Journal of American Studies, **37** (2003), 3, 389–405 © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0021875803007151 Printed in the United Kingdom

Paul Auster's Specters

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When the prophetic seer was asked whether this boy [Narcissus] would live to a ripe old age, he replied: 'Yes, if he does not come to know himself.'[1]

Unwittingly, he [Narcissus] desired himself, and was himself the object of his own approval, at once seeking and sought … But he could not lay hold upon himself … Poor foolish boy, why vainly grasp at the fleeting image that eludes you?[2]

For knowledge comes slowly, and when it comes, it is often at great personal expense.[3]

There is more than one specter haunting Paul Auster's *Ghosts*. The novel is, indeed, riddled with specters (puns intended): Auster, as writer, haunts a text where reader and critic alike hopelessly strive to catch an equally elusive meaning. I intend to show, in this paper, how Auster, following a lineage going back to the metafiction writers of the late 1960s, passing by others loosely grouped under the term "post-structuralists," more importantly heralds a new era, and manages to present, in one novel, a full-fledged allegory of how postmodern writing and reading can successfully negotiate the new challenges presented by the dawning virtual age, focusing on the twin concepts of the mirror and the double and the resulting *spectral* image(s) produced.

Critics have been divided over the postmodernist status of Auster's writings, unwillingly participating in the game Auster himself induces his readers to play. The argument has, to many, turned into a mystery to be solved by all means, a search after traces, an almost *ghostly* quest for the postmodernity

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[1] Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1980), 83.
[2] Ibid., 85.
[3] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin Books, 1990), 163. All subsequent quotations from Auster's *The New York Trilogy* will be indicated by "A" followed by the page number.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and/or post-structurality of Auster's oeuvre.[4] Yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, debates as to whether Auster's writing is postmodern or not are, as I will show, sadly irrelevant, as his fiction, especially *Ghosts*, heralds the new age announced years before by Fredric Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and ushered by wave after wave of interest in cybertheory. As such, Auster's *oeuvre*, specifically *Ghosts*, perches itself on the border between "classical" postmodernism and the emerging cyber age with its attending problems about the identity(ies) of the individual. In the 1990 introduction to his seminal work, Jameson accurately writes:

> In the present instance it seems clear that a range of competing formulations ("poststructuralism," "postindustrial society,"…) were unsatisfactory insofar as they were too rigidly specified and marked by their area of provenance.[5]

And the whole debate as to Auster's postmodern status takes on a problematic dimension as a search for traces which become, uncannily, suddenly *ghostly* in a Baudrillardian sense, where the problem is "no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."[6] The question, therefore, falls as dramatically as Black and Blue's opposition in Auster's *Ghosts*.

Charles Baxter's "The Bureau of Missing Persons: Notes on Paul Auster's Fiction," Barry Lewis's "The Strange Case of Paul Auster," and Richard Swope's "Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Fiction: Hawthorne's 'Wakefield' and other Missing Persons,"[7] all focus on issues of

[4] See, for instance, Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), William Lavender, "The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's 'City of Glass'," *Contemporary Literature*, **34:2** (1993), 219–39, Dennis Barone "Auster's Memory," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 32–34, Robert Creeley "Austerities," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 35–39, Steven E. Alford "Spaced-out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's 'The New York Trilogy'," *Contemporary Literature*, **36:4** (1995), 613–32, William G. Little, "Nothing to go on: Paul Auster's 'City of Glass'," *Contemporary Literature*, **38:1** (1997), 133–63, Patricia Merivale, "The Austerized Version," *Contemporary Literature*, **38:1** (1997), 185–97, John Zilcosky "The Revenge of the Author: Paul Auster's Challenge to Theory," *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, **39:3** (1998), 195–206, and William Dow, "Paul Auster's 'The Invention of Solitude': Glimmers in a Reach to Authenticity," *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, **39:3** (1998), 272–81.

[5] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), xiii.

[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 6.

[7] Charles Baxter, "The Bureau of Missing Persons: Notes on Paul Auster's Fiction," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 40–43, Barry Lewis, "The Strange Case of Paul Auster," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 53–61, Richard Swope,

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missing persons and lost identities, that is, implicitly, on *ghosts*. Yet none goes so far as to acknowledge the obvious etymological hint Auster gives on pages 171–72 of his novel:

> To speculate, from the Latin speculatus, meaning to spy out, to observe, and linked to the word speculum, meaning mirror or looking glass.

