Pozzi are left with absolutely nothing, and then become further indebted to the tune of ten thousand dollars. Or as Stone says "We've hit that magic number again" (104). And this is no minor detail: along with their other charming eccentricities Flower and Stone lay great stock by the "magic power of numbers," insisting as they do that "numbers have a soul" or that prime numbers "refuse to co-operate" (73). So given their preoccupation with numbers it is interesting that, when Flower tells the story of their choosing the winning number in the lottery that made them millionaires, a good deal of attention is given to the holes which were punched out on their winning ticket, the holes in fact that turn the numbers on the card into zeros. And there's that magic number again; in fact *The Music of Chance* is riddled with zeros and holes, gaping mouths and empty eye sockets, or as Pozzi says "[y]our mouth will drop open and I'll make your eyes fall out of your fucking head" (35).

Certainly, as the arguments around zero and the annotation of the millennium year made evident, zero is no simple matter. The concept of zero has bewildered and fascinated Western minds since Al-Khowarazmi's treatise on the cipher was translated from the Arabic into Latin circa 1320.<sup>2</sup> And the power of nothing, of zero, to increase ten fold rather than to make other numbers disappear, still amazed and mystified Shakespeare three centuries later, as numerous mentions of the cipher in plays such as *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* would attest (recall the riddle of the egg and of nothing told to King Lear by his Fool). And another three centuries later, in the Weimar Republic, German doctors coined the name "zero stroke" or "cipher stroke" for people who could not cope with fantastic currency figures, and who were perfectly normal save for their maniacal compulsion to "write endless rows of ciphers" (Rotman 1987: 23; see also Galbraith 1975: 159). More recently in "The Father of Logos" Derrida

<sup>1</sup> For extensive records of taxes on cards, see Benham. Cf. also Crespi (1956).

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Menninger (1958: 410-413).

mentions the cipher in connection with an ibis' egg in an Egyptian myth about Theuth (or Thoth) the divinity of Naucratis "who first invented numbers and calculation... not to mention draughts and dice, and above all writing" (1981: 75). Here, while the egg is the origin it is also hidden, and it is the hidden egg which stands for nothing, yet at the same time opens up the system of writing to the possibility of signification.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, in *The Music of Chance* zeros congregate around Pozzi. For Nashe, Pozzi is "a hole in the wall that would get him from one side to the other... a card-playing spectre" (36). When they first meet, Pozzi jokingly tells Jim that his identification number in the International Brotherhood of Lost Dogs is "zero, zero, zero, zero" (62). And elsewhere throughout the text Pozzi is described as a cipher and a nothing but more specifically it is observed more than once that, like Hamlet's ghost, Pozzi could disappear before one could count to one hundred (170, 176). Moreover, just before Pozzi is beaten to death he and Jim dig a hole under the fence that encloses the field where they are building the wall. Jim tells him "[...] crawl through that hole and be on your way," to which Pozzi replies "You afraid of holes or something?" (165, 166).<sup>4</sup> And of course Pozzi is responsible for their initial encounter with zero in the poker game and the rest of the debt, he being the professional poker player who lost all of Jim's money.

But in spite of the zeros, Pozzi is also the source of all possibility and activity in *The Music of Chance*. He creates the debt, but then the debt is translated into the wall, which is ultimately the story line of the novel. This is why Pozzi is also significantly called a wild card, a jester, and a joker. In an actual deck of fifty-two, the joker is the one card that holds the potential to take on the value of any other card by mimicking it. More importantly, the joker in the deck opens up the system of signification to infinite possibility precisely because this card also represents nothing. I noted earlier that the cipher was introduced into Europe from Egypt around 1320, not long before playing cards, known in folk wisdom as the Book of Thoth, also found their way into Europe.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "If we add that this egg is also a 'hidden egg,' then we shall have constituted but also opened up the system of these significations" (Derrida 1981: 88).

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is probably not entirely without significance that Pozzi is the plural of the word for pit or well in Italian.

