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The Self-Consuming Narrative: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy

Of course it happened. Of course it didn't happen.

Thomas Pynchon: Gravity's Rainbow

All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out.

Paul Auster: The Locked Room

Postmodernist fiction or "metafiction"¹ is an introspective narrative form: it provides a key for the narrative analysis. The door of the postmodernist novel seems to open easily, but it leads to another door. Questions follow questions, and the answers become interim: they are short corridors between two doors.

Paul Auster is a second generation postmodernist writer. As a true follower of Samuel Beckett he tries "to find a form that accommodates the mess"², because "[literature is] an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers. For that reason, it becomes essential to ask the right questions."³

The *New York Trilogy*, Auster's first novel, swarms with questions. In the maze of the *City of Glass* we follow *Ghosts* to reach the door of *The Locked Room*. This

¹ "Metafiction", as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction - that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity." Hutcheon 1

² Auster (1990b) 113 (from an interview with Beckett by Tom Driver).

³ *ibid*

quest means constant meditation on the nature of the story, on personal identity, on the narrator's persona and the problem of language.

THE LOST GENRE

Paul Auster's novels are classified as detective stories by many of his readers. The writer himself, however, might have had a slightly different public in mind than the average mystery story reader, because he published the *Trilogy* under his own name, stubbornly sticking to the text of the book even when - before its first publication - the *City of Glass* was rejected by seventeen different publishers. By the time the first volume of the *Trilogy* appeared, Auster was a successful pseudonymous mystery story writer (*Squeeze Play* was published in 1982, under the name of Paul Benjamin).

Being so familiar with the genre, Auster eagerly uses its tricks and treats in his first novel, carefully blending the suspense of the mystery with the existentialist questions and narcissistic self-awareness of the postmodernist novel. Auster does not merely seek a good story in a mystery novel, he also admires the way the good mystery is written: nothing is meaningless, every bit and piece gains its own significance.

Although it seems clear that *The New York Trilogy* (together with some of Auster's later novels) does not fit the tradition of the "well-made mystery story", it is also clear that many of its elements are strongly connected to the genre. The most obvious of these is the title of each novel, especially *Ghosts* (which is a typical paperback title) and *The Locked Room* (which refers to a classical type of mystery story). As far as the clues - the crucial props of the detective story - are concerned, Auster seems to play a fair game with the reader by fulfilling the requirement of accurate description⁴. His characters are peculiar enough to arouse the interest of any mystery story reader; his typical heroes seem to be people with a more than average moral sense. They are ideal detectives, just as Raymond Chandler describes the type: "He must be the best man in his world an a good enough man for any world"⁵

The "certain spirit of detachment"⁶, which is another trait of the good mystery novel, is also present in Auster's *Trilogy*, and this, according to Chandler⁷, makes a

⁴ "[the clue] must be accurately described to the reader, as the detective sees and feels it" Rodell 266

⁵ Chandler 237

⁶ *ibid*

story realistic. “In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist.” - Auster admits in an interview - “What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in”⁸.

The basic formula of the detective fiction is that somebody (usually a professional detective) is in search of something (the solution of a crime) and/or someone (the criminal). The essential presupposition of the detective story is that problems have a suitable solution, and, with cold logic and careful examination, the mystery can be reduced to facts.

The detective story always has a solution. In this sense it also has a comforting role, being a type of “rhetorical presentation” as described by Stanley Fish:

A presentation is rhetorical if it satisfies the needs of its readers... the experience of such a form will be flattering, for it tells the reader that what he has always thought about the world is true and that the ways of his thinking are sufficient.⁹

Paul Auster’s “detective stories”, however, do not perform this function. The reader has to confront the fact that the basic questions remain unanswered, although the stories have a certain kind of ending. Suspense, just as in a detective novel, is present, but this suspense does not seem to cease with the ending of the book. The story itself is ended, but the mystery remains unsolved. The Austerian fiction then is “dialectical” in the Fishian sense:

A dialectical presentation ... is disturbing, for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by. It is didactic in a special sense; it does not preach the truth, but asks that its readers discover the truth for themselves ...¹⁰

The “dialecticism” of *The New York Trilogy* is partly the consequence of the disturbing narrative structure of the book, but, to a greater extent, it can be attributed to the fact that the greatest mystery the three novels are concerned with is the act, the content and the result of writing: books are quoted, notes are made, reports are written. The written material is always expected to provide some revelation, an explanation of the mystery (what is Stillman’s “project” in *City of*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ McCaffey - Synda 4

⁹ Fish 1

¹⁰ *ibid*

Glass? what is Black writing about in *Ghosts*? how can Fanshawe explain his disappearance with the help of his diary in *The Locked Room*?