That such a seemingly offhanded piece of information would provide one of the pivots around which the whole novel revolves appears not to have caught the interest of Auster scholars sufficiently. Indeed, Katharine Washburn's "A Book at the End of the World: Paul Auster's 'In the Country of Last Things'" and Steven E. Alford's "Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster's 'The New York Trilogy'" both attempt, with rather disappointing results, to investigate *mirror* images.[8] One feels that any such mirror discussion stops short of going into any challenging debate. Chris Tysh's "From one Mirror to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation in 'City of Glass'" comes closer to my point when the postmodern dimension and the mirror image are correlated.[9] Tysh accurately links Auster's fiction to the issue of cultural decay and finds the latter dealing with postmodernist problems through mimetic representation. Auster's text is, to Tysh, so full of mirrors, that it can only be reminiscent of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Indeed, Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage, delivered in 1949, and collected in his *Écrits*, reads like an *inverted* psychoanalytical interpretation of *Ghosts*:

> The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development.[10]

Lacan ends by saying that breaking out of the mirror stage "generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications," a process diametrically opposed to what happens to Blue.[11] Tysh also associates the mirror images in *City of Glass* with the reflexivity present in postmodern fiction. For all this

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"Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Detective Fiction: Hawthorne's 'Wakefield' and other Missing Persons," *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, **39:3** (1998), 207–27.

[8] Katharine Washburn, "A Book at the End of the World: Paul Auster's 'In the Country of Last Things'," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 62–65, Steven E. Alford, "Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster's 'The New York Trilogy'," *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, **37:1** (1995), 17–33.

[9] Chris Tysh, "From One Mirror to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation in 'City of Glass,'" *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, **14:1** (1994), 46–52.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1985), 4.

[11] Ibid., 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insight, Tysh fails to capitalize on the passage in *Ghosts* quoted above. He does not reach a satisfying synthesis as to what the mirror images in the Austerian text really *achieve* in terms of textual and narrative theories and does not escape mere postmodernist concerns.

It is true that the mirror image and the double have haunted the imagination of writers of all ages. One has only to mention Poe's *William Wilson*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Borges' *The Mirror and the Mask* and *The Other* to conjure up fascinating debates. Yet the mirror image and/or the double are treated as signifiers used to point to signifieds, be they moralistic, aesthetic, or, at best, existentialist. In such readerly activities, readers are hardly taxed beyond their ability to just *understand* and *consume* a message. One of the key points of postmodernity and of post-structurality was the realization, probably for the first time in the history of literature, that the signifier only and ultimately points to itself. The vertiginous and writerly glance at the abyss opening up when the signified is finally seen as infinitely deferred and hence forever unattainable is allegorized most effectively by the mirror image with which Auster constructs a meta-literary, virtual representation of a writing looking back at itself.

Ghosts clearly shows four stages in the development of this allegory of the history and theory of writing, from its classical times to the present post-structuralist day or from a readerly to a writerly concept of writing and reading. These four stages, when read in the light of a mirror-image construction, obviously turn *Ghosts* into a *Reader's Progress* depicting Blue's arduous journey from one interpretive stage to another. The Celestial City – if it is ever to be found, however, is not paved solely with gold.

1. THE "OLD" TOOLS OF THE TRADE AND THE FIRST SIGNS OF INADEQUACY

> First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes, and when Brown grew old, Blue took over … Blue goes to his office every day and sits at his desk, waiting for something to happen. For a long time nothing does, and then a man named White walks through the door, and that is how it begins.[12]

Roland Barthes sums up the situation which Blue experiences from the very beginning of his new assignment:

> For centuries … literature never reflected on itself (sometimes it reflected on its figures, but never on its being), it never divided itself into an object, at the same time

[12] A161.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

looking and being looked at; in brief, it talked but never talked to itself. And then … literature began to feel itself double: at the same time object and gaze on the object, voice and voice of this voice, literature-object and meta-literature.[13]

The first stage, that of every writing and every reading in their infancy, is that of positivism. Writing cannot come to terms with itself; what is sought is only *traces*, in true classical detective style. Brown, Blue's old master, exemplifies this approach which, while effective as a study of influences, milieu, and stylistic devices, quickly falls short when asked to delve into the nature of writing itself. Blue takes up the assignment with the comfortable idea that, like any other assignment he has received, this one will nicely fit into his investigative routine:

