

Balthazar Too: Paul Auster's *Timbuktu*

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By the late 1990s, Auster was prepared to regroup the kinetic assets gracing *The New York Trilogy* in the (hidden) form of a demiurge-Auster, Frederick Austerlitz, aka Fred Astaire. After a decade of pressing the plausible but sickening case on behalf of self-promotional inertia (bathos) as the only way to meet world-historical exigencies of material and nonmaterial well-being, it was time to reopen the case of coherence between rising to carnal survival and rising to carnal cogency. *Timbuktu* (1999)¹, generally referred to as a short novel (a novella), stands in fact as a long poem in prose, in its task of putting through its paces with apposite *bravura* the primal composition of solitary and public historicity.

Having demonstrated in his poetry from the 1970s a productive reflection upon the warrior sensualism of Heraclitus, the novelist would stand ready to profit from kinesthetic phenomenality in his rediscovery of purchase upon a course of disclosure distinct from the appallment of clunkers like *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and *Leviathan* (1992). Doing justice to the dynamics of carnal consciousness entails appreciation of the latter's ambience of determinist materiality, whereby the override of human free intent comes to a quirky, workable kinship with the consciousness of the so-called lower animals. Confirming this field of investigation is *Timbuktu's* confident deployment of the quantum electrodynamic factor of polarization in an episode showing a dog, "Mr. Bones," falling asleep on a sidewalk in Baltimore with his terminally ill master, "Willy G. Christmas," and dreaming a foretaste of the latter's death, provided to himself as a fly (on the wall), within a rendition of the quantum physical outcome of a "many worlds" cascade to account for that individual choice which brings to presence a specific realm of facticity. There are more apt places to elucidate the physics of that kinesthetic field (the explication of *The New York Trilogy* in Clark, *Rather Have the Blues*², for instance). Here we merely provide the schema for the absorbing thematics being launched by a canine protagonist light years removed from *Beautiful Joe's Paradise*.

There is, then, an extraordinary leeway on behalf of examination of pristine love and its loyalty standing at risk (*au hasard*) from human personal and world historical corruption. Auster brings to bear a dog at this stage of his depictions, because he resolves to meet the frequently stressed enshrinement of bathos with a startling countermeasure of pathos as germane to social reality. In doing so he performs a clandestine consultation with initiatives in the world of film (including *Au Hasard Balthazar*) going to show in the worst possible light such well-meaning drivel as that spilling out of Mr. Bone's Santa daddy. Whereas Willy (Gurevitch) has been able to encompass inklings of Heraclitean dynamics—"How do we know that two is two? That's the real question"³---derived from Hippy/Punk/Junkie skepticism, within his capitulation to musings about lavish and utterly conventional humanitarianism—"That would be his mission in life from now on: to embody the message of Christmas every day of the year, to ask nothing from the world and give it only love in return"⁴—his puppy could evince no such devious agility of intent. And so the stage is set for an oblique pulverization of guileless love, and a probe of the solvency of courage.

Auster has an almost genetic implication in the instancing of such grace, and here it lies hidden in the name, "Mr. Bones." Readers of my *Rather Have the Blues* and *Parallel Lives and the Art of Convergence* will recall that *The New York Trilogy* is, to a large extent (unfortunately hidden in virtually incomprehensible allusion [absolutely incomprehensible to the filmically-bedridden literary world]), a Fred Astaire production. Later, in *The Music of Chance* (1990), Fred re-emerges as a sinister figure, "Stone," with a Ginger-like sidekick, "Flower." Later still, in *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), by way of jamming closed the Pandora's Box that way with movement represents, we find a psychopathic Uncle Slim a "chinless wonder." Now we come to Mr. Bones, redolent of "Mr. Bojangles of Harlem," a trope by Fred as "Lucky," in the 1936 film, *Swing Time*, which includes a strategic pretence of being hopeless as a dancer and holding onto Ginger as if she were a lamppost while slipping and sliding about. At the outset of *Timbuktu* we find Willy on his last legs, "clinging to a lamppost that foggy morning in Baltimore to prevent himself from falling."⁵ The transference of Fred's action to Willy bespeaks the full proportionality of the Astaire gambit as including the serenity-inducing catastrophe of the film noir, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Christmas is described as "a man in love with the sound of his own voice,"⁶ a bit like Christina (who, like Willy, knows mental hospitals from the inside) at the outset of the noir, who gets a lift from a taciturn—but, like Mr. Bones, by no means inarticulate—Mike Hammer, the film's unlikely arbiter of integrity. (Adding to the metaphorical mesh, Willy is seen to be heavily dependent on his "pack of Luckies."⁷)