At the end of the novels, however, no such thing happens. In *City of Glass* Quinn, the main hero, vanishes without a single trace, and the story proves to be an account of his fate narrated by an outsider, who is ignorant of the true weight and importance of his thoughts and the happenings of Quinn's life. At the end of *Ghosts* a disturbing feeling of suspicion might arise in the reader of the novel concerning the narration: it seems likely that the novel he holds in his hand is nothing else than the very book that Black, the writer in the story, was writing, based on the reports of the detective hired by him. It is possible that, while Blue watched him, Black was watching Blue, and he wrote exactly the story of this "double-spying", the monotonous happenings of his own life and the life of Blue as well. This supposition is grounded on Blue's thorough knowledge concerning the contents of Black's Book: "He [Blue] reads the story right through, every word of it from beginning to end. (...) Black was right, he says to himself. I knew it all by heart." (232) Thus the story does not reflect anything but itself, it is the story of a story, a mirror reflecting another.

In parallel, the end of *The Locked Room* does not reveal anything. Although the quest is ended, the narrator does not and cannot explain the basic question of Fanshawe's self-imposed disappearance and death. He reads through Fanshawe's last notes, but finds them beyond understanding, and instead of delving into it he tears apart and throws out the notebook that is supposed to solve the mystery ("It's all in the notebook" - Fanshawe has suggested.)

This is certainly not a traditional handling of the detective-story genre. Paul Auster himself admits this in an interview: "I was employing these detective conventions only as a means to an end, as a way to get somewhere else entirely... mystery novels always give answers; my work is about asking questions."¹¹ Consequently, the story or plot is not the one and only thing that evokes interest. There is another layer of the story that is more than the solution of a criminal case. This is the realm of questions, of meditations about personal identity (Quinn's in *City of Glass*, Blue's and Black's in *Ghosts*, and that of the anonymous narrator of *The Locked Room*), language (this involves old Stillman's quest for the language of Eden in the first novel, the literarily untrained detective's desperate search for the right words in *Ghosts*, and Fanshawe's strange diary at the end of *The Locked*

¹¹ McCaffey-Synda 6

Room), and also the tradition and innovation in novel writing (thus the constant references to classical - mainly American - writers in each novel.)

These questions are not meant to be solved by the novel, and thus will remain open at the end. Instead of a comforting novel we get a confrontational one, which makes the readers to meditate on the problems raised by the fictional work even after they had finished reading it. This narrative type is “anti-detective fiction”, as William Spanos defines it: “It is (...) no accident that the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination is the anti-detective story (...) the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to ‘detect’ and/or to psychoanalyse in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (...).”¹² Paul Auster, as a postmodern writer, aims to disturb and even distract the reader from the story by constantly questioning the genre of the novel, its authorship, its narration and its characters as well. His works fit in a tradition established by Kafka, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Borges. *The New York Trilogy* can be described by the Sartreian definition of the

anti-novel that reads like a detective story, [which is] ... a parody on the novel of “quest” into which the author has introduced a sort of impassioned amateur detective [who] doesn’t find anything ... and gives up the investigation as a result of a metamorphosis.¹³

The detective genre, therefore, has consumed itself in Auster’s narratives. Something that seems like a traditional mystery story reveals itself to be a narcissistic metafiction, even metamystery.

THE LOST IDENTITY

The pattern of the Austerian story is very simple: “Something happens, and from the moment it begins to happen, nothing can ever be the same again”¹⁴: “It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night...” (*City of Glass*); “White wants Blue to follow a man named Black” (*Ghosts*); and “...I received a letter from a woman named Sophie Fanshawe” (*The Locked Room*).

¹² Spanos 81

¹³ Spanos 85

¹⁴ Auster (1990b) 81

There is a life at stake in every novel: Quinn disappears; Black dies; Fanshawe commits suicide. The novel begins, and the characters become part of a situation they won't be able to quit, and which will consume their lives. The protagonist is asked to do a job for someone, and he becomes obsessed by it. His life and identity are ruined for the sake of the case. The detective-writer and the writer-detective are giving up everything in their devoted search for something that cannot be found.

Auster, like Beckett, "begins with little, ends with even less".¹⁵ A man is following another man. A detective keeps a record of a man he is watching. A writer writes. A story is being written.

"The writer and the detective are interchangeable" says the narrator of *City of Glass*, (9) because "the detective is ... in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all ... things together and make sense of them... The reader sees the world throughout the detective's eyes... [things] might begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence."

