



4 3 2 1... 0?
COUNTING IN PAUL AUSTER'S 4 3 2 1

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It is difficult to approach Auster's *magnum opus*, *4 3 2 1*, without getting a sense of plentifulness or numerousness.¹ At 866 pages, it represents a daunting volume of text, and this feeling of vastness is reinforced by the photograph that illustrates its cover—a photograph that depicts a crowd gathered in the streets to celebrate the end of World War II and that hints at even larger numbers: the millions, billions of lives affected by history. While this sheer mass might suggest an encyclopedic novel, what could be Auster's *Ulysses* or *Infinite Jest* or *La vie mode d'emploi*, the title nevertheless brings a strong sense of focus. If there is anything to be measured or counted in *4 3 2 1*, there are only four of these things and they can ultimately be reduced to one. Indeed, *4 3 2 1* is the coming-of-age story of one young American boy, Archie Ferguson, spanning from his birth to the beginning of his adulthood in the sixties. What sets this *Bildungsroman* apart is that four versions of the story of the protagonist are told across seven stages of his life. In each version, various events or accidents (for instance, the fate of his father's appliances store) cause Ferguson's life to take different turns.

Although this storytelling device has never been employed by Auster before, *4 3 2 1* is certainly not an outlier in Auster's body of work. Not only does *4 3 2 1* re-explore many of Auster's favorite places (New York, Paris) and *topoi* (writing, loss, solitude, family life or the ordinary of television and baseball), but it can also be seen as a (re)synthesis of earlier works, with characters or events from his previous novels reappearing throughout *4 3 2 1*. If Auster's prose in *4 3 2 1* occasionally deviates from his reputed sparseness and simplicity, there is still a sense of continuity between this novel and earlier works, insofar as Auster continues employing the same narrative strategies. Auster's narratives are first and foremost driven by disasters: the imminent life-changing events looming over the characters' lives, the way these events—in all their absurdity—are shaped by chance or coincidences, and the routines through which the characters' lives settle in-between such events.

This paper will attempt to analyze how numbers, in particular in the form of the ascending or descending sequences that can be found throughout *4 3 2 1*, starting from its title, work together to serve Auster's narrative goals. Along the way, we encounter the zero at which these sequences hint, and study how it relates to the Austerian themes of disaster, loss, or

¹ I wish to thank Jonas Rosenbrück for breathing new life into the writing of this article.

solitude. We will also attempt to elucidate the power of numbers in a literary text: if numbers are not words, what, and how, can they mean? And ultimately, what does *4 3 2 1* mean?

1. *Counting down to disaster*

An essential narrative device in Auster's novels and autobiographies is the use of an imminent disaster, often foretold in the first pages of the text, if not in its first sentence: Nathan Glass's cancer sets into motion the narration of *Brooklyn Follies*, just like Nashe's imminent depletion of money sparks off *The Music of Chance*. This imminent disaster—be it death, poverty, or a drastic change in a character's life trajectory—is what drives Auster's stories, what creates the situations the characters experience, and what calls upon the reader to wonder 'what happens next.' As a title, *4 3 2 1*, unambiguously signifies imminence, evoking popular culture tropes like the digital counter of a time-bomb before its explosion, or the countdown to the launch of a rocket. This draws our attention to the fertility of the countdown as a narrative device, as a way of very explicitly representing the march of time towards a catastrophic event. What is particularly striking in *4 3 2 1* is the wide variety of categories of things whose countdown announces an impending disaster. Auster mines the narration with counts of time, money, or even pages or books.