<sup>5</sup> Some claim that the first reference to cards in European history occurs in a Catalan epistle from 1331 or 1332, however this is difficult to ascertain since the "Golden Epistles" of Guevara are extant only in translations, the first of which is dated 1539 (Chatto *Facts and Speculations on the Origin of Playing Cards* (London: John Russell Smith) 1848: 66). There is a record of an ordinance decreed in 1387 by Juan I of Castile against the use of playing cards and in the *Istoria della Città di Viterbo* of 1379 the following entry occurs which makes specific reference to card games: "Non

Coincidentally, the fool or the joker on the earliest 14<sup>th</sup>-century playing cards bore the mark of the cipher and carried the value of zero. It then came to be customary that in the closed system of four suits of thirteen cards bearing fixed values, the inclusion of a wild card whose value is variably determined, has the potential to throw open the gates of possibility. Or, as Derrida writes "a joker is a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play... [a]lways taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy (*le mort*)" (1981: 93).

Another important feature of both zeros and jokers is that they mysteriously multiply, making more something out of nothing. So while Pozzi represents an increase in possibilities, he also signifies a state of complete loss and debt. It is the wild card, the fool, the cipher, who opens up the text, the game, and Jim's life to possibility and signification, but he is also that which produces a state of absolute loss and death. This is poetically expressed in *The Winter's Tale* as Polixenes asserts that "standing in rich place, [he] multipl[ies], with one we thank-you many thousands more" (I, 2: 345).

But that said, there appears to be a delightful symmetry between the gambling debt and the wall: Jim and Pozzi are paid ten dollars per hour to work ten hours a day building a wall of ten rows of a thousand stones until they pay off a debt of ten thousand dollars. The wall then, amounts to a sort of primitive balance sheet in stone, a daily lesson in double ledger accountancy arranged for by Flower and Stone. And because the scheme is the invention of an accountant, it fits the crime most aptly: "it's a fair punishment that [has] some educational value to it" (105). Logically then, Jim and Pozzi should be able to free themselves of indenture in fifty days, and walk away from the wall, having learned a valuable lesson about fiscal responsibility and personal debt.

However, as is the case with all the other plus and minus relationships in the text which are assumed to be perfectly balanced, there is always something that cannot be accounted for, something written in the margins of the ledger. For just when Jim and Pozzi assume that they have cleared their debt, they discover that the terms of their agreement did not cover celebratory expenditure, monies paid for the ephemeral services of a prostitute and the costs of a lavish party. They are now re-indentured for the sum of 3,000.00 and are forced to realise that they are stuck in a Sisyphus story: the most Jim and Pozzi can hope for is to be "back to zero," because the longer they work at the wall the more personal debt they will accumulate (149).

giuocare a zara, nè ad altor giuoco di dadi, fa de' giuochi che usano i fanciuli; agli aliossi, alla trottola, n'ferri, a'naibi, a'coderone, e simili" ("Cronica di Giovan Morelli," in Malespini. 1728. *Istoria Fiorentina*. 4 vols. Florence. 270. Cited in Chatto. 1848: 73. See also Parlett 1992: 36).

Of course this hardly seems fair, but then one must not forget that Flower and Stone prepared for the big game by taking poker lessons from a man named Sid Zeno. This name, given Paul Auster's penchant for intertextual puns and his predilection for play on proper names, is perhaps Auster's way of dealing the reader another card. Zeno, for example, is removed from zero by only the phoneme "n," a letter which in mathematical expressions stands in for other numbers, like a joker. And the name Zeno instantly brings to mind the two famous paradoxes. First there is the one about Parmenides never being able to catch the tortoise, because by the time he reaches the tortoise it will have advanced, however little. This paradox is of course analogous to Jim and Pozzi's debt and the impossibility of clearing it or finishing the wall.

The second is the "Cretan Liar: all Cretans are liars and I am from Crete," or in this case "all poker players are cheaters and I'm a poker player." Coincidentally, the realisation that Flower and Stone have cheated comes to Jim and Pozzi at just about the same time they realise that they have become part of Stone's model utopia, The City of the World. Pozzi and Nashe are ostensibly being reformed in the city because here everything is controlled by a single impulse for Good. So, to borrow briefly from Lyotard's *Just Gaming*, Flower and Stone control both metastatements and first order statements, therefore judgement is no longer a process, it is predetermined and the resulting order, rather than good is violence and totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if you could have Zeno's paradox both ways, all poker players would be cheaters as a general and a specific rule and they would already be cheating by telling you this, but then who cares if you are the one calling all the shots? Or, as Pozzi puts it so succinctly "[t]he whole world is run by assholes," and that is cheating (135).