This - almost didactic - theoretical grounding is turned into practice in all three of the New York novels. A writer, who has turned into a detective, has to experience the dangers of getting too much and too sensitively involved in other people's lives. This also means that, in taking on the disguise (and the name) of a detective, he will consequently lose his identity. Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, who wants to see how it feels taking up the personality of his own fictional character, detective Max Work, has to use a name other than his own, and gradually aims to get rid of his own personality through the power of his new name. Quinn is successful in hiding and disappearing under the name of William Wilson, the detective story writer.

The mad professor, Peter Stillmann, identifies himself with Henry Dark, his own fictional character. In *Ghosts Black*, under the name and personality of White, hires detective Blue. In *The Locked Room* the anonymous narrator is possessed by the thought that he is identical with Fanshawe, the person he is chasing. This conscious consuming of the self creates a world of uncertainty, a world where there is no fixed point, where one means two and two means one, when one person equals three or even more, where one personality dissolves into another.

The most complex system of such relations is established in *City of Glass*; here the structure of connected identities is the following:

Daniel Quinn - Paul Auster (Quinn "wandered through the station,... as if in the body of Paul Auster," [62])

¹⁵ *op. cit.* 150

Daniel Quinn - William Wilson ("It was then he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books," [4])

Daniel Quinn - Max Work ("Work had become a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother," [7])

Daniel Quinn - Peter Stillman senior ("It felt as though he had lost half of himself. For two weeks he had been tied by an invisible thread to the old man," [110])

Daniel Quinn - Daniel Auster ("The boy looked at him from across the room and laughed: 'Good-bye myself!' he said," [122])

Daniel Auster - Peter Quinn ("In his dream ... he found himself walking down Broadway, holding Auster's son by the hand," [126])

Peter Quinn - Peter Stillman junior ("Uncannily, in that first moment, Quinn thought of his own dead son," [17]; "It did not help, perhaps, that his son's name had also been Peter," [42])

Peter Stillman junior - Peter Stillmann senior

Peter Stillman senior - Henry Dark ("I needed him, you see. I had certain ideas at the time that were too dangerous ... So I pretended they have come from someone else." [96])

Henry Dark - Humpty Dumpty (Humpty Dumpty is "the origin of Henry Dark," [99] - thus one fictional character (Dark) invented by another fictional character (Stillman) stands for yet another fictional character, Humpty Dumpty).

Daniel Quinn - Don Quixote ("He wondered why he had the same initials as Don Quixote," [115])

Similar pair relations can be found in the other two novels (in *Ghosts*: Brown-Blue, White-Blue, Blue-Black, Black-White; in *The Locked Room*: narrator-Fanshawe). The characters take on (or are forced to take on) other personalities, trying to acquire a new view of the world.

The experiment of seeing through someone else's eye has an elaborate theoretical background in the novel, and it is connected with the problem of the identity of writer and detective: "Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter 'i', standing for "investigator", it was "I" in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him," (9-10).

This pun becomes a leading principle in the novel. The notions “seeing through other’s eye” mean the other man’s “I” or personality, and at the moment Quinn - who is William Willson and Max Work at the same time - enters the house of Peter Stillman under the name of Paul Auster and says “I must keep my eyes open”, it can be also taken as keeping the “I”s or personalities open.

There is another element in the trilogy that is especially confusing if we take into consideration the reaction of the reader to these effects. In this case not personalities are lost, but names: the names of the characters are attached to other characters, like the name of Peter Stillman or the name Henry Dark in the final part of the Trilogy (here the narrator is chasing a character that identifies himself as a certain Peter Stillman). The same confusing effect is acquired when the writer uses his own name and pseudo-personality (a character named Paul Auster) in *City of Glass*.

The Trilogy provokes a disturbing question: if the name itself is not part of the personality, then what distinguishes one man from the other? The clothes, maybe: “men in brown and gray and blue and green, women in yellow and grey and white and pink, children in sneakers, children in shoes, children in cowboy boots.” (66). However, as the clothes play a great role in the Austerian world, they also imply that changing them means a change of personality (we may think about the several disguises used in the novel). Children still believe, that wearing similar clothes means being similar: “If Fanshawe came to the playground wearing black sneakers, then I would ask for black sneakers.” (247) Wearing someone’s clothes means taking on their identity: “[wearing Pavel Shum’s uniform meant that] I was stepping into a dead man’s body, that I had been turned into Pavel Shum’s ghost.”¹⁶

Taking off clothes, however, does not mean taking off personality. Rather, it means returning to one’s self. In the first novel of the Trilogy nakedness means getting rid of all outer expectations and inner beliefs about one’s personality, life reduced to being, the active man to a passive watcher and thinker, to the “naked eye”¹⁷ (the naked “I”). This is the moment of finding identity by losing it: to be everybody and nobody.

