

Bitterness took possession of my soul,
the fear of death overcame me, and now I wander in the wilderness.

Gilgamesh, table IX, 2000 BC

Entering Arnaldo Pomodoro's labyrinth

Texts by Aurora Donzelli, Gino Fienga, Federico Giani

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Graphic design

Dialmo Ferrari with Rossella Dal Fiume

Editing

Federico Giani, Nadia Lazzarini, Bitta Leonetti

Translations

Jeremy Haynes

Photography credits

Archivio Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro (pp. 68, 76, 80)

Gabriele Basilico (p. 79)

Melpomene (p. 11)

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Dario Tettamanzi (pp. 24-25, 27, 28, 30-31, 32, 34-35, 37, 38, 40-41, 43, 44, 46, 48-49, 50, 53, 54-55, 82)

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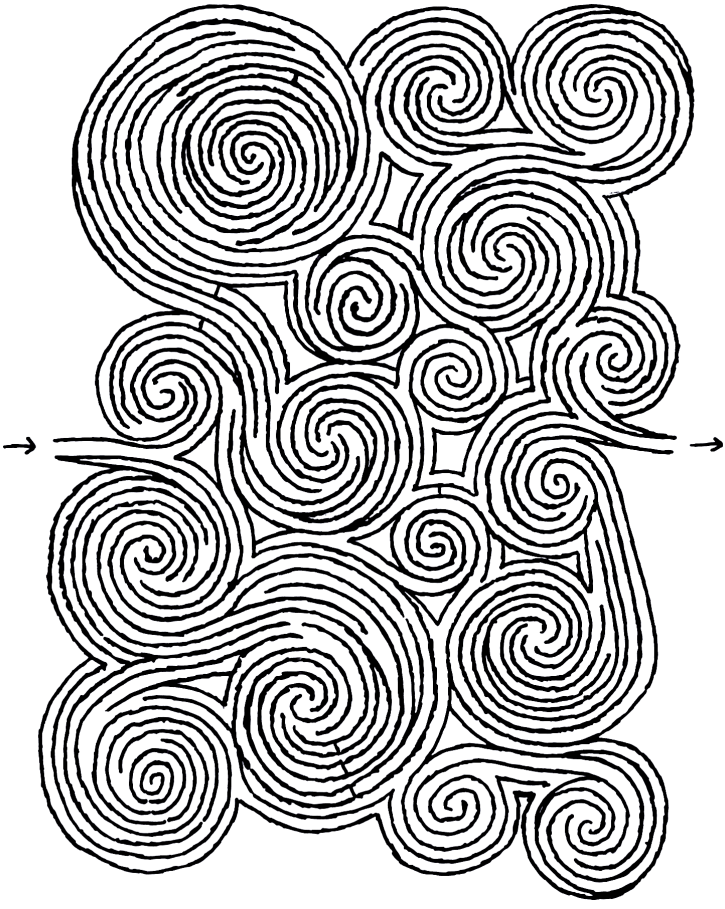
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Preface

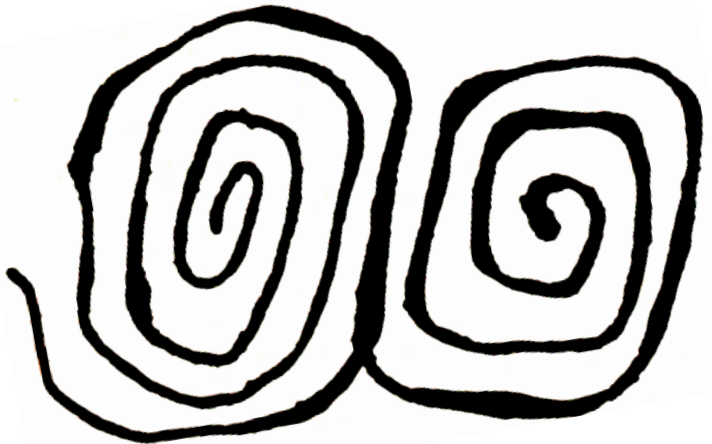
Aurora Donzelli

To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirrelled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave, like those lines of television cable and fresh water and steam heat and outgoing sewage and telephone wire and whatever else which cohabit in the same intestinal holes that pavement demolishing workmen periodically wrench open to the daylight and to our passing, disturbed glances. We only pretend to live on something as orderly as a grid.