Like Ginger, tutoring in song her clumsy dance student, Willy—much more concerned about tooting his own horn—declares, "I've always picked myself up and tried again."⁸ Resilience would be precisely the challenge facing Mr. Bones, about to become a stray after seven years of being peppered—not without affection—by a manic Santa Claus (who has left a special goody, his written *pensées*, in a Greyhound locker and wants to pass on the key to a

last hope, living somewhere in Baltimore) one of whose teachings was the concept of “Timbuktu,” a place to go after death, “an oasis of spirits.”⁹ This would be the pup’s *time* to *swing* away from all that, as best he could. Filling his best (and only) friend’s head with an ambition that he could speak and even write, given training and equipment, he touches upon the uninviting movie about Francis the talking mule,¹⁰ thereby inadvertently putting Mr. Bones on notice regarding his stake in the seriously ambitious Robert Bresson movie, *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966). The donkey carrying the ball for Bresson would also be glued up with reams of facile pieties, and somehow manage to rise above them. Therewith the drama of *Timbuktu* unfolds. On his own, starving, Mr. Bones soon succumbs to embarrassment and depression on failing to catch a pigeon, suggesting from the get-go that his would be a steep learning curve as to picking himself up. Then he confronts a gang of boys far less lethal than those to which Balthazar is thrown, and, showing how suffused he is with Willy’s regime of bathetic self-promotion, he tries to ingratiate himself by way of fetching stunts, to no avail. Also at this point, he discerns himself as “a thinking dog instead of an athletic dog”¹¹ (more an ascetic than a sensualist), caught up in calculative possibilities of love—“But that was the bargain, wasn’t it? The man gave you food and a place to sleep, and in return you gave him love and undying loyalty.”¹² “Now that Willy was gone, he would have to unlearn everything he knew and *start all over again* [my italics].”¹³

Thus begins an episodic pattern of more or less sterile and harmful encounters, reminiscent of the tribulations of Balthazar. Starving and missing Willy, “he filled his lungs with air and let out a long, mighty howl.”¹⁴ Whereas Balthazar’s braying was wildly joyous, Mr. Bones was mired in the blues. He is adopted by a kind Chinese boy and renamed *Cal*. Pampered (as was Balthazar, by his first mistress, who gave him his name) but made to hide out in a cardboard box in avoidance of Henry’s dog-hating father, Mr. Bones cherishes the boy’s tender caring, but has no regrets when forced to flee. As he tries to make sense of this shredded opportunity, he evinces some progress in painful innovation.

“Shutting up a soul in a dark box wasn’t right. That’s what they did to you after you were dead, but as long as you were alive, as long as you had some *kick* [my italics] left in you, you owed it to yourself and everything holy in this world not to submit to such indignities.”¹⁵