He has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember, fixing his attention on these surfaces only in order to perceive them, sizing up one and then passing on to the next, and he has always taken pleasure in the world as such, asking no more of things than that they be there.[14]

The *old* tools strengthen Blue in his handling of reality. Little does he know that of all these tools only the notebook will be of use. Even the latter will serve a very different purpose, that of a writing which writes about itself: "Blue takes a small gray satchel down from the shelf and packs it with his thirty-eight, a pair of binoculars, a notebook, and other tools of the trade."[15] As a "devoted reader" of true detective stories Blue is firmly ensconced in a long tradition which has had – and still has – ardent proponents: "He is a devoted reader of True Detective and tries never to miss a month."[16]

But since no visible events have happened since the beginning of the Black case, since the only thing Blue has observed is Black writing and reading, a barely perceptible feeling of uneasiness settles in. Blue feels that his interpretation of the facts has met with a new situation:

His method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and *until now* they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there.[17]

Accuracy is not an issue. The old school has always prided itself with being accurate, and accurate it certainly was and still is. Yet the problem, as Blue clearly sees it, is not one of accuracy, but one of vision. The *inadequacy* of the

[13] Roland Barthes, *Essais Critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 106. All texts originally in French used in this paper have been translated by me.
[14] A171. [15] A163. [16] A168. [17] A174. My italicizing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

old tools begins to be felt:

> As he reads over the results [of his report], he is forced to admit that everything is accurate. But then why does he feel so dissatisfied, so troubled by what he has written? He says to himself: what happened is not really what happened.[18]

Questions which have, in a writing which consciously banishes any gaze upon itself, undoubtedly risen above the surface have quietly been silenced:

> Oh, there are moments when the glass gets a trifle smudged and Blue has to polish it in one spot or another, but once he finds the right word, everything clears up … The report confines itself to known and verifiable facts, and beyond this limit it does not try to go.[19]

Auster, through Blue, then frankly jumps into the heart of the problem: if one is to forsake the "old procedures," trusty tools which have served the interpretive community for centuries, what is to replace them? The uncertainty which seizes Blue at that moment and which understandably frightens him will be later incorporated into a larger frame of reference. The loss now barely felt will be a loss accepted as the inherent nature of all interpretive activity:

> Black, too, is looking through the window at that moment, and it suddenly occurs to Blue that he can no longer depend on the old procedures. Clues, legwork, investigative routine – none of this is going to matter anymore. But then, when he tries to imagine what will replace these things, he gets nowhere. At this point, Blue can only surmise what the case is not. To say what it is, however, is completely beyond him.[20]

It is interesting to note that Auster makes of writing, from the beginning, the nexus around which the mirror image and the resulting double revolve:

> To the extent that Blue can make out what is happening, he gathers that Black is writing. A look through the binoculars confirms that he is. The lenses, however, are not powerful enough to pick up the writing itself, and even if they were, Blue doubts that he would be able to read the handwriting upside down.[21]

Writing and reading, the two central activities involved in any interpretive process, are crucially underlined throughout the novel. Yet, notwithstanding the feeling of inadequacy newly discovered, Blue cannot come to grips with a new reading and writing at this stage: "It's not so much that Blue is bored, but that he feels thwarted. Without being able to read what Black has written, everything is a blank so far."[22]

[18] A176. [19] A174–75. [20] A175. [21] A164. [22] A164.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. LOOKING FOR THE FIRST TIME: SPECULATION ON THE SPECULAR

The second stage is that of the mirror, the specular. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, "specular" comes from the Latin *speculari*, "to observe," and "speculation" from the Latin *specere*, "to look." What Auster does not divulge, however, is that the title of the novel, *Ghosts*, or, to use a related word, "specter," also comes from the same Latin *specere*.

To "look," "specere," is what Blue is asked, quite innocuously, to do. And since it is his job, as a detective, to "look" for traces and clues, he takes his new assignment like any other assignment. Brown has taught him well: one has to look *everywhere except at himself*. Interpretation has always been to seek a signified for each signifier, to seek for what lies *outside* the space of writing. But quite a sinister thing takes place this time: Blue is placed, unknowingly, in front of a mirror. "Looking" becomes "specular" and Blue is forced to look at an exact image of himself.

