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**Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*:  
the individual in a world without references**

**Introduction**

With all the fervor and idealism of a young man who had thought too much and read too many books, I decided that the thing I should do was nothing; my action would consist of a militant refusal to take any action at all. This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition. 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. (*Moon Palace*, p. 20)

Meet Marco Stanley Fogg; a student at Columbia University who has been raised by his uncle after his mother died and who has no idea how to live his life after his uncle dies too. He never met his father and (wrongly) thinks his father died too. Prior to the death of Marco's uncle, Marco moves from a student dormitory to an apartment (after his first year of college in New York) to live on his own, and his uncle gives him all of his 1492 books as a going-away present. When his uncle dies, short after Marco's move, Marco remains alone; with no family and without money. After this sad event Marco starts alienating from society, from himself, and he even becomes self-destructive by not taking responsibility, for Marco does not see any meaning in life anymore.

In Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* a similar course of crisis can be distinguished: Malte moves to Paris, but realises when he arrives that the city is not what he expected it to be. He is not able to recognise the surroundings,

because the place he comes from is completely different. Malte gets in a crisis, because he also loses sense of himself and therefore he needs to learn how to live again in this new environment. There is no one to help Malte with his problem of coping, for his parents are dead, he does not know anyone in this new city, and the people he knew have become strangers to him from the moment he realises that Paris is a completely new world. Just like Marco needs to learn to live again after he loses his uncle – and thereby his only stable reference of his identity – Malte needs to learn to live in a city where he has no references at all. Both seem to be in an existential crisis.

According to the philosophy of the existentialism, one *is* not, but one *becomes*. One realizes himself in the world, that is: one defines himself in relation to the other<sup>1</sup>. To accomplish this, one – obviously – has to have a certain notion of the world one lives in, in order to define himself in relation to this world, something that is problematic for both characters. “Obliged to make our own choices, we can either confront the anguish . . . of this responsibility, or evade it by claiming obedience to some determining convention or duty”<sup>2</sup>. Marco is an example of how one evades one’s responsibility, whereas Malte confronts his anguish<sup>3</sup>. How do Marco and Malte get in an existential crisis, how do they work through this crisis and what is the function of reading/writing in relation to these existential crisis’s?

### **The loss of references**

It is remarkable that Marco even prior to his uncle’s death already seems to have trouble with defining himself in the world he lives. When Marco’s uncle, Victor, leaves with his band ‘The Moon Men’ – not long before Marco moves to his apartment in New York – he gives Marco all of his books, a clarinet, a chess set, autographs and a

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<sup>1</sup> Kuypers e.a., *Encyclopedie van de Filosofie*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. (p. 119-20)

<sup>3</sup> Marco and Malte are, however, not the only characters that suffer from existential crisis’s in these books; also Marco’s grandfather (Thomas Effing) and his father (Solomon Barber) – although Marco has no idea these men are family – seem to suffer from identity crisis’s. Solomon as a result from not knowing his father and Thomas effing for not taking responsibility for one’s own life (when he takes on a new identity in order to forget his past life).

tweed suit. Although Victor is just not in the same place as Marco, Marco feels his uncle's being away as being left without a home:

I ... managed to stay in spiritual contact with him by wearing the suit ... I felt at home in it, and since for all practical purposes I had no other home, I continued to wear it every day, from the beginning of the year to the end. At moments of stress and unhappiness, it was a particular comfort to feel myself swaddled in the warmth of my uncle's clothes, and there were times when I imagined the suit was actually holding me together, that if I did not wear it my body would fly apart. It functioned as a protective membrane, a second skin that shielded me from the blows of life ... More than anything else, the suit was the badge of my identity ... I was also satisfying the desire to have my uncle near me. (p. 14-5)

Marco, thus, needs his uncle with him, one way or the other, to feel safe; to be capable of dealing with the world and to realise what his place is in that world. The only home he has is not a material home, but it is a feeling he has when he wears the suit. When his uncle dies, his importance becomes even more clear: "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" (p. 2). But as long as Uncle Victor is still alive, and Marco still lives with his roommate Zimmer<sup>4</sup> in a college dormitory, Marco does seem to be able to keep his life on track.

