

# CHANGING IDENTITIES IN PAUL AUSTER'S *MOON PALACE*

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Advances in psychological knowledge have often been made in fiction long before psychological research made equivalent discoveries. Suffice it here to mention the Oedipus complex and the problem of narcissism, which were known in stories a couple of thousand years before the creation of the field of psychology. Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* from 1989 deals with psychological material that was just beginning to be the focus of psychological studies in the early 90s, and that is still largely uninvestigated by professionals.<sup>1</sup>

As with almost all of Paul Auster's work, the main concern of *Moon Palace* is identity. The novel tells the story of a few years in the life of Marco Stanly Fogg, when he passes from late adolescence into early adulthood and goes through an identity crisis. Marco's story is then put in perspective by the stories of two other men, Effing and Solomon Barber that are told at quite great length. Taken together, these stories show that external events can lead to dramatic changes in a person, changes that concern the core of his or her being, namely the identity.

The stories of these three generations of men show many identity changes, and the question the novel poses is why these occur. Are they results of internal changes in the characters themselves, or are they caused by external events, situations, or other people? In its turn, this treatment of identity change turns into a philosophical inquiry into the forces that guide our lives, where the fundamental terms are "control," "fate" and "chance." This article is part of my PhD project on Auster and identity development. My purpose with the article is to test my assumption that modern developmental psychology can help open up and explain important aspects of certain of Paul Auster's novels. In the following I will analyze part of the development of Marco Fogg, who is the main character of *Moon Palace*.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking here about the relationship between internal and external factors in identity change and identity status change. It was an issue for Erikson (1980), but [quantitative real-world] research into this complicated field is still in its infancy according to Jane Kroger and Kathy Green (1996: 477).

## **Identity**

In the following, the term *identity* will refer to “a coherent sense of one’s meaning to oneself and to others within that social context. This sense of identity suggests an individual’s continuity with the past, a personally meaningful present, and a direction for the future” (Marcia 1994:70-71). This definition belongs to the field of developmental psychology and has its roots in Erik Erikson’s work of the 1950s and 60s. Identity includes such aspects as personal values and beliefs, sex role identification, how you communicate with and feel close to others, decisions about what profession to pursue, sexual orientation, and whether you want to marry and start a family and with whom.

Erik Erikson sees human development as taking place in stages, each typically happening at a particular age, and concerned with resolving a particular issue or conflict. Identity formation is the 5th stage, and it happens during late adolescence, age 18-22: “[W]ithin the Eriksonian framework, identity is the expectable outcome of a particular developmental period: adolescence” (Marcia 1994:77). The main conflict of this developmental stage is between identity and identity diffusion. Erikson says: “Adolescence can be regarded as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child, and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community’s recognition of him” (1980:120).

In order to carry out empirical research on identity formation, James Marcia has concretized Erikson’s diffusion-identity stage of development in four different identity statuses. In line with Erikson’s theory, Marcia and others have confirmed that the main identity work takes place during late adolescence, but that it is by no means over as adolescence ends. Many people will go through several identity status changes as adults as well.

The four statuses of Marcia’s “Identity Status Paradigm” (Marcia 1966, 1967, and 1976) are Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement, of which diffusion is considered the lowest and achievement the highest. “These identity statuses are four ways in which any late adolescent [...] might be expected to be resolving

Identity–Identity Diffusion,” Marcia says (1994:72). Identity status is measured by means of the Identity Status Interview, which contains “questions in the domains of occupational or vocational choice; ideology, consisting of religious and political beliefs; and interpersonal values such as sex roles attitudes and sexuality” (ibid: 73). Within each of these areas the interviewer distinguishes between “exploration” (genuinely trying to figure out what you think about a problem area and experimenting with roles) and “commitment” (having settled the question and decided how you feel about it; having made a choice that will be difficult to change). *Identity diffusion* implies no commitments and no exploration, *foreclosure* is commitment without a preceding period of real exploration, *moratorium* is exploration but no commitment, while *identity achievement* means that the person has reached commitment after an exploratory period or moratorium. Identity status change means that a person experiences a transition from one status to another.