As is well known, the function of the mirror stage for Jacques Lacan is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality, and the end of this stage inaugurates the dialectic that will link the newly acquired "I" to social situations.[23] In this context, the function of the mirror put up by White is to establish – or, indeed, to re-establish – a disregarded relationship between writing and itself, between reading and itself, between a signifier and itself. Lacan's "organism," in this context, is Blue (and, as I will show later, it is also Black) and the dialectic acquired is the realization of post-structuralist textual potentialities.

The uncertainties mentioned earlier stem, naturally, not from alienation but from specular fragmentation. Fredric Jameson writes that the "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject."[24] Blue begins to realize that his vague feeling of unrest stems not from finding himself alienated from a meaning (Black) which is to be gained, but from discovering that a part of his being has never been duly acknowledged. The new assignment has forced him to stay still, to stop wandering *outside*, in search of clues and, through the mirror of Black, to *reflect* upon himself. Not an easy task for someone who has been used to going *beyond* a signifier in

[23] Lacan, *Écrits*, 4–5. Fredric Jameson takes up the Lacanian terms in his "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" in Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, eds., *The Jameson Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 89–113.

[24] Ibid., 199.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

search of ultimate signifieds:

> As time passes, Blue grows more and more discouraged … He likes to be up and about, moving from one place to another, doing things … Now, when he himself is the boss, this is what he gets: a case with nothing to do. For to watch someone read and write is in effect to do nothing. The only way for Blue to have a sense of what is happening is to be inside Black's mind, to see what he is thinking, and that of course is impossible.[25]

It is at this stage that Blue remembers three stories which have an essential bearing upon the allegorization presented by Auster. Three stories dealing with mirrors, masks, and death parallel Blue's own interpretive progress. In the first story, a boy is found murdered without the police being able to find any clues as to the identity of the boy. The coroner, Gold, becomes obsessed with the case and makes a death mask of the boy's face, vowing to spend the rest of his life trying to solve the mystery. After twenty vain years, Gold has almost lost hope and puts his photograph holding the death mask in "True Detective," hoping to be helped. The boy *is* indeed Gold's own son, as Auster very offhandedly proposes, and the mask *is* that of Gold himself; the photograph is an outrageous challenge thrown at the face of classical, readerly interpretation, and a mirror reflecting the reader's own futile endeavors and subsequent loss. Gold *is* Black and, by the same token, Blue. At this stage, however, Blue does not know all this. In the second story, Blue remembers how, as a boy, he used to walk with his father across Brooklyn Bridge, and how once his father told him the story of the bridge's construction: how it was built, successively, by John and his son Washington Roebling; how the father died of gangrene just after finishing the plans; how the son, after taking over, had an accident and had to be confined to his room for many years. Yet what is more remarkable was that the son supervised the construction of the bridge from a distance, through his telescope, and though he "never set foot on the bridge, it was totally present inside him, as though by the end of all those years it had somehow grown into his body."[26] By supervising the construction of the bridge from his room window, Washington Roebling had framed himself a mirror which, with the passing of the years, had transplanted the whole bridge into his own body. Roebling, incapable of movement, was constructing his own self through the mirror image of the bridge. John Roebling also stands for Blue's father, and for Brown as well. The bridge stands for Black, who is also observed from a distance until he grows inside of Blue's body. The third story is probably the most troubling in its outspokenness: Blue remembers

[25] A166.

[26] A179.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

having read, in a magazine called "Stranger than Fiction," the account of a skier who had disappeared in the French Alps and was never found. Quite by mistake, his son, many years later, was skiing in the same place and chanced upon the body of his missing father. As he "bent down and looked at the face of the corpse, he had the distinct and terrifying impression that he was looking at himself," and what was more frightening was that the dead man was "still young, even younger than his son was now."[27] The son, here again, meets his father in a mirror image rendered, uncannily, even more mirror-like by the glassiness of the ice. Yet, as with all the mirror images put in place in *Ghosts*, the reflection is not a perfect resemblance: writing gazes upon itself yet it is not itself. Gold holds only a *mask* of the dead boy, and not the real face; Roebling son looks at the bridge through the telescope yet the bridge which grows inside of him is only a virtual construct; and the dead, frozen skier, looks younger than his son. Again, Blue at this stage can only remember these stories (and isn't remembering itself an imperfect mirror which brings one back reflections of the past?) brought forth by the Black case.