As a coming-of-age story, *4 3 2 1* narrates the various stages of life of Archie Ferguson: childhood or boyhood, adolescence, adulthood. These stages of life are considered to be significant events, as much as the accidents that punctuate the course of Ferguson's life. In all of the four parallel timelines, each stage of life is seen as an event, an impending doom: 'even if he was still just a prepubescent boy of twelve, enough was stirring inside him for Ferguson to know that the days of his boyhood were numbered' [*4 3 2 1*: 108]. The use of the attribute 'numbered' in this commonplace phrase points to the end, the impending doom of adolescence, the imminence of turning 13. Aging implies a counting upward of the measure of the passing of time, but also a counting downward to the next stage. Ferguson experiences aging, or growing up, not as a continuum, but as a series of events—events with a fixed beginning and an end, between which the next stage is already imminent. The title *4 3 2 1* could thus summarize Archie's experience of life and his experience of time: an experience that resembles the ticking of a time-bomb.

In the second timeline—the one in which young Ferguson dies—the narrator recounts his imminent adolescence: 'the boy who had broken his leg at six and gashed his foot at three and nearly drowned at five, who had weathered the depredations of the Gang of Nine, and the Band of Four [...] had been counting the days until he entered the kingdom of erotic bliss [...] [178]. Life for Archie Ferguson is an experience in numbers, an exercise in counting—in counting down to an event. In so doing, he turns puberty and adolescence, into an event: an expected and foreseeable experience, with a fixed temporal mark of occurrence. This event, or an event of this nature, is then the zero that the title announces precisely without announcing, without naming—or rather, without numbering—it. Zero is at once the ineluctable, the ungraspable, the unnamable event. Adolescence, like death, is a certainty, but at the same time, it is an event whose occurrence is unforeseeable (even when expected); it is an ungraspable passage or movement in time. Archie, through this countdown, is turning his adolescence into a foreseeable occurrence, as if in an act of resistance to its very unforeseeability.

Archie's unavoidable break-up with his girlfriend Anne-Marie is also conveyed through a countdown, not of time, but of pages. His letters to her are at first 'nine pages' long, then 'six

pages', then 'two', then a mere 'postcard', until he understands that 'he was never going to write to her again' [133]—'never' acting as the zero that terminates the sequence.

The countdown to the zero of disaster, the running out of time, is also to be found in the gradual depletion of resources, and more specifically, the running out of money. In *4 3 2 1*, this is seen for instance in one of the timelines in which Archie slowly runs out of his funding during his years as a student at Columbia University—an autobiographical episode that is fictionalized in a number of Auster's texts, especially *Moon Palace*, where Marco Stanley Fogg's possessions diminish one by one (his books, other objects he owns, food, money) until he finds himself living in Central Park. Running out of money, and at the same time, running out of time, is also what structures the plot of another of Auster's novels: *The Music of Chance*. Nashe's inheritance diminishes month after month. He then plays a game of poker with Flower and Stone in which the stakes are high and money runs out, and Nashe finds himself imprisoned on Flower and Stone's property. Auster's attachment to the motif of running out of money is anything but insignificant. Money is countable matter, intimately tied to numbers: money has numerical value and is represented by a number. Its running out, and therefore the countdown of the numerical value a sum represents, is the appropriate metaphor for the imminence of a disaster. It makes the looming disaster something that can be counted, accounted for, and recounted. To recount and to give an account of something are synonyms for storytelling. Storytelling—which for Auster amounts to narrating a disastrous event—is therefore inseparable from counting. Moreover, numbers (in the form of money) allow the measuring of the passing and gradual lack of time: as such, resorting to the metaphor of the running out of money in order to recount tales of disaster better conveys—concretely, arithmetically, unambiguously—the concept of imminence. Numbers serve to make up for the imprecision of language.

Linked to counting is also the figure of the list, and unlike any other Paul Auster novel, *4 3 2 1* abounds with lists. One of the most striking lists in *4 3 2 1* is the list given to Ferguson 3, by his Aunt Mildred, of a hundred books that he starts to read one by one, making his way down the list, following its original order. He reaches the ninety-first book (which is Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*) on the list when he dies in that particular narrative timeline. His death is told by how far down the list he had made his way. Not only does the list become a metaphor for his life, but also a measure of his life: reading each book becomes living. Like the running out of money, running out of life is presented through the figure of the list of books, and the running out of books on that list. The motif of books running out, or slowly depleting, strikingly appears in *Moon Palace*: the 1492 books Fogg inherits from Uncle Victor first serve as furniture, and then turn into money when he begins selling them; 1492 books slowly become zero books, and eventually 0 dollars and 0 cents.