Auster’s *Moon Palace* was begun in 1968, completed between 1985 and 87, and eventually published in 1989 (Chénetier 1996:37-38). In 1996 Jane Kroger and Kathy Green published their “Events Associated with Identity Status Change,” where they investigate the impact of external and situational factors on identity status change. This article has helped me see how much of Auster’s novel concerns identity status change, and also that the question of external versus internal causes for change is a main theme. Many critics have noted that identity is very important in Auster’s *oeuvre*, but developmental psychology can provide a tool for studying this issue in much more detail and depth than has hitherto been done. It is also interesting that although Auster is often seen as a post-modern and non-realistic writer, most of what is said about identity formation and change in *Moon Palace* fits with the real-world findings of Kroger and Green’s article. And their developmental starting point is very distant from the basic tenets of postmodernism.

In *Moon Palace*, Marco and the other main characters, Barber and Effing, go through several identity status changes. Some of these happen in adolescence and others later in life. For Marco Fogg, the main changes come in late adolescence or early adulthood, while for Effing and Barber they come later. Here, I will examine the two major changes that Marco experiences and explore their causes. My main question concerns the role played by external forces versus internal factors in Marco himself.

### **Youthful exploration**

Marco's account of his first two years as a student in New York, from 1965-67, makes him seem like a bit of an oddball, but nevertheless quite typical of a person his age, i.e. 16-18 years old. He is uncertain about his identity, but he is experimenting and searching. In Marcia's identity status scheme, he belongs in the *moratorium* category: "Moratorium individuals are currently in the exploratory period; hence, their commitments are not firm, but they are struggling actively to arrive at them. They may be said to be in an identity crisis" (Marcia 1994: 73). That Marco is exploring is seen for instance in the area of love. He has short-term relationships with several girls, and spends the summer of 1967 "falling in and out of love with a girl named Cynthia" (17). He commits himself, but these commitments are short-lived and easy to change.

Marco also exemplifies Marcia's observation that moratorium individuals "vacillate between rebellion and conformity" (Marcia 1994: 75). He wants simultaneously to fit in and to set himself apart in order to assert his unique individuality. He dresses and behaves in particular ways to make others see him as an intellectual; and he changes between studying hard and partying wildly. He was, he says, "a grotesque amalgam of timidity and arrogance, alternating between long, awkward silences and blazing fits of rambunctiousness" (15). "In the identity status interview," Marcia says, "[m]oratoriums<sup>2</sup> impress one as intense, sometimes active and lively – sometimes internally preoccupied, struggling, engaging, and occasionally exhausting. [...] In studies, we have found them to be the most highly morally sensitive of the statuses as well as being the most anxious" (1994:75). Kimmel and Weiner, in their *Adolescence: A Developmental Transition*, say: "Because successful identity formation requires an active effort to examine types of work, friends, potential mates, and philosophies of life carefully before choosing among them, young people typically vacillate for a time in what they like to do and with whom" (1985: 388). And this is what Marco is doing in his first two years in college.

### **Loss**

But in the spring of 1967 Marco changes dramatically. After his uncle's death he gives up on life, and stops caring about his future. The only

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<sup>2</sup> That is, people in the moratorium status.

thing that now matters to him is keeping his promise to his uncle that he would graduate, so he keeps studying and starts an extreme scheme of economizing to keep himself in food and a home until the end of his last term at university. This scheme, or project, brings about changes in Marco's outward appearance and behavior. The lies and strange stories he starts telling others in order to hide what he is really up to, make him increasingly hidden and isolated emotionally, until he eventually gives up contact with other people. Gradually, during his last few weeks in his apartment and the time he spends in Central Park, his thoughts and emotions are seen to have changed also.

During his previous phase of moratorium, Marco's exploration could be seen in his dress, behavior, the way he talked, his studies, and the people he chose to spend time with. As Marco now embarks on his "do-nothing project," he first changes his appearance away from his former intellectual look. This time he is not trying out a new look or role, in the way adolescents often do, but merely dressing in a cheap and practical manner, without caring how he appears to others: "My friends were startled by this transformation," Marco says, but "what they thought was finally the least of my concerns" (25). Marco had formerly been using friends and fellow students as an area of exploration, but this now stops. Starting with lies and strange excuses, Marco gradually retreats from social contact, and after graduation in the early summer of 1969, he spends virtually all his time alone. The amorous exploits of his student days also cease, and it is clear that he stops wondering what he is going to do in the future. Though he keeps studying and has decided to graduate, he no longer cares about literature or ideas. In sum, all exploration, and thus the moratorium, ends as Marco embarks on his project. This lack of exploration is the first criterion in Marcia's definition of identity diffusion.<sup>3</sup>