Although Marco feels "small thumbs of fear about living on [his] own" (p. 16) when he moves to his new apartment, he is comforted when he sees a neon sign through the windows on a building with the words 'moon palace' that reminds him of Victor:

They were magic letters and they hung there in the darkness like a message from the sky itself. MOON PALACE. I immediately thought of Uncle Victor and his band, and in that first, irrational moment, my fear lost their hold on me. I had never experienced anything so sudden and absolute. . . I went on staring at the Moon Palace sign

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<sup>4</sup> It is ironically that Marco's friend is called Zimmer, which is German for 'room'. The connection between Marco and Zimmer is based on rooms. At first, they are roommates, and later Marco lives in Zimmer's bedroom. Marco has no real relationship with Zimmer, or contact, other than when they live together.

and little by little I understood that I had come to the right place,  
that this small apartment indeed was where I was to live. (p. 16-7)

Again, a connection to Uncle Victor enables Marco to handle the situation. It is also the first indication in the story that Marco seems to be looking for signs, for something that gives him a purpose, or direction in his life<sup>5</sup>. The experience he has by seeing this sign is almost like a revelation: its nature is sudden and absolute, and it allows Marco to see things differently afterwards. We see this need for signs that give life direction also when Marco has just lost his apartment:

I suddenly looked down and saw a ten-dollar bill lying at my feet. . . and rather than simply call it a stroke of good luck, I persuaded myself that something profoundly important had just happened: a religious event, an out-and-out miracle . . . I began to tremble with joy . . . I felt like someone about to be reborn. (p. 50)

Furthermore, when Marco works for Thomas Effing, he still has this willingness to see signs: “I began to be less irritated by Effing’s criticisms, wondering if his impatience and dissatisfaction could not eventually serve some higher purpose. I was a monk seeking illumination” (p. 120). Marco, thus, is willing to see signs, but also knows how to give them meaning.

However, when Uncle Victor dies, Marco’s link with the world starts to deteriorate. A few things that are linked to his uncle – like Uncle Victor’s suit he still wears<sup>6</sup> – keep him on track for a short while. For example, the promise to Uncle Victor to graduate (but also, although less important, the unappealing prospect of fighting in Asia) keeps Marco in college<sup>7</sup>. But when he realises that

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<sup>5</sup> The modern time can be seen as a post-apocalyptic world in which there is no god anymore. One tries to find out how to live in such a godless world, but still has the need for signs. We can see this also in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* wherein main character Oidipa is desperately looking for signs that explain something bigger than herself.

<sup>6</sup> It is ironically that when Uncle Victor dies, Marco holds on to the suit and wears it daily. But when Marco gets a job at Effing’s and gets the old suit of his former employee – Pavel Shum, who is now dead –, Marco suddenly has trouble with wearing the suit of a dead man. Apparently, Marco never saw Uncle Victor’s suit as a dead man’s suit. In contrary, the suit sort of kept the memory of his uncle alive.

<sup>7</sup> This, however, seems more something that is fixed in his life than something that Marco really wants to achieve for himself. The graduation was something that Victor wanted Marco to accomplish. Marco only knows what he does *not* want and lets his life be the result of the things he does not want.

he has not enough money to accomplish this goal, Marco sabotages his “only hope of surviving the crisis”(p. 20): he decides to do nothing - besides graduating. He starts reading Uncle Victor’s books, “That was how I chose to mourn my Uncle Victor”, and sells them afterwards to earn some money to survive. The not taking care of himself is a course he has set for himself which becomes worse when he graduates:

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 now, and the struggle to remain in that present had gradually overwhelmed the rest. I had no ideas anymore. (p. 40-1)