But is zero really the number of disaster? In *4 3 2 1*, does counting down necessarily mean counting down to zero? Or perhaps is it 1 that marks the occurrence of the disaster? *4 3 2 1* offers two avenues or both possibilities: zero as disaster and one as disaster.

Zero unambiguously denotes the event of interest, its origin in time (as in Italo Calvino's *Ti con zero*, translated into English as *t zero*) or in space (the 'Ground zero' of a nuclear blast or the 9/11 attacks), and indeed, zero is frequently associated with a disaster in *4 3 2 1*. Following the death of his father, Archie and his mother 'would be starting again from zero' [81]. The disastrous zero is also Ferguson's awareness of his stupidity: 'He was dumb, so perfectly dumb and hopeless that he found it embarrassing to be himself, an idiot child, present but not

accounted for, a body occupying space in the same way a chair or bed occupied space, nothing more than a witless zero, and if he meant to change it, he would have to get started now' [58]. Zero is not only a number, but also a metaphor for emptiness, and in Ferguson's case, a metaphor for ignorance, turning him into a body 'not accounted for,' a body that remains outside of all counting, a body, in other words, emptied of itself. The emptiness of which zero measures the size appears in the third timeline of the penultimate section:

Empty. That was the word for it, he said to himself, as he sat down on the sofa and took his first sip of wine, the same *empty* space Vivian had talked about when describing how she had felt after finishing her own book. Not empty in the sense of standing alone in a room without furniture—but empty in the sense of feeling hollowed out. Yes, that was it, hollowed out in the way a woman was hollowed out after giving birth. [665]

In this passage, specifically and ironically, emptiness is reaching the end of writing a book. An achievement is experienced as nothing. But the counting down to zero, to nothing, is not the only experience of disaster. If zero measures emptiness, one measures solitude. Solitude in *4 3 2 1*, and more generally, throughout Auster's novels and autobiographies, is at once creative and destructive: it is creative insofar as it is the condition for creating a work, for writing; it is destructive in its signaling the imminent doom of death and disappearance:

Only one thing was certain. One by one, the imaginary Fergusons would die, just as Artie Federman had died, but only after he had learned to love them as if they were real, only after the thought of seeing them die had become unbearable to him, and then he would be alone with himself again, the last man standing. [863]

The 'last man standing,' who can be counted or numbered as one points to zero—the certain and ineluctable zero lurking in the shadows. The last man standing perpetuates the counting down. Solitude is also experienced in Archie's inability to procreate: he acknowledges himself as 'The last of the Fergusons' [612]. *4 3 2 1* can thus also be read as the countdown to the extinction of a lineage.

2. Sequences, narration, and counting up

While our focus thus far has been on 4-3-2-1 as a sequence leading to something, to the catastrophic event, be it represented by 1 or 0, it is also worth considering the uniform and stable relationship that runs, like a chain, throughout its constituents. 3 is to 4 what 2 is to 3 and 1 is to 2. These numbers 4, 3, 2, and 1 are bound up within the logic of a sequence that is ineluctable, and that represents the causality of events that has been one of Auster's central concerns, permeating his writing from the *Invention of Solitude* to *4 3 2 1*. 4-3-2-1 numbers a series of seemingly trivial events leading up to one crucial event—a disaster or catastrophe—that changes the course of the narrative and the life of the protagonist. The emphasis placed on the importance of causality as the key to storytelling is to be seen throughout *4 3 2 1*, but perhaps most explicitly when in the first timeline the young Ferguson 1, having broken his leg from falling out of a tree, traces out all of the events that led up to his accident (his parents' deciding to move, his meeting and befriending a certain Charlie Brower, making a bet with him to climb up a tree, and so on), and then lying in bed wondering 'what if,' imagining the different scenarios and courses his life would have taken but did not take. Indeed, *4 3 2 1* is the point of culmination of Auster's life-long dedication to the question of causality that structures experience. *4 3 2 1* is, in a way, a novelistic rewriting of Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' (this poem is more than a simple allusion: it is explicitly and repeatedly mentioned throughout