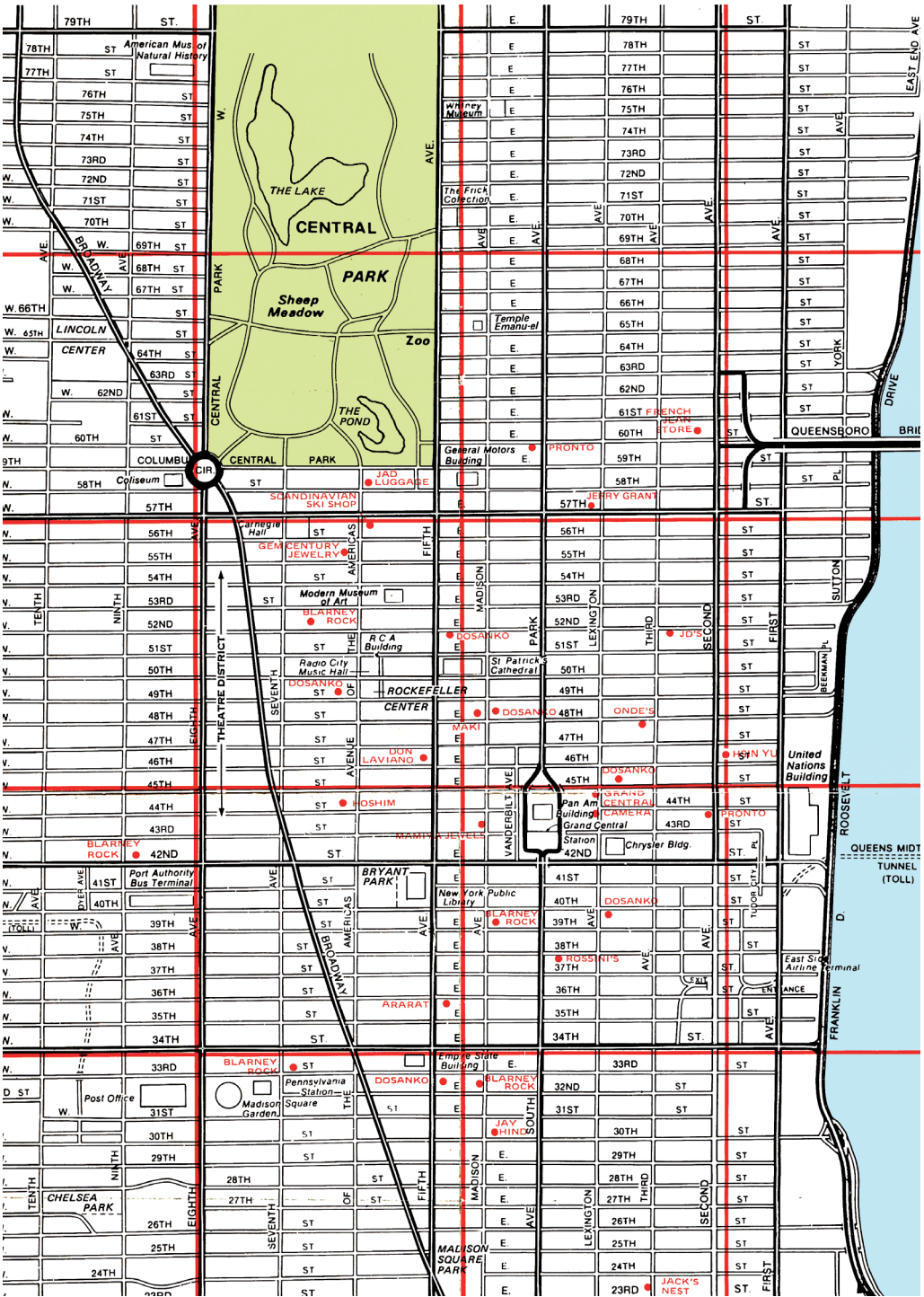
(Jonathan Lethem, *Chronic City*, London, Faber & Faber, 2010, p. 8)