As a result of the meaningless of life, Marco decides to let life live for him, instead of taking control of his own life. He loses his apartment and lives on the streets of New York, sleeps in Central Park where he almost dies<sup>8</sup>. That is when his friends Zimmer and Kitty find him. It seems that Marco’s life gets on track bit by bit from then on. Marco gets a job at Effing, he starts being in a relationship with Kitty, but still his life’s path is determined by others. When Marco eventually loses everything – his relationship, his unborn child, the chance to know his father and grandfather while they were still alive – he could have entered a new crisis again. Paradoxically enough, however, now that Marco has experienced everything that he could have had, but has now lost because of his own attitude, he is finally able to take responsibility for his life.

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the nature of the crisis is similar – both Marco and Malte have trouble living in a world where there are no references anymore; no family, no God, no deeper purpose – but Malte has an approach opposite to Marco’s. Marco decides to do nothing and behaves passively. He only does

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<sup>8</sup> Again the only choices he makes are by choosing what he does *not* want: he could have gone to a shelter, but he does not want to. Instead of *choosing* the option of living on the streets, he makes sure that the option he left open for choice, is the only option.

things that are necessary: he looks for a place to sleep and eats out of garbage cans. He has his life annihilated to man's basic needs and behaves instinctively<sup>9</sup>. It is almost as if Marco wants to be a victim of life, whereas Malte really tries to make his life work.

Malte is, like Marco, on his own in a big city. Although Burton Pike thinks that Malte is not driven by "despair at existence but [by] an intense dedication to art as a high calling" (p. xiii)<sup>10</sup>, I think that Malte is driven by both as I will explain later. Malte decides he wants to be a poet and realises you can only be a poet if you have seen and experienced things in the world: "For poems are not, as people think, feelings (those one has early enough—they are experiences. For the sake of a line of poetry one must see many cities, people and things" (p. 13-4). Therefore Malte moves to Paris, to experience all these things, but when he arrives there seem to be two problems for Malte.

Firstly, Paris is completely different than he thought. The world he came from is different than this new world. The people he knew have become strangers to him: "if I am something different than before it is clear that I have no acquaintances" (p. 3). It seems that Malte is not able to find his place in this world for he has no references. He sees, hears, feels, everything at the same time which is too much for him to handle and he gradually turns insane, hence the notes in his notebook are sometimes hard to understand and fragmented – because apparently he cannot think clearly anymore.

But unlike Marco, Malte really tries to accomplish something serious. He realises that if he wants to write about this world and his experiences in this world, he has to learn to see again: "I am learning to see. Yes, I'm beginning. It is still going badly. But I want to make use of my time" (p. 3). However, Malte does not seem to accomplish this seeing really well: he messes up senses ("their clothes were unpleasantly loud" (p. 170)), refers to himself in

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<sup>9</sup> Even before he loses his apartment and has to live on the streets, his behaviour becomes more instinctively. For example when he meets the new occupants of Zimmer's old apartment:

It was an infantile response, but once the food entered my mouth, I wasn't able to control myself. I chomped down one dish after another, devouring whatever they put in front of me, and eventually it was as though I had lost my mind. (p. 35)

<sup>10</sup> Burton Pike, "Introduction," in: Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Burton Pike (trans.). London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008.

the third person and describes things that are almost incomprehensible (“The woman took fright and raised herself up out of herself, too quickly, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands” (p. 4)). Furthermore, his memories are woven through his experiences and seem to make no sense, similar to the way his references to artist seem to be randomly put between his experiences in Paris. Therefore both the style and content of the notebooks seem to give insight of Malte’s incapability of dealing with the world<sup>11</sup>.

The second problem is inherent to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century environment in which Malte lives; a time of a lot of change. Not only industrialisation was an important aspect of this time, but also the arts wherein traditions were being left for what they were and wherein people were finding new ways to express themselves. It is likely that the confusion Malte felt in this city is also a result of his perspective to poetry.