The second main characteristic of diffusion is lack of commitment. When he embarks on his project, Marco deliberately chooses to be without direction and purpose, deciding not to care about the future or what he is going to do with his life. Identity status research investigates the presence or absence of commitments in a number of life areas or domains. These always include the domains of vocation, ideology (religion and politics), and interpersonal relations, and sometimes other

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Marcia (1994: 76-77); Kroger (2003: 213-214); Kroger and Green (1996: 478).

areas as well. During his project, Marco is not committed to a job or profession and studies only in order to keep a promise; he does not care about politics or religion, and he is uninterested in other human beings. Indeed, he has no commitments in the life areas that are usually seen as most important. Ironically, however, he is fanatically committed to his crazy project. It is therefore slightly difficult to fit him into the identity status scheme. He fits the status of diffusion in all respects, except in his commitment to a project that will eventually make all normal commitments impossible, since its projected outcome is death. His situation is highly paradoxical, as he is fully aware from the beginning: "I would turn my life into a work of art, sacrificing myself to such exquisite paradoxes that every breath I took would teach me how to savor my own doom. [...] The moon would block the sun, and at that point I would vanish" (21). As he embarks on his project, it is perhaps difficult to say that Marco fits the status of identity diffusion perfectly. There has been a clear change in him that greatly resembles the characteristics of this state, but his dedication is at odds with Marcia's definition. However, as his do-nothing-project goes on, his lack of direction and unconcern about the future become more and more ingrained, until he eventually loses all ability to make decisions and even to think about the future:

The essential thing was to plot my next move. But that was precisely what gave me the most trouble, the thing I could no longer do. I had lost the ability to think ahead, and no matter how hard I tried to imagine the future, I could not see it, I could not see anything at all. The only future that had ever belonged to me was the present I was living in now, and the struggle to remain in that present had gradually overwhelmed the rest. I had no ideas any more. The moments unfurled one after the other, and at each moment the future stood before me as a blank, a white page of uncertainty. (41)

This "white page" points back to Uncle Victor's statement that "life was a story [...] and each man was the author of his own story" (41-42). Marco might initially have been the author of his do-nothing project, but he loses control and becomes totally passive. Even though he knows he is going to be evicted from his apartment on a particular day, he does not plan what he is going to do when that happens: "I would be out on the streets by September. From the vantage of June first, however, the end of

the summer was light-years away. The problem was not so much what to do after that, but how to get there in the first place" (28).

Marco is here seen to share the "lack of direction and purpose" in life "and a pervasive unconcern about the matter" (157) that Marcia found so striking in the Identity Diffusion individuals he interviewed for his 1976 study. The control he seemed to have at the beginning is gone, and Marco has here clearly descended to proper diffusion status.

The question as to the cause of this identity status transition from moratorium to such a condition of apathy and unconcern (diffusion), is answered straightforwardly by Marco himself; it was the death of his Uncle Victor:

Then, in the spring of 1967, Uncle Victor died. This death was a terrible blow for me; in many ways it was the worst blow I had ever had. Not only was Uncle Victor the person I had loved most in the world, he was my only relative, my one link to something larger than myself. Without him I felt bereft, utterly scorched by fate. [...] My uncle simply dropped dead one fine afternoon in the middle of April, and at that point my life began to change, I began to vanish into another world. (3)

Marco brings up the death three times in the first chapter, as if to impress its importance on the reader. In the above quotation, we see three slightly different aspects of it that help explain the tremendous impact the event had on Marco.

Firstly, we must remember that Uncle Victor's death is the second dramatic loss in Marco's life. He lost his mother when he was only eleven, and this was particularly traumatic because she was a single parent. She had told Marco that his father was dead, and his only other relative was her brother in Chicago. Luckily for the young orphan, Uncle Victor proved a good and loving substitute father. But when Victor died as well, that loss was likely to affect him even more than losing his mother. This may seem illogical, since he was a child when he lost his mother, and 18 when his uncle died. But as John Bowlby has found, such a loss, at whatever age, brings back the pain and fear of the first, childhood, loss, and is thus likely to be felt even harder (1991).