Counterpointing that breath of fresh air, he comes to a halt in *a meadow* (as Balthazar did) and in a dream he musters the following pseudo-grandness of gesture: “That’s my life, now, Willy. I run, and I’m going to keep on running until I drop.”¹⁶ That would swing things back to the nihilism of the suicide joggers of *In the Country of Last Things*. But taking heart from his dream’s “Willy” rallying him not to “give up on men”¹⁷ he plunges ahead and comes face to face with a “Tiger,” as Balthazar did and, likewise, finds some peace from that encounter. (Not so promisingly it must be noted he is braced by the supposition that Willy resides in Timbuktu.¹⁸) Tiger is a three year old boy, “pulling up clumps of grass and flinging them into the air,”¹⁹ in a backyard in suburban Virginia. (“Virginia” was the name of the most composed of the cast of characters of *In the Country of Last Things*.) At the end of Jacques Demy’s *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), a boy around Tiger’s age, romps in the snow tossing it about, after visiting Santa. That child had arrived in the aftermath of a relationship that dissolved due to a woman’s opting for a husband guaranteeing more ample material well-being than the snowy little one’s father could hope to provide. Back in Virginia, there is Tiger’s older sister, about the age of the canny woman’s daughter, fathered by the nonaffluent dad. And then their mother, “a great beauty [like Catherine Deneuve], one of those women who made men stop breathing the moment they walked into a room.”²⁰ She is “Polly” (perhaps Pollyanna) Jones, married to an airline pilot who (like the ever-sober Roland Cassard) “hates surprises.”²¹ The children and Polly lovingly welcome the starving, exhausted and filthy dog, but they know “Dick,” who drives a Volvo abhors disorder. The girl (who has recognized that if they don’t take him in, Mr. Bones will die) pleads, “We’ve just got to keep him Mama. I’ll get down on my knees and pray to Jesus for the rest of the day if it’ll make Daddy say yes.”²² Daddy does say yes; but in view of terms whereby the new arrival lives by his rules, being tethered to a dog run in the yard, as far as he knows. But there are also Polly’s rules—having the run of the house—when he’s jetting about. That Mr. Bones is hardly the antipode to Dick is twisted in by way of his recognizing a meeting of minds as to “this deep, irrational love of the lawn,”²³ the final twist being reference to “their greatest philosophical differences” in that Bones saw the lawn’s beauty as a gift from God while Dick saw it as entirely due to human effort—theism and humanism being in fact not significantly different at all. The three yes votes have named him “Sparky” (hearkening to the garage mechanic *la Deneuve* really loved but had to ditch for *la grande vie*). Bones hates that name for its being a suburban cliché, and he has to deal with the diminishment implicit in Dick’s greeting, “You’re not going to complain, are you? You know what you’ve *lucked* [italics added] into here, and the last thing you want is to rock the boat.”²⁴ Included in the new Cassard’s caseload is his getting “fixed” by a vet named Walter A. Burnside, a name ringing bells along a horizon ranging from Mike Hammer’s nemesis, G.E. Soberin to Virginia’s father, Dr. Woeburn.

Sparky could see that it was Polly who needed him most; but Polly drove a Plymouth Voyager, and the fix was in. She's on the phone a lot to a sister, "Peg," Peg being Uncle Slim's stout, trailer-trash consort in *Mr. Vertigo*. Bones' turmoil in the midst of this American Dream was particularly acute insofar as he came to wallowing in bathetic resentment. ("Had he walked to the ends of the earth and found this blessed haven only to be spat on by the people who had taken him in?")²⁵ Burnside's science being no better than Soberin's, Sparky comes down with post-surgery complications coinciding with the family's putting him in a kennel ("Dog Haven") while they go off to Disney World. He bolts away while being loaded into a car to take him to more surgery at Burnside's. (The previous night he had checked in with Willy in a feverish dream and heard himself scolded, "'You've turned yourself into a joke, a tired and disgusting joke.'"²⁶) On the run—thinking to catch up with the Joneses or at least make it to their deserted house—and nearly dead, he passes out in the woods, and on waking he feels an affinity with birds looking for food in the snow. "...for once he was able to look at them not as nuisances but as fellow creatures, members of the secret brotherhood."²⁷

That is about where Balthazar had died, free of resentment and bathos. But in the night Mr. Bones had dreamed of Willy's restored love for him, redolent of "strangeness and beauty...beyond the boundaries of hard fact...beginning in silence,"²⁸ and, moreover, he had ventured to imagine he was being told he would make it into Timbuktu by virtue of improved language skills (" 'And I'm in?/ 'You're in'"²⁹). He drags himself onto a highway, and, again like those suicide joggers, plays a game called "dodge-the-car."³⁰

"He ran toward the light, toward the glare and the roar that were rushing in on him from all directions. With any luck, he would be with Willy before the day was out."³¹