One must be able to think back to paths in unknown regions, to unexpected meetings and to partings one long saw coming; to childhood days that are still not understood, to parents one had to hurt when they brought one a joy and one did not understand it . . . and if one can think of all that, it is still not enough . . . But it is not enough to have memories . . . For it is not the memories themselves. Only when they become blood in us, glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves, only then can it happen that in a very rare hour the first word of a line of arises in their midst and strides out of them. (p. 14)

Thus the fragmented style of the book, the lack of plot, the descriptions Malte gives of Paris, and his memories can be also seen as an attempt to make new art (and not only as his incapability to deal with the world). Since we read his notebooks (‘die Aufzeichnungen’ in German, which literary means ‘the sketches’), we read the *drafts* he is making. It is thus not an imitation of the world he really sees, but an attempt to make poetry out of this world. And in this attempt he not only uses the experiences he has

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<sup>11</sup> This is also something he says explicitly: “A transformed world. A new life full of new meanings. At the moment it is rather hard for me, because everything is too new. I am a beginner in my own relationships” (p. 53).

in Paris, but also refers to memories and artists. These references, thus, do not particularly mean that Malte is losing track of reality. Malte's notes can, therefore, not only be interpreted from the point of view that Malte is having difficulty with his surroundings and himself, but also from the perspective of Malte finding a new way to express himself.

I think the problem lies in the combination of things. Malte says that he would have become a poet, such as Francis Jammes, if he only "had been able to live somewhere" (p. 30). This implies that he is *not* able to live somewhere – to be specific: in Paris. Thus the confusion of his surroundings can not only be assigned to him trying to write new poetry, but must also (partly) be the effect of his trouble dealing with the city<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, there are two other aspects that influence Malte's search for his place in the world. Firstly, his unhappy childhood – which probably still has an influence on the adult Malte, since lots of his memories refer to the days he was a child – should be considered. Malte's parents are dead, he grew up in a house with weird people, and during the time Malte's mother was still alive Malte had to act as if he was a girl<sup>13</sup>. Secondly, it also seems that Malte has problems with the absence of God in the modern world. It is remarkable how often Malte speaks in terms as 'my God', 'God alone knows why', but he does not really believe in this God. And just like Marco, Malte seems to be aware of signs but unlike Marco these signs are harder for Malte to give meaning to<sup>14</sup>: "Once again a warning something called me to the other side of the street, but I paid no attention" (p. 49), and:

I felt that it was a sign, a sign for the initiated, a sign that the outcasts recognize . . . I could not shake of the feeling that there really was a certain appointment to which this sign belonged, and that this scene was basically something I ought to have expected.  
(p. 29)

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<sup>12</sup> There are more indications in the book that his own identity in the world is a problem as well, for example: "I imagined that there could still be something outside that belonged to me" (p. 122) or "I could only have understood that man [a man in a café] because something is going on in me as well, something that is beginning to distance and separate me from everything" (p. 37).

<sup>13</sup> Because of the limited space of the essay I have decided to do mention it here, but I will not explore this aspect further.

<sup>14</sup> At one point Malte actually decides that in the future he will go for the facts. "I noticed how unburdening [the facts] were, as opposed to suppositions" (p. 129).

Malte lives in a world where rationalism has become a dominant way of thinking and I think that can be seen by the way he still notices the presence of signs, but does not know any more how to react to these signs in a rational world. In the end of his notebooks, it seems that he is directly invoking God, however, in a dual manner: on the one hand he addresses Him, but at the other hand he denies His existence:

Outside, much has changed. I don't know how. But within and before you, O my God, within before you, we are spectators: are we not without action? We discover that we don't know the role, we look for a mirror . . . Here, in this great, curved seating space for the spectators there reigned a sucking, expectant, empty existence. All action was on the side facing them: Gods and fate . . . Let us be frank, we have no theatre, as little as we have God: for that you need community. (p 169-171)

Malte invokes God (by means of the Apostrophe – as people used to do in the times there still was a God). He uses the theatre as a metaphor for the world after the 'death of God'. In this new world man has a free will and is responsible for his own actions (in opposition to man who has a responsibility to God). But we "don't know the role": how do we – specifically Malte – live in a world without God? We "look for a mirror", which means that we are on our own. At the end of the notebooks, Malte finishes with a story of the prodigal son – which can be read as his own story<sup>15</sup> – in which he describes how the prodigal son "understood how extremely far away God was" (p. 188). Malte, thus, seems to write about his own troubles with living in a godless world.