The word “labyrinth” evokes images of intricate and non-linear spaces. Twisted meandering turns and dead ends, hidden holes and insidious traps. Or the word invokes visions of complex, but perfectly ordered, geometric systems. Such as those created by the evergreen hedges of Renaissance maze-gardens or those associated with the *mandala*, intersections of concentric circles and squares that, in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, represents the cosmos and constitutes both a tool and a path of contemplation.

As in the Manhattan described in Lethem’s novel, quoted in the epigraph to this preface, the image of the labyrinth always contains two iconographic souls: one chaotic and magmatic, the other, no less



Megalithic petroglyph
from the Belmaco cave
on La Palma





disturbing, geared to perfect geometric order. The tangle of pipes, cables and underground sewers and the ordered grid of parallel and perpendicular streets that intersect in an almost perfectly regular way in the aerial views and maps of the island of Manhattan.

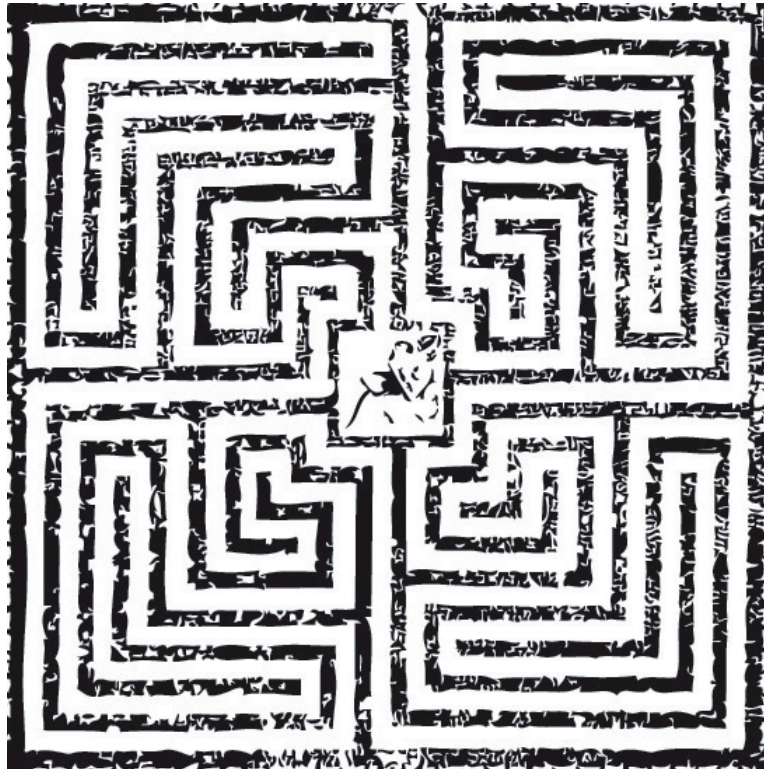
In its multiple shapes and representations, the labyrinth is a place to lose and perhaps to find yourself. Its lattices, whether chaotic, contorted tangles or interlocking geometric games aim to create feelings of disorientation, disturbing and, at the same time, redeeming. The word “labyrinth” is therefore, in our imagination, primarily related to purely spatial relationships. The labyrinth is, indeed, first of all, a place or rather, an archetype of a place.

The labyrinth is the base of one of the most productive myth cycles of our literary and artistic imagination. Created by Daedalus’ genius to accommodate the deformed and semi-divine son of King Minos, the labyrinth is the central iconographical element of the Cretan saga linked to the palace of Knossos. The Cretan labyrinth is an incomprehensible tangle of passages and snares. It embodies a mysterious place full of pitfalls, capable of annihilating those who venture inside. At the same time, its elaborate architecture symbolises the intellectual creative energy of its creator, his visionary ability to control the disorder and to plan. The labyrinth, in this sense, refers to the yearning for discovery and the intellectual desire for exploration.