Secondly, Victor's death leaves an emotional hole in Marco's life. He says that his uncle was "the person I had loved most in the world," and, in addition, "he was my only relative" (3). Marco has not yet started a family of his own, and his friendships, although Zimmer seems very

loyal, are not intimate enough to constitute a substitute for the unconditional love and feeling of secure base that a family can provide. So the loss of uncle Victor is the loss of an important outlet for Marco's need for intimacy. And Victor was "my one link to something larger than myself", (3) Marco says. His death thus also requires an existential rearrangement; if his life is to have meaning, Marco has to find some other link to society and other people. He has to find a place where he can fit into a larger scheme, and have a function that seems important to him.

Thirdly, Marco says he felt "scorched by fate," which is a feeling of a slightly different order than the ones I have discussed so far. Losing his only parent at the age of eleven, and then his adopted father, his only relatives, must have formed ample proof that there is no limit to the disasters that the world can bestow upon him. And this opens up the possibility that nothing at all important is under Marco's control. The nature of life and the world, or fate, if you like, might be that people are no more than powerless vessels on a stormy sea, at the complete mercy of ruthless elements. And in the face of such dismal evidence it is maybe not strange that Marco should wish to "give up the struggle" (80).

So, to recapitulate, this transition from a period of youthful exploration (*moratorium*) to aimlessness and depression (*identity diffusion*) is caused by the death of uncle Victor, which in addition to being a devastating emotional blow also forces Marco to reevaluate his assumptions about life and his own place in the world.

### **Rescue**

When Marco's do-nothing project, or his period of identity diffusion, has gone on to its bitter end, almost resulting in Marco's death in Central Park, there comes another radical change in him. This follows his rescue by his friend Zimmer and a relative stranger, Kitty Wu, while Marco is spending a month at Zimmer's, convalescing. At the beginning of this stay, Marco is in bad shape, physically as well as mentally. Gradually, however, he builds up his strength and regains a belief in himself and the future. When he moves out of Zimmer's place he is ready to take on responsibility for his own life and to make commitments to other people.

In looking for the reason for his dramatic change, we must again first see what Marco himself has to say. At the beginning of Chapter 2 he

foreshadows the end of that chapter and much of the next in a brief summary of his rescue and convalescence. Here Marco explains:

I had jumped off the edge of a cliff, and then, just as I was about to hit bottom, an extraordinary event took place: I learned that there were people who loved me. To be loved like that makes all the difference. [...] I had jumped off the edge, and then, at the very last moment, something reached out and caught me in midair. That something is what I define as love. It is the one thing that can stop a man from falling, the one thing powerful enough to negate the laws of gravity. (50)

So if “fall” is a metaphor for the self-destructive project Marco had been caught up in for the last two years, then a fatal end was averted by love. He was physically rescued from dying of pneumonia in the rain and cold, but mentally and emotionally it was the love of Kitty and Zimmer that changed his outlook on life and himself.

That Marco starts to change after his rescue is made clear at the beginning of chapter 2:

As time went on, it became increasingly difficult for me to make sense of the disaster I had created. I had thought I was acting out of courage, but it turned out that I was merely demonstrating the most abject form of cowardice: rejoicing in my contempt for the world, refusing to look things squarely in the face. I felt nothing but remorse now, a crippling sense of my own stupidity. (73)

It is as if Marco has woken up after a nightmare to realize how horrible and crazy it all was. And as he reflects on the last couple of years of his life, he is forced to reevaluate his thoughts and actions. He now understands that his “project” was pure madness, and that it was wrong not to confide in Zimmer and ask for his help when he needed it (73). Marco uses very harsh words about himself; “disaster,” “cowardice,” “stupidity;” and this condemning judgment is matched by a new desire to do and be the opposite:

More than anything else, I felt a need to purify myself, to repent for all my excesses of self-involvement. From total selfishness, I resolved to achieve a state of total selflessness. I would think of others before I thought of myself, consciously striving to undo the damage I had

done, and in that way perhaps I would begin to accomplish something in the world. (73-74)

Having realized his past mistakes, Marco now decides to change: He wants to be “a saint, a godless saint who would wander through the world performing good works” (73). This program is the opposite of his do-nothing project, but the extremity and fanaticism Marco displays is the same. And this is an indication that even though his thoughts and ideals are unrecognizable, his identity status may not be as distant from what it was during his do-nothing project as he would have liked. Such a tendency to see oneself and the world in terms of black and white, good and evil, does not belong to the highest stage of *identity achievement*, but rather to identity diffusion and sometimes foreclosure.