By entering the “locked room” (which, in this context, means the inner self, the inside of the skull, the human mind) one will have to lose everything that is not an integral part of oneself, just as Quinn gets rid of all his earthly possessions except his red notebook and his pen. “I remain in the room in which I am writing this ... It

¹⁶ Auster (1989) 120

¹⁷ “the realm of the naked eye” Auster (1990b) 81

is a journey through space, even if I get nowhere, even as I end up in the same place I started"¹⁸ - writes Paul Auster in the poetic prose text, "White Spaces". This is the position of the writer: to be everywhere and nowhere, to be everybody and nobody.

THE LOST CHARACTER

The idea of the self-consuming character is an echo of the idea of self-consuming fiction, as explained by Stanley Fish¹⁹. The self-erasure of the characters is a highly disturbing factor of postmodernist fiction: "(...) projected existents - locales, objects, characters, and so on - can have their existence revoked. The effect is most acute, of course, in the case of characters, since it is especially through projected people that the reader becomes involved in the fictional world."²⁰ This is characteristic of Auster's Trylogy, as emphasised by his critics: "[In *City of Glass*] Both modern and postmodern notions of character are exploded"²¹. The characters are not only "consumed" (pushed out of existence by being ignored by the author) but also "self-consuming" or self-erasing. This is especially emphatic in *The Locked Room*, where Fanshawe, the doppelganger of the narrator, places his own existence 'sous rature' by his consequent dissappearances.

The most interesting feature of Fanshawe's character is that he is virtually unseen. He is only a "ghost" of a character. His figure is emphatically and enigmatically fictional: only a letter or a voice behind a door. He is the mysteriously and untraceably vanished killer of the "locked room mystery", but he is also the victim - he is both the object and the agent of his fictionality.

THE LOST WRITER AND NARRATOR

In *The New York Trilogy* Paul Auster has created a manifold structure of characters. He, the writer (let him be indicated by W1) has created a special anonymous narrator who seems to be the organiser and the writer of the stories (W2). Through the first two novels W2 seems to be a faceless voice, of whom the reader knows almost nothing, but who is involved in the stories in such a way that it

¹⁸ *op. cit.* 85

¹⁹ this is based on the consideration of "meaning as an event, something that is happening between the words and the reader's mind." Fish 389.

²⁰ McHale 105

²¹ Lavender 54

raises our attention and makes us try to guess who he is. At the end of *City of Glass* the narrator reveals himself as the friend of one of the characters, Paul Auster the writer: "I called my friend Auster that evening ... He said that I was the only person he could trust." (157) In *Ghosts* the narrator ends the book saying: "For we must remember, that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood. Anything is possible, therefore. I myself prefer to think that he went far away." (232) *The Locked Room* begins with the narrator telling a story of his own, being the narrator and the character of this particular novel. There is a hint, however, at the end of the Trilogy, that he is not only the narrator of this story but the writer of the whole book: "The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. The same holds for the two books that come before it, *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*." (346) It is not clear that this passage is the voice of the interfering W1 or W2 can really be considered as the writer of the three novels. Either one is true, W1 and W2 are closely related or mingled, even, because the narration is not consistent. Once the narrator seems to be omniscient ("In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself in the town dump of his childhood," 87) another time he is highly limited ("At this point the story grows obscure. The information has run out, and the events that follow ... will never be known," 157). Once he seems uninvolved and appears to set up all the elements of the story through his own assumptions ("The address is unimportant. But let's say Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument," 163), another time he is totally involved and unable to change anything in the story ("I was there, I read those words with my own eyes, and yet I find it hard to trust in what I'm saying," 371) The same is true for the time of narration: in the same story it is once - at the beginning - defined as "present" ("The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change," 162), while at the end - it is defined as "past" ("all this took place more that thirty years ago." 232) In every story there are constant references to a certain "ending" - a mysterious and sinister time-to-come, which is the decisive element in the characters' fate - but at the end of the novels we know very little or nothing of what really happened at this decisive moment (we do not know if Quinn died or not, and we do not know for sure if Fanshawe really committed suicide).