These symbolic values resonate in the image of the cave of the alchemical tradition, a place marked by its deep affinity with the Cretan labyrinth. At the same time as creative hotbed, mortuary catacomb, and maternal womb, the alchemical cave represents the

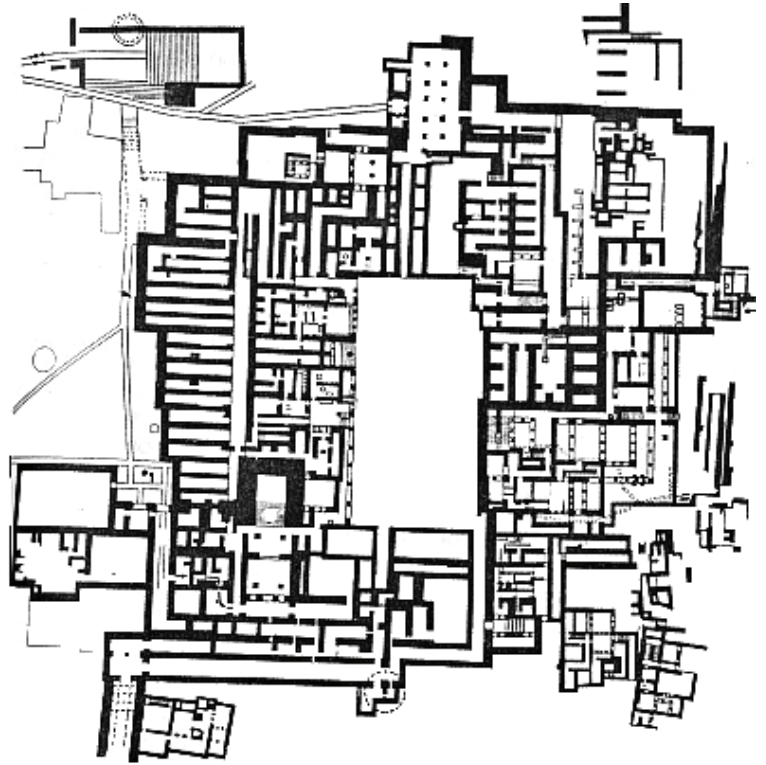
Detail of the
topographic map of
Manhattan, New York

Panorama of
Manhattan, New York



paradoxical and irreducible combination of the visible and invisible. Such a place materializes the endless confrontation between the triumph of demiurgic powers and the annihilation of the conscious subject, overwhelmed by its own desire for wisdom and creation. The labyrinth is also a place where an existential journey unfolds. A journey that, at times, takes on the characteristics of an initiatory path aimed at reaching ever-higher stages of inner illumination. Just like the famous Borobudur, the ancient Hindu-Buddhist temple shaped like a *mandala* on the Indonesian island of Java. With its concentric corridors created from the juxtaposition of huge blocks of lava, the Borobudur is both a reflection of the cosmos and an instrument of spiritual asceticism. Indeed, walking through its narrow corridors and contemplating the bas-reliefs carved into the rock that show key scenes from the Life of the Buddha, the pilgrim makes a path of meditation aimed at raising him to Nirvana. Or, again, the labyrinth recalls the idea of a play area where you can wander aimlessly or play hide and seek. As in the garden-mazes that in the European courts of the 16th century became a symbol of

Mosaic from the
“House of the
Labyrinth” at
Calvatone (CR)



social distinction. The social distinction of those who could indulge in aristocratic idleness strolling through elegant gardens maintained by the knowledgeable and invisible work of pruning trees and hedges.

In its multiple spatial values, the labyrinth becomes a powerful metaphorical lens to read and imagine our experience in the world. The labyrinth thus becomes a metaphor and allegory of human existence, of travel, of writing, of the cognitive learning process, of the metropolis or of the digital space where a potentially unlimited number of hyper-textual links create an infinite network of connections between texts and people.