Another indication that Marco has not progressed much, at least not according to Marcia's statuses, is his reaction on finding a forgotten letter from the draft board calling him in for a physical examination: “I had done nothing to prepare myself for the moment of truth. [...] I had not given the subject much thought. As with so many other things, inertia had got the better of me, and I had steadfastly shut the problem out of my mind” (75). His friend Zimmer suggests fleeing to another country, but Marco is not “terribly interested” (75), again turning away from taking an active part in shaping his own future. This occurs on September fourteenth, soon after his rescue, and obviously he is then still in the grip of the inertia that characterized him during his do-nothing project.

The draft letter also activates Marco's tendency to think in terms of black-or-white, or all-or-nothing. On reading the letter, his first thoughts are worst-case scenarios: “In that one instant, everything closed in on me again. I was probably a fugitive from justice, I thought. If I had missed the physical, the government would already have issued a warrant for my arrest – and that meant that there would be hell to pay, consequences I could not even imagine” (74). These unimaginable consequences could hardly have been that horrible – he would not have been executed, and a period in prison would probably be easier than the long period of hunger and suffering he had recently put himself through. But Marco is at this time unable to see anything in terms that are not absolute.

Marco describes his month with Zimmer as a rest: “It was an exquisitely tranquil period in both our lives: A brief moment of standing still before moving on again” (82). Zimmer takes care of him, and Marco

does not have to be responsible for himself for a while. Yet this rest is also a transition, and Marco shows evidence of several identity statuses simultaneously, or one after the other. He is in the process of change, and his thoughts, actions, and emotions are thus uncertain and confusing, even to himself. In the first couple of weeks at Zimmer's, he goes from being passive and lethargic (about the draft letter), to deciding to turn his life around and become "a saint."

There is also another change, which starts with a conversation between Marco and Zimmer. Marco starts wondering why he has seen so little of Kitty Wu lately, and Zimmer explains that she is desperately in love with him but does not want to force herself on him if he does not want her. Marco, of course, has been too wrapped up in himself to notice this. "What are you trying to say?" Marco asks, and Zimmer answers: "That it's up to you, Fogg. You're the one who has to make the next move" (84). Since his uncle's death, Marco has been fundamentally passive, trusting his fate to chance, to others, to the world, or anything but himself. He has merely responded to whatever has been happening to him or around him, without initiating anything himself. Zimmer's call to action requires a profound attitude change in Marco. He is now asked to resume the role of author of his own story, or hero in his own life.

This he finds very hard to do, and he lets weeks go passively by. But when he finally runs into Kitty again, he does pluck up the courage to ask her back to Zimmer's place for coffee. It is Kitty who takes the next step, hugging Marco and asking if he likes her. And then he can respond. Even though Marco manages to take the required initiative in relation to Kitty, in the description of their first day and night together, Marco emphasizes how it is Kitty who enables him to act and respond: "My desires were very strong, overpowering in fact, but it was only because of Kitty that they were given a chance to express themselves. Everything hinged on her responses" (94). Talking openly to, and then making love to, Kitty is described as one of the most important events in Marco's life so far:

Without question it was one of the most memorable things that ever happened to me, and in the end I believe I was fundamentally altered by it. I am not just talking about sex or the permutations of desire, but some dramatic crumbling of inner walls, an earthquake in the heart of my solitude. (94)

What Marco is describing here is the evolution of a new side of himself, that of intimacy. In Erikson's eight-stage model of lifetime development, the sixth stage (after the stage of identity development) is concerned with intimacy. This stage is supposed to come in early adulthood, that is, at about the age Marco is now. Marcia says about this stage that:

Intimacy/Isolation is the stage one usually experiences as the most 'relational.' Here one ventures merger of oneself with a trusted other. One experiences, on an adult level, the joy of connectedness, the desolation of separation, the terror and relief of self-revelation, the warm pleasure of companionship, and the sadness in the knowledge of the inevitable limits of what another can be for oneself. As with the other stages, it is the dialectic of Intimacy and Isolation that teaches this. (1997:104)

For Erikson, intimacy involves the coming together of two distinct people, each with their own firm identity, and unafraid of losing themselves in the union. Kroger explains that "[t]o Erikson, genuine intimacy is not possible until issues of identity are reasonably well resolved. Relationships of earlier adolescence often serve only the purpose of self-definition rather than intimacy" (2004: 30).