the novel). *4 3 2 1* explores the various roads taken and not taken by Archibald Ferguson. The numbers in the title therefore also serve as markers of events on a timeline, and the space that separates the numbers in the title marks the time between two events. 4, 3, 2, and 1, then, all at some point become 0—the moment of the occurrence of the event. But numbers in *4 3 2 1* are not only involved in this sequence of counting down; the reverse—i.e. increasing sequences—is also a movement that structures *4 3 2 1*.

Auster has a certain and unmistakable attachment to the materiality of a text which resurfaces regularly in *4 3 2 1*—attachment to the three-dimensional book-object itself, and to the way it is delineated by the increasing sequence of the page and chapter numbers, as well as to the one-dimensional chronological or narrative thread. A sign of this attachment can be found in the way the numerous fictitious pieces of writing penned by the three Archies are systematically described by their number of pages or words: ‘The text came to fifty-four pages’ [728], ‘two years to finish that two-hundred-and-forty-six-page novel’ [750], ‘a sequence of twenty-five-hundred-word stories’ [797], ‘he had one hundred and twenty-two finished pages’ [843], ‘The manuscript came to a total of one thousand one hundred and thirty-three double-spaced pages’ [864].

Literary texts, whether in their creation or their reading, are experienced by Ferguson in *4 3 2 1* through their materiality or their spatial dimension: the thickness of the pages occupied by a book or a story. What runs parallel to the numbered time of the sequence of events in the novel is the numbering of the pages: a countdown measured by a count-up, a sequence that marks, in the manner of milestones, the distance and time covered. In addition to page numbers, Auster sometimes explicitly uses the typographical artifice of the numbered or itemized list, especially towards the end of the novel. The events leading to Archie’s father’s death [66-67], the causes of the breakup with Celia [831], or the events of the year 1966 [847] are presented in the form of such enumerations. This suggests exhaustiveness, as if the narrator were methodically delivering all of the information known to him, but the numbers simultaneously operate as typographical milestones. This tendency of turning the text of the novel into its own table of contents is new in *4 3 2 1*, but it is also reminiscent of Auster’s habit of explicitly revealing, through his narrators, how he is going to perform his own storytelling tricks, and how his story is going to unfold, as if to announce a new number that will blow the reader away. In the very first paragraph of *Moon Palace*, M.S. Fogg announces: ‘That was the first part. From then on, strange things happened to me’ [*Moon Palace* : 1]. Similarly, the narrator of *Leviathan* comments: ‘That was the event that started the whole miserable story’ [*Leviathan* : 73]. This process is also at work when Auster writes in *4 3 2 1*: ‘Nineteen Sixty-Nine was the year of the seven conundrums, the eight bombs, the fourteen refusals, the two broken bones, the number two hundred and sixty-three, and the one life-changing joke’ [*4 3 2 1* : 847]. In a single sentence, Auster, through his narrator, not only provides a glimpse of all the events about to be told, but also sets ticking for them a typographical time-bomb.

The numbering of chapters, like the numbering of pages, is a practice that is blinding in its obviousness, a typographical practice that authors, publishers, and readers may take for granted. The numbering of the chapters of a novel appears redundant in that it repeats the linearity of the page numbers, and superimposes a linear, increasing order to a story that might in fact not be linear or chronological at all. In *4 3 2 1*, however, the chapter numbers perfectly match the structure of the novel. They reveal the two-dimensional matrix in which the text is inscribed: the first dimension is a linear chronological axis, and the second dimension materializes the four different timelines.