Significantly, it is precisely cheating that informs the narrative economy of the novel, throughout which Auster makes self-conscious and devious use of intertexts as a dangerous supplement. The bits and pieces of Faulkner, Nashe, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Dickens, Blake, Joyce, and Coleridge that persistently surface recall Flower's museum where Voltaire's spectacles and Hawthorne's cane are displayed side by side. This method of random citation gives the impression that the text, as well as the events recounted in it, depend on "the single blind turn of a card," to quote Auster quoting Faulkner (202). Moreover, when Auster tells the episode of the tree from Rousseau's *Confessions*, where Rousseau cheats himself in his own wager by picking the biggest tree he can find, Auster in turn cheats by altering Rousseau's text and getting the story wrong. But as Derrida points out in "The Father of Logos" it is falsification, trickery, and deception, that cheat the system of discourse and open it up to the play of possibilities.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the chapter entitled "Politics and Ethics" in Readings (1991).

### Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, I would argue that *The Music of Chance* ends in absolute negativity and loss as Nashe accelerates into an oncoming vehicle, at once celebrating death and turning it into spectacle. As Bataille wrote "for man finally to be revealed to himself he would have to die... death itself would become self-conscious" and this is what Nashe's suicide accomplishes, it is the final recognition of the total expenditure of the self, the orgiastic enjoyment of absolute loss or negativity (cited in Derrida 1978: 257). I have pointed out as well that this is a novel obsessed with numbers, and balanced accounts, but in spite of this obsession with conservation and the symmetrical recoverability of wealth, Nashe observes that the whole thing functions as an "engine of loss" (17). This would concur with the Derridian notion that there is always a hole in any text, through which a surplus of meaning will escape no matter how carefully one attempts to control the discursive economy.

To further illustrate my point, I would like to conclude with an example from Bentham's *The True Alarm*, a treatise on the importance of restrictive economic measures in the face of public debt and the inflation of zeros caused by the overproduction of paper currency which has been liberated from gold bullion. Bentham writes: "It is easier to make something out of nothing," which his editor insists is obviously a "slip of the pen," and adds in a footnote that "it is easier to use little to make more... is sure to express Bentham's thoughts" (III: 156). Hence, even a text whose entire purpose is to discuss controlled economic measures and which assumes itself a closed system is also haunted by zeros and nothing. It would appear then, following Derrida's "From Restrictive to General Economy," that a potlatch of signs is at work in any discursive economy, so that in the *recounting* of the tale one always comes up with a little spare change.

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## REVOLUTIONIST CONSUMERS: THE APPLICATION OF SACRIFICE IN RUSKIN, BATAILLE AND HENRY JAMES

JESSICA MAYNARD

In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin saw nobility in the redundancy and imperfection of gothic architecture. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille identifies "intimacy" in the surplus, supererogatory aspect of a medieval cathedral. Both see a resistance to values of economic utility in aesthetic productions that have no use, that bring no tangible profit, and that seem to absorb effort and labour unproductively. With reference to Henry James's novel *The Princess Casamassima*, this essay examines the relationship between Victorian and twentieth-century, as well as continental and Anglo-American, accounts of the role of sacrifice and consumption in challenging capitalist modernity. Using the perspectives provided by Ruskin and Bataille, seemingly very distinct thinkers, but drawing attention to Bataille's often ignored background in medievalist scholarship, this essay argues that James's novel blurs a distinction between political and aesthetic experience. Ultimately, it identifies gratuitous expenditure as the only effective riposte to a culture which even threatens to commodify and "consume" political revolution itself.

In March 1886, Henry James took up residence in new rooms in Kensington, West London, describing the place in a letter to his brother as "excellent in every respect... and, in particular, flooded with light like a photographer's studio." He went on to praise the panoramic views of the city that the location afforded — "I commune with the unobstructed sky and have an immense bird's-eye view of housetops and streets" — and to remark that these natural advantages would be improved upon when "little by little I have got more things" (James 1980: 120).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, writing of Edward Burne-Jones later that year, James confessed to some difficulty in understanding the painter's way of life, "that is the manner and tenor of his production — a complete *studio* existence, with doors and windows closed, and no search for impressions outside — no open air, no real daylight and no looking out for it." Whilst James, in his lofty position, seemed to court the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to William James, 14 February 1886.