Intimacy has so far been a problem for Marco. He was close to his uncle Victor, and during his first two years as a student he explored new friendships and short-term love relationships. But the death of his uncle brought about a total breakdown in intimate relations. Kitty changes that. With her he learns to be open, and he learns to "put yourself in her position," as Zimmer urges him to (84). He gradually manages to forget about himself and identify with others. This empathy is then developed further when he starts working for Effing.

Another radical change in Marco during his stay with Zimmer is that he starts planning for the future. First, his thoughts are only of getting a job and earning some money, so that he can pay back Zimmer what he has spent on him. Taking over a translation job for Zimmer, he feels "for the first time in months" that his life "has a purpose" (90). This job is also seen by Marco as "penance for my past mistakes," (90) and he compares himself to a prisoner "sentenced to a term of hard labor on a chain gang" (91). After finishing the translation and handing the money over to Zimmer, Marco is ready to move out, find a job, and start making it on his own again. Towards the end of the chapter Marco, Kitty and Zimmer have a meal in a restaurant together, and Marco says: "It was a superb

moment for me, a moment of astonishing joy and equilibrium, as though my friends had gathered there to celebrate my return to the land of the living” (96). And a return to the land of the living is in fact what has happened to Marco in this chapter. In just a month he has been quite transformed. From being a young man who could see no possible future for himself, living as a bum in the park, he now has friends, love, and hope and the will to try to make a future for himself.

During his month with Zimmer, Marco thus seems to go through another period of moratorium. It is very different from the one at the start of his college career in that it does not involve much searching or experimentation. It is rather a process of examining his past and re-evaluating himself in the light of his miraculous rescue. There is a sense of several time-levels or stages at which Marco has a particular understanding of things that will later change. He keeps referring to what he felt before this time, how he saw things then, and how he comes to look at them later. Therefore there is also a great deal of temporal movement, backward and forward, and the chapter is organized around themes and episodes rather than chronologically. This is a period of change and process, a movement from one place to another, rather than an arrival.

Toward the end of Marco’s month at Zimmer’s we are beginning to see the direction in which he is heading; toward commitment. He starts a relationship with Kitty, he starts working on a translation to earn some money, and he changes psychologically in becoming more interested in and caring for others. Then at the beginning of chapter 4, Marco takes on the job as Thomas Effing’s live-in companion, which, although it is not a career choice, is a long-term commitment. In the course of just half a month he has committed himself in at least three different areas: interpersonally, in the area of work, and I think we may also say ideologically. Marco has not found religion or new political beliefs, but he has gone from wanting to spit on the world and just throwing up his hands, to taking on the responsibility for himself and his life. This newfound independence and commitment to life is demonstrated in his moving out of Zimmer’s place and becoming economically independent.

I think what we have seen in Marco now is a change from moratorium at the beginning of the book, through the diffusion period of his mad project, and now, finally, into identity achievement. The main characteristic of achievement is, of course, commitment, but there are a

number of other personality aspects that achieved individuals have in common. Kimmel and Wiener say that “[p]eople who have a clear sense of their personal identity generally feel good about themselves, work constructively toward well-defined goals, seek out and feel comfortable in close relationships with others, and remain relatively free of anxiety, depression, and other symptoms of emotional distress” (1985: 390).

This description fits Marco well after he starts his job with Effing. In spite of the fact that Effing is a difficult person to get along with, Marco does his best, and also learns a lot from the experience. His relationship with Kitty is peaceful and stable, and after Effing dies the two get an apartment together. Marco says about this time: “For the next eight or nine months, I lived in a way that had never been possible for me before, and right up to the end, I believe that I came closer to human paradise than at any other time in the years I have spent on this planet” (228). Such extreme happiness is not a prerequisite for identity achievement, but after his convalescence Marco gives an overall impression of contentment, of things having fallen into place, and of finally being at peace. The heavy depression and mood swings of his “project period” are gone, and he is positive and optimistic about the future. He says that he and Kitty did not talk “about the future,” but, he says, “at a certain point, perhaps two or three months after we started living together, I think we both began to suspect that we were heading toward marriage” (231).