Yet in their undeniable effectiveness these spatial representations of the labyrinth obscure, what in my opinion is a fundamental part of the structure of experience and imagination of the labyrinth. I refer to the dimension of time, which is often lost in the two-dimensional representations, be they graphic, pictorial and cartographic, that underlie our way of imagining the referent of the word “labyrinth”. I believe that the pre-eminence of the spatial axis over the temporal

Plan of the Palace of
Knossos on Crete



View of the Borobudur temple on Java



View of the Altjeßnitz maze (Germany)

one, which distinguishes the most shared and established ways to imagine the labyrinth dilutes its metaphorical value. As is known, metaphors produce meaning through the juxtaposition of semantic fields belonging to non-contiguous areas of everyday experience. Within the metaphorical processes surrounding our representations of the labyrinth, the labyrinth's semantic field is super-imposed on different areas of experience, either that of the urban landscape, or that of the cognitive or existential process. By imagining the maze as space rather than an organic, multi-dimensional unit of space-time, our metaphors lose their power to evoke the complex temporality that distinguishes these experiences.

Arnaldo Pomodoro's *Entering the Labyrinth* restores instead the organic interconnection of space and time, which, in my opinion, represents the constitutive and founding dimension of the labyrinth. In this work we find the experience of a space within which a dizzying proliferation of temporal planes capable of transforming the physical space itself occurs. Pomodoro's environment is just like a multidimensional and multifaceted text.

We know that writing is a semiotic mode beloved of Arnaldo Pomodoro, who has often described his work as a form of writing both mysterious and perfectly decipherable. And it is in writing and literary criticism that we find poetic and analytical instruments to think of the labyrinth as *space-time*.

In his famous essay on *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*,¹ the Soviet Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 84) explains how literary writing is organised through an «intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships» that he calls chronotope. Borrowed from Einstein's theory of relativity, the idea of chronotope refers to an organic fusion of time *χρόνος* (chronos) and space *τοπος* (topos) and for Bakhtin is a fundamental unit of analysis and literary production.

For Bakhtin narrative writing is structured through different chronotopical types, i.e. through different configurations of the interrelation between space and time that give shape to different literary genres. For example, in the time-adventure of the Greek novel, «the action of the plot unfolds against a very broad and varied geographical background» (Bakhtin 1981: 88) without leaving a trace «in the life of the heroes or their personalities» (Bakhtin 1981: 90). According to Bakhtin, the chronotope associated with

¹ In: M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.