The question of narration gets more complicated if we find out that W1 can not only be related to the Paul Auster of the first story and also W2, the narrator, but he has many common features with Fanshawe, the writer, in the third story. This latter statement is based on some autobiographical resemblances, but also on the fact that

a piece of writing by Fanshawe (about the Arctic explorer Peter Freuchen) can be found word by word in an early work of Paul Auster (W1) which has the same title as one of Fanshawe's books: *Ground Work*.

When the time of the novel is obscure, the viewpoint is uncertain and the characters are constantly changing their identities, it is hard to pass a judgement about the narrator's person. The author, just as the narrator, seems to be lost in the manifold structure of uncertainties. Auster, the author, erases his own autobiographical presence by creating narrators and characters, but at the same time he also emphasises his existence by his pseudo-personalities and the multiple identities of the characters in the novel (like Quinn²², Auster the character²³, Fanshawe, and the narrator in the third novel²⁴).

THE LOST LANGUAGE

"New York Babel" is the title of one of Auster's early essays on a book by a schizophrenic writer, Louis Wolfson, who mixes up the words of all human languages, thus creating a new, unified language. His act is the reverse of that of God's at Babel: Wolfson does in some way re-create the "Ur-language" from its surviving fragments. In another essay, "The Art of Hunger", Auster meditates on "thingless words and wordless things", on words "in no language", "words with no meaning"²⁵. His essays and novels are deeply concerned with the problem of language, because the word "hides the thing it is supposed to reveal. And if we cannot even name a common, everyday object that we hold in our hands, how can we expect to speak of the things that truly concern us? Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words in use, we will continue to be lost." (94) The philosophical problem of "wordless things" (as the "broken umbrella"²⁶, that has lost its function but has not lost its name) and "thingless words" (as the sound sequences the Stillmans invent to express exactly what they mean) is solved in Humpty Dumpty, who is a "master of the language", "the future of human hopes" and "our clue to salvation", who makes "language answer our human needs." (98)

²² "Quinn is a paper-Auster, a mere linguistic construct of the author himself". Russel 73

²³ "[I wanted] to implicate myself in the machinery of the book. I don't mean my autobiographical self, I mean my author self." McCaffey-Synda 14

²⁴ "such stratagems as [...] his introduction of himself into the dramatis personae of the *City of Glass* is too precious by half". Brawer 68

²⁵ Auster (1990b) 110

²⁶ Orlando's "magic umbrella" Auster (1989) 209

As language is an inadequate form of communication, literature becomes endangered by lack of comprehension. In *City of Glass* Quinn meets one of his readers on a railway station, and he feels disappointed and even disgusted: "He did not like the girl sitting next to him, and it offended him that he should be casually skimming the pages that had cost him so much effort. His impulse was to tear the book out of her hands and run across the station with it." (64)

Right before this incident Quinn meets a deaf mute in the same railway station who sells him a ballpoint pen. Quinn will write with this same ballpoint pen in a cheap red notebook ever after (the same kind of a notebook will be present in all three volumes of the trilogy). The two following scenes - the one with the girl and the other with the deaf mute - seem to be connected: they both represent the impossibility of communication between writer and reader. The ballpoint pen seems to suggest that the writer himself is a deaf mute, unable to hear his reader's questions and comments, and at the same time incapable of giving any response.

The use of signs is an alternative to spoken and written language. Peter Stillman senior is using a refined and mysterious sign-language, "walking his letters" on the streets of Manhattan. Even here, the language of signs is in fact an imitation of writing. Stillman's "message" is a nonexistent one: it had been consuming itself during the very act of its creation (his footsteps leave no trace, and the only proof of his route is Quinn's notebook).

This self-consuming language appears as an alternative to fiction writing at the end of the third novel of *The New York Trilogy*. Fanshawe's notebook appears to contain a message that cannot be understood, because "Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible." (230)

Self-consuming fiction is a heroic and tragic attempt to make chaos understandable: "It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity. It is as if Fanshawe knew his final work had to subvert every expectation I had for it. These were not the words of a man who regretted anything. He had answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again. I lost my way after the first word, and from then on I could only grope ahead, faltering in the darkness, blinded by the book that had been written for me. And yet, underneath this confusion, I felt there was something to be willed, something too perfect, as though at the end the only thing he had really wanted was to fail - even to the point of failing himself." (370)

A narrative that consumes itself - this seems to be the "perfect" artifact, the form "to be willed" in Auster's fictional world. *The New York Trilogy* is self-

consuming only on the narrative level. Although self-consuming text appears as the ideal form at the end of the Trilogy, Paul Auster does not use this device. The main reason for this, I suppose, is that the completely self-erasing text would be totally incomprehensible to human understanding. It would be a perfect work of art - and perfection leaves no place for questions.

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