### **Inner and outer motivation**

In “Events Associated with Identity Status Change,” Kroger and Green have looked at which events people themselves thought were “the primary source of influence when identity status change seemed to have occurred” (481). After getting details about these events they systematized them into seven different categories, six of which are external. The last, “internal change,” denotes “discontent or coming to terms with the self where there was no strong external source or influence reported, e.g. altered perspective or new awareness through introspection” (481). Kroger and Green found that a transition to the identity status of achievement four times out of five was associated with internal change (Kroger 1996:485). This does not mean that external factors were not involved as well, but that they were less important. People have to be ready for change in order to get anywhere. They

themselves have to synthesize their experiences and go through a process of psychological change, before achieving a firm identity. In transitions to the other identity statuses, external factors were more important. Internal change was the least important factor in changes to the status of foreclosure, for instance. In the case of transitions to diffusion, just over half were related to internal change, while quite a few were related to new contexts and some to a critical life event.

For Marco, it is clear that his transition to achievement status begins with his being physically rescued, which might be considered a “critical life event.” But it is his personal, emotional experience of being loved, “the one thing powerful enough to negate the laws of gravity” (50), that brings about his internal change. And without this change, he could not arrive at commitment and identity achievement. Experiencing a mutual and intimate love relationship with Kitty causes a “dramatic crumbling of inner walls,” Marco says, “an earthquake in the heart of my solitude” (94). And, as he says himself, he was “fundamentally altered by it” (94).

Marco’s transition to diffusion status, on the other hand, was directly motivated by the loss of his Uncle Victor. This event would fall into Kroger and Green’s category of “critical life event,” i.e., “a single event generally involving a major loss or setback and occurring at any point during the life cycle, e.g. illness of self or important other, death, job loss, school failure, broken romance, major financial setback” (481). In their study, there are only a handful of transitions related to critical life events, too few to say anything definite about their effects, and in addition these are in different identity domains. But almost a quarter of these changes are to the status of moratorium, whereas very few are to achievement, foreclosure, and diffusion. It is perhaps worth noting that only in the domain of religion did a critical loss lead to achievement.

Marco Fogg is only one individual, so it maybe does not make much sense to compare him to the statistics from Kroger and Green’s study, but it is interesting that his development is not contradicted by their findings. Marco’s transition to achievement is the result of an internal change, and the psychological study shows that such transitions are overwhelmingly associated with internal factors. His change into the diffusion category, on the other hand, is externally motivated, and Kroger and Green find that almost half of such transitions are related to external events. Studies of Auster’s novels often remark on the great importance of chance in them. And chance indisputably plays a

conspicuous role in *Moon Palace*. But in relation to the two major changes of the main character, they are less related to chance than to events and processes seen by developmental psychologists to be universal and real.

Auster's characters are often seen as symptomatic of the post-modern condition: Fragmented, changing identities whose actions cannot be understood through traditional sociological or psychological approaches.<sup>4</sup> I now hope to have shown that such a view is inaccurate and exaggerated.

According to Erikson, ego development happens through the two opposite processes of identification and separation; or, as Marcia puts it: "Human development is an ongoing dialectic between connection and separation, between relatedness and solitude" (1993:101). It is this dialectic we see at work in *Moon Palace*, although the form it takes is somewhat extreme. The loss of love and connection plunges Marco into despair, depression, and identity diffusion, while experiencing love again sets him on the course toward a new identity.

As anyone who has read the book knows, this is not Marco's final identity. Life has other dramatic events and changes in store for him. But as both Erikson and Marcia point out, having arrived at an identity does not mean that everything will be static or harmonious for the rest of one's life. Marcia says of some of the identity-achieved people he has interviewed that "[i]n the best of them, one senses that a process of identity formation will continue throughout their lives, and one would sometimes like to warn them that this is only the first time around" (Marcia 1994:75).

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Allison Russell, who says about *City of Glass* that it "illustrates Derridean dissemination. Quinn literally vanishes from the text when he runs out of space in his red notebook. [...] In *City of Glass*, Characters 'die' when their signifiers are omitted from the printed page" (1990: 75).

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