In contrast to the theme of writing in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, only few sentences mention Marco's reading in *Moon Palace*, although the reading takes an important place in the book. It is by reading that Marco is mourning Uncle Victor. It is a way of repressing the horrible situation he is in. Marco chooses to counteract his goal of graduating; he could have found a job or apply for a scholarship, which would have helped him achieving his goal, but instead he reads. In the first place Marco, thus, evades all

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<sup>15</sup> This hypodiëgetic story could be a *mise-en-abyme*; it can be read as a duplication of the story of Malte who leaves home to move to Paris.

responsibility resulting nearly in death. Another way 'reading' is represented in *Moon Palace* is Marco's reading – or seeing – of his surroundings in order to describe it properly to the blind Thomas Effing. It is only when Marco has to describe these things to Effing that Marco realises he does not see them properly; that he wasn't able to *read* the world properly.

I realized that I had never acquired the habit of looking closely at things, and now that I was being asked to do it, the results were dreadfully inadequate . . . . Until then, I had always had a penchant for generalizing, for seeing the similarities between, rather than their differences . . . I began to consider it as a spiritual exercise, a process of training myself how to look at the world as if I were discovering it for the first time. What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words? (p. 117-8)

Both Marco and Malte (try to) see the world for the first time. Marco also encounters the same problem as Malte does: how to put the things you see in words? When Marco does learn to see things properly, it is almost too much to handle: "My head would start to throb whenever I thought of this, imagining the furious and hectic motion of molecules, the unceasing explosions of matter, the collisions, the chaos boiling under the surface of all things" (p. 119), which also reminds me of how Malte seems so 'read' his surroundings. Later, when Marco is writing Effing's life story, Marco strikingly realises that Effing describes the same things Marco felt: "I had my own memories of living in a cave, after all, and when he described the loneliness he had felt then, it struck me that he was somehow describing the same things I had felt" (p. 179). In the end of the book Marco travels to the place Effing described and then understands what Effing tried to tell him (p. 294). Through this he is finally able to make sense of himself in the world: "This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins" (p. 298). While reading is first something that helps him alienate from the world, it later becomes something that helps him understand the world. Eventually, Marco finds his identity and is finally able to take responsibility for his life, after he – ironically – has lost everything that gave him any sense to his life.

In Malte's case, writing is the ultimate goal. He is trying to achieve this goal of being a poet by means of using writing as an aid: he writes down his experiences and memories as an aid to give some sense to the world. This, however, seems rarely to be really helpful, since he also thinks of unhappy past events that often mess up his stream of thoughts. Eventually, all of his writings are the result of his incapability to deal with the changing world, but they also *reflect* his incapability to do so. It is ironically that whereas Marco says that he wants to turn his life into a work of art, Malte is the one that *does* turn his life in a work of art, for his notebooks are a reflection of his attempt to describe the indescribable surroundings and experiences in his notebooks. Marco eventually has found a place in this godless world (after regularly being confronted with fate and his own free will) whereas we stay in uncertainty as to Malte. The recalling of the parable of the prodigal son, which also has no closing, can be seen as an existentialistic metaphor for the individual in the modern, godless world, in which nothing is certain and man – although he has a free will but is also subsided to fate – can only take responsibility for one's own life. Although both characters (eventually) take this responsibility, both stay open-minded for signs that could explain their place, or meaning, in this world.

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