For a novel that is centered on the question of the event of death, and its inevitability, and the inseparability of life and death, number sequences are particularly appropriate. More specifically, the chiasmus between the numerous decreasing sequences (as exposed in the first part of this study) and the increasing sequences (chapter numbers, lists, enumerations) points in the direction of the chiasmus between life and death. 4 3 2 1 can then be read as a novel in which Ferguson ponders a central question: is living, growing up, and aging an accumulation of days (an increasing sequence), or is it a countdown towards death? In this sequence of numbered chapters and timelines occurs a strange phenomenon: certain chapters, although numbered, are empty. In chapter 2.2, Archie Ferguson dies at the age of 13. In the subsequent sections of the corresponding timeline (3.2, 4.2, 5.2 and so on), the chapters are therefore left empty: nothing other than the chapters' numbers are inscribed on the pages. These empty chapters come to resemble tombstones marking Archie's grave. But by their mute eloquence, they wind up prolonging the life of the character: Archie Ferguson lives on, even if only as dead. Such immortality in the narrative is possible only through the use of numbers and typographical play. Through such a numerical and deliberately non-alphabetical representation of his death, Ferguson becomes immortal. Numbers therefore gain power over the letter. While numbers do not *refer* to anything, unlike words, numbers wind up becoming more eloquent than words.

3. Numbers, names, and notations

Numbers are interesting entities in a literary text precisely because their power of signification vastly differs from that of words. In this section, not only will we examine the relationship between numbers and words, but also the relationship between numbers and names. At times, in the novel, numbers appear in a cluster, saturated in a paragraph, within just a sentence:

[...] Billy and Joanna [...] tipped him off about an apartment six doors down the block, a one-room studio that went on the market just days after their first meal together, and that was how Ferguson wound up renting his third-floor digs on East Eighty-ninth Street for seventy-seven dollars and fifty cents a month. [719]

These precise details or these numbers are more than just an attempt to create verisimilitude. They are more than just the 'narrative *luxury*' or the 'futile details' in the narrative fabric that Roland Barthes discusses in his essay on the 'The Reality Effect'.¹ The saturation of these numbers turns the reality effect into an absurdity of precision. But the fact that these details are numerical turns the narration into an account of reality (albeit fictional), into an exercise of counting reality—Ferguson's reality. Numbers in this passage become the matter of which reality is made. One must observe that Auster tells us about New York not through elaborate descriptions of its streets and avenues, but simply by referring to the numbers assigned to them.

Another numerical absurdity is to be seen towards the end of the novel, in the timeline in which Ferguson 4 tells the reader, in a classic Austerian metafictional gesture, about his writing

¹ '[Such] notations are scandalous (from the point of view of structure), or, what is even more disturbing, they seem to correspond to a kind of narrative *luxury*, lavish to the point of offering many futile details and thereby increasing the cost of narrative information.' ('The Reality Effect' [BARTHES: 141]; original emphasis.)

of the novel 4 3 2 1. Ferguson describes the numbers' game that allows him to escape being drafted to Vietnam:

Three hundred and sixty-six possible numbers, one for every day of the year including leap year, one for the birthday of every young man in the United States, a blind draw of numbers that would tell you whether you were free or not free, whether you were going off to fight or staying home, whether you were going to prison or not going to prison, the whole shape of your future life to be sculpted by the hands of General Pure Dumb Luck, commander of urns, coffins, and all national graveyards. Absurd. [856]

The absurdity here is of course in the very process of using a lottery to decide such a matter as life and death (a theme taken to its extreme in Borges's *The Lottery in Babylon*). But the absurdity is also in the reduction of people, of young American men, into a number—a number that becomes an indicator or a symbol of chance. The draft number does not mean anything because it does not count anything. For instance, the number 257 does not amount to two hundred and fifty-seven items. Besides, the difference between numbers is also erased: 337 is no longer greater than 274. The numbers only point to one of two possibilities or two paths: drafted or not drafted—as if a set of words or signifiers could only have two possible signifieds.