Though a hapless contestant, this protagonist amounts to significantly more than a heap of bones. Does Auster rest content with that *tour de force*? *Timbuktu* delivers a compelling sense of monstrous odds. It attains to rare pathos amidst a career comprising a floodway of toxic bathos. We can't say he hasn't upped the ante here. But has he found a way to obviate the axiom of fear, and its corollary that life is a dog's life? Balthazar touches us as a very quiet pitch-pipe for forward momentum. Does Mr. Bones? Both productions paint extremely vivid battle lines. Both usher us into cogent instances of love. Do *both* of them understand love as a far-reaching *power*?

That strike is palpable in the film's direct physicality. In *Timbuktu*, Auster has delivered a Chekhovian dividedness, that of Willy, in whom fear and greed sustain discreetly defensive egoity fertilized by technical prowess (of verbal articulation) extirpated from its carnal foundations. Not content with wallowing in crude ultimacy of self on the order of the "bowl of his own excrement"³² he was found (by his roommate, "a guy named Anster, Onster, something like that..."³³) gobbling down as a college boy en route to a psych ward, this master of me-ness had to fabricate a realm of violence toward all of finitudal primordiality, named, unwittingly, on the order of that generally slighted destination, "Timbuktu."

"Was Mr. Bones an angel trapped in the flesh of a dog? Willy thought so. After eighteen months of the most intimate, clear-eyed observations, he felt certain of it. How else to interpret the celestial pun that echoed in his mind night and day? To decode the message, all you had to do was hold it up to a mirror. Could anything be more obvious? Just turn around the letters of the word *dog*, and what did you have? The truth, that's what. The lowest being contained within his name the power of the highest being, the almighty artificer of all things. Was that why the dog had been sent to him? Was Mr. Bones, in fact, the second coming of the force that had delivered Santa Claus to him on that December night in 1969? Perhaps. And then again perhaps not. To anyone else, the matter would have been open to debate. To Willy—precisely because he was Willy—it wasn't."³⁴

In face of such an ontological barracuda (and his ilk, wherever you turn), Mr. Bones would be on highly troubled notice to sustain the dignity he could sense, in the realm of Dick's "lawn maintenance," emanating from the wild, nocturnal visitors to his comfy prison (reminiscent of the fellows, including the tiger, Balthazar met at the circus where he was got up as "the Mathematical Donkey").

"...there were certain small miracles to be seen from that same doghouse, especially at night. A silver fox, for example, who scampered across the lawn at three A.M. and disappeared before Mr. Bones could stir a muscle, imprinting an afterimage on his mind that was so sharp, so crystalline in its perfection, that it kept coming back to him for days afterward: an apparition of weightlessness and speed, the grace of the wholly wild."³⁵

Will Bones be a prototype for projects going forward—for instance, that of Orr in *Oracle Night* (2003) and that of Brill in *Man in the Dark* (2008)? It is hard to imagine such a trajectory as anything but a comedown from Bones' gameness. Will Auster, then, look to volatile figures like *Oracle Night's* Grace and Chang? And yet surely those two were as terminally poisoned by megalomania as Willy. Where *is* Auster going with this?!

¹ Paul Auster, *Timbuktu* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1999).

² James Clark, *Rather Have the Blues* (Toronto: Springtime Publishers, 2008).

³ Op. cit., p. 24.

⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

²¹ Ibid., p. 129.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 174.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 180.

³¹ Ibid., p. 181.

³² Ibid., p. 17.

³³ Ibid., p. 65.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 34f. Polly had remarked to Burnside unknowingly apropos of the steady diet of Willy's undigested and indigestible offerings, as tending to complicate the exigency of courage, "He's a tough old trooper...But his stomach is shot. I hate to think about some of the things that must have gone in there" (Ibid., p. 143).

In her rustic piety, Balthazar's last mistress referred to him as a "saint."

There is a Heraclitean saying against which the pun here brushes: "Time is a child playing a game of draughts; the kingship is in the hands of a child" (Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971], p. 28).

³⁵ Op. cit., pp. 149f.

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