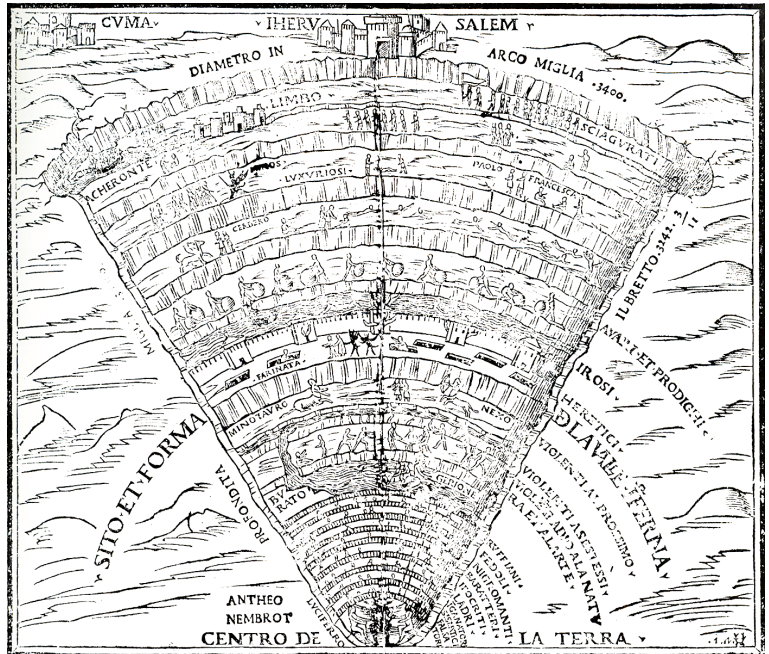


the literary genre of the Greek novel designates a specific mode of human action and an event structure based on the strength of fate. In this genre the plot of the story unfolds in an «abstract expanse of space» (Bakhtin 1981: 99) through «turns of fate», that is, «short segments that correspond to separate adventures» generally introduced with specific link words: «suddenly» and «at just that moment» (Bakhtin 1981: 91-92).

This literary form is different from other chronotopical models. The idyllic chronotope, for example, evokes a «little spatial world, limited and sufficient unto itself» that contains within it a potentially unlimited sequence of generations (Bakhtin 1981: 225). In the idyllic chronotope, «the unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave [...] childhood and old age [...], [thus uniting] the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things. This blurring of all the temporal boundaries, made possible by a unity of place, also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll» (Bakhtin 1981: 225).

Another example of chronotope discussed by Bakhtin emerges towards the end of the Middle Ages, through a new literary

Network map of a
Facebook profile



genre of which *The Divine Comedy* and the *Roman de la Rose* constitute an emblematic representation. These works, according to Bakhtin (1981: 156), are characterized by the strong «influence of the medieval, otherworldly, vertical axis». We see in them the production of a «vertical world» whose «temporal logic» consists in «the sheer simultaneity of all that occurs» (Bakhtin 1981: 157). In the «Dantesque vertical chronotope», Bakhtin sees an attempt to «deny temporal divisions» and «synchronize diachrony» in order to show the «whole world as simultaneous». In this world, «structured according to a pure verticality» the temporal divisions are cancelled so that «everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence» (Bakhtin 1981: 157-158). Indeed, Bakhtin continues, «only under conditions of pure simultaneity - or, what amounts to the same thing, in an environment outside time altogether - can there be revealed the true meaning of that which was, and which is and which shall be: and this is so because the force (time) that had divided these three is deprived of its authentic reality and its power to shape thinking». The chronotopic model underlying the space-time of the labyrinth resembles, in my opinion, a reversal of Dante's one. In the labyrinth, instead of the primacy of space that

Sixteenth century woodcut depicting the plan of Dante's Inferno

synchronizes the diachrony and resets the time divisions, we have an expansion of the temporal axis that saturates the space, making it possible to think of the paradox of an infinite and multifarious time contained in a small space.

Essentially the labyrinth is duration. Its threshold opens «a labyrinth of endless steps»,² uncovering a dizzying plurality of temporal levels in which the “already” intersects with the “not yet” according to a logic that subverts the order of chronological time. The temporality of duration differs profoundly from the abstraction of chronological time. Duration, as Henri Bergson explains, «is not the succession of one instant to the next: in this case there would only by the present, the past would not continue into the present and there would be no evolution or concrete duration. Duration is the relentless progression of the past that affects the future and that, moving forward, increases. And as it increases continually, the past is indefinitely preserved».³

The intersections between past and future that develop in the labyrinth realize a paradoxical union between internal and external, of retrospective glances and anticipatory inspirations, of memory and oblivion. In this place dug out from a liquid and multifaceted time the debris and ruins of the past become portents of possible futures.

² Paul Auster on New York in *City of Glass* (in *The New York Trilogy*, London, Faber & Faber, 1985, p. 3. Quinn, the protagonist of this novel, usually wanders around the streets of New York. Auster is very efficient in his way of demonstrating the erosion of the spatial dimension that takes place through the wandering in the metropolitan maze: «Movement was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realised that he had no intention of ever leaving it again» (P. Auster, *City of Glass*, in *The New York Trilogy*, London, Faber & Faber, 1985, p. 4).

³ H. Bergson, *The Creative Evolution*, New York, Dover Publications, 1988, p. 4.