Numbers can serve as substitutes for words, but they can also be stand-ins for names—and one may note here the striking resemblance between the French *nom* (name) and *nombre* (number). Ferguson 3, we are told in the novel, winds up not getting drafted, due to his being unfit for service. This decision is conferred upon him through the official classification on his draft card as 4-F: 'because he openly confessed to the staff psychiatrist that he was attracted to men as well as to women, a new draft card was issued to him later that summer with his new classification typed onto the front: 4-F Feckless—frazzled—fucked-up—and free' [452]. This new classification is a new name in the form of a number. The narrator plays on this ambiguity and ambivalence between name and number by making the 4-F mean feckless, frazzled, fucked-up and free—words or attributes describing each of the four Archie Fergusons of the novel. But the 'four F' could very well refer to the existence of four different Fergusons. This ambiguity between name and number is also to be seen in the naming of Ferguson. At the very end of the novel, the narrator tells us that

Ferguson, whose name was not Ferguson, found it intriguing to imagine himself having been born a Ferguson or a Rockefeller, someone with a different name from the X that had been attached to him when he was pulled from his mother's womb on March 3, 1947. In point of fact, his father's father had not been given another name when he arrived at Ellis Island on January 1, 1900—but what if he had? [862]

The problem of naming and the forgetting of the name (a performative gesture which becomes the name), with which the novel opens, returns in its closing pages. If his grandfather had not forgotten the intended name (Rockefeller) and expressed his forgetting in Yiddish (*Ik hob fargessen*), the officer at Ellis Island would not have named him Ferguson. A few lines below, he calls it 'A name born out of a joke about names.' We also learn in this passage that his lack of name at birth was represented by an X. In algebra, X has a distinctive status: it names the unknown; it names something whose value is to be determined. As such, it is both a letter and a number, and at the same time, neither a letter nor a number. And it is this ambivalent sign that replaces his name, and in so doing, becomes his name.

After having treated 4-3-2-1 as a decreasing sequence made of numbers, it would be worth considering, as a conclusion, what 4-3-2-1 as a whole, as a single linguistic unit, could signify. As a decreasing sequence, 4-3-2-1 could become the name of Auster's favorite narrative trick: the foretold, imminent disaster.

4 3 2 1 is not only the title of Auster's novel, but also the title of the novel that Ferguson 4 writes, and which, according to his description,¹ is similar in terms of plot, structure and content to Auster's 4 3 2 1. Just like in Borges's *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, this situation leads to a strange state of superposition—a specular relationship between two identical texts that acquire a different meaning: Ferguson's fictitious autobiography, and Auster's real, cryptically autobiographical piece of fiction.

Because 4 3 2 1 revisits and rewrites Auster's career-long concerns, it can be read as an accumulation of all of his previous works: an encyclopedia not of the world but of the Austerian inner world. 4 3 2 1 could also be the originary novel that he conceived of before any of the others, the only one he meant to write, but which he wound up writing and rewriting over and over—the novel that exists only in its multiplicity.

At once a mnemonic for his narrative technique, a title of book(s), fictitious, dreamed of, or real, 4 3 2 1 would thus appear to be the elusive key, the alpha and omega of his entire *œuvre*: the novel that gives birth to itself. 4-3-2-1 does not lead to 'zero' but, in a self-referential movement, to 4 3 2 1.

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¹ 'Identical but different, meaning four boys with the same parents, the same bodies, and the same genetic material, but each one living in a different house in a different town with his own set of circumstances. Spun this way and that by the effect of those circumstances, the boys would begin to diverge as the book moved forward, crawling or walking or galloping their way through childhood, adolescence, and early manhood as more and more distinct characters, each one on his own separate path, and yet all of them still the same person, three imaginary versions of himself, and then himself thrown in as Number Four for good measure, the author of the book, but the details of the book were still unknown to him at that point, he would understand what he was trying to do only after he started doing it, but the essential thing was to love those other boys as if they were real, to love them as much as he loved himself, as much as he had loved the boy who had dropped dead before his eyes on a hot summer afternoon in 1961, and now that his father was dead as well, this was the book he needed to write—for them' [4 3 2 1 : 863].