Speculation on the specular follows and opens up a whole new dimension never envisioned before: postmodernism is born. Blue remembers his past (read: writing sees its past in retrospective) and the three imbedded subnarratives in *Ghosts* point to one thing: the double comes back with a vengeance. What was thought to be non-existent, unknown, not worthy of attention, *supplemental*, was in fact just waiting to be expressed. And what has come to be expressed in the age of postmodernism was not, contrary to all classical expectations, *something else*, a signified, but *writing itself*. As mentioned earlier, Auster gives indeed his readers an offhanded hint as to the nature of *looking* in a postmodernist sense:

> If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term – speculation, for example – would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin speculatus, meaning to spy out, to observe, and linked to the word speculum, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself.[28]

Speculating on his past, on the stories he was told and the stories he had read, Blue is faced with the ultimate interpretive activity, and with the first hurdle in his spectral initiation, the writing of his report. The report which represents interpretive discourse is a writing within a writing: the critic's interpretation of facts, of the text (Black) being read. And Blue, probably for

[27] A180.

[28] A171–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the last time before taking the big leap which will cut him forever from a long interpretive tradition and plunge him headlong into textual uncertainty, indulges in the age-old illusion that words do point to things, and that signifiers always point to stable signifieds:

> For the first time in his experience of writing reports, he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say. Blue looks around the room and fixes his attention on various objects, one after the other. He sees the lamp and says to himself, lamp. He sees the bed and says to himself, bed … It will not do to call the lamp a bed, he thinks, or the bed a lamp. No, these words fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world.[29]

But then Blue instantly recognizes the fallacy of his former views, forsakes them, and realizes that what the report (a signifier) is about (a signified), in this case Black, can never be found. The ultimate signified is forever deferred:

> Then he looks out across the street and sees Black's window. It is dark now, and Black is asleep. That's the problem, Blue says to himself, trying to find a little courage. That and nothing else. He's there, but it's impossible to see him. And even when I do see him it's as though the lights are out.[30]

3. *MISE EN ABYME*: THE DISCOVERY

But speculation on the nature of writing is not an innocent game. Blue, by being placed in front of Black, in front of himself through speculation, has reached a dead end, an impasse, the third stage in his initiation. Tension has to be resolved in one way or another. Blue, out of sheer despair, decides to meet White face-to-face in order to get answers to his dilemma. White, at this stage, and in line with the allegory presented, cannot be seen anymore and his face cannot – ever – be displayed. Blue, however, goes to the post office in person to catch White coming to get the former's report which, like the few previous ones, has now been "exceedingly cryptic, no more than a paragraph or two, giving the bare bones and nothing else."[31] What happens is expected:

> Just past noon, at a moment when the post office begins to get crowded … a man with a mask on his face walks through the door. Blue doesn't notice him at first … but as the man separates himself from the crowd and begins walking toward the numbered post boxes, Blue finally catches sight of the mask … and Blue senses in this first moment that the man behind the mask is White.[32]

[29] A176. [30] A176. [31] A197. [32] A198.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Blue then makes his move but White sees him and is "bounding down the stairs, landing on the sidewalk, and running down the street," while "Blue is left in the lurch, all out of breath and standing there like an idiot."[33] White represents, among other things, the ultimate deferral of meaning which cannot be caught but can be arrived at through the mirror image, in this instance, Black. Both Black and White are thus specters which inhabit *Ghosts*: the first is the specter of a signifier which, after becoming a mirror image, is found to be devoid of a signified, the second is an interpretive strategy which empties itself of a search for meaning. Barthes, in this context, speaks of the "truth" of literature: "The truth of our literature is not of the order of doing, yet it is not of the order of nature anymore: it is a mask which points a finger at itself."[34]

The interpretive process, in addition to being incapable of stopping at a final answer, also posits an interpreter, in this case Blue, who is indeed in the position of a parasite. The specter of Black haunts Blue (read: the specter of interpretation haunts the critic), and Blue's specter haunts Black (read: the specter of the critic inhabits the text). J. Hillis Miller, in his essay "The Critic as Host," writes that the relation of parasite to host, that is, the relation of critic to text, is governed by an undecidable oscillation which makes it impossible to decide which is the parasite and which is the host, which commands and which encloses.[35] As such, the critic "cannot unscramble the tangle of lines of meaning, comb its threads out so they shine clearly side by side. He can only retrace the text, set its elements in motion once more, in that experience of the failure of determinable reading."[36] This is what Blue discovers when he attempts to write his report, when he cries out: "He's there, but it's impossible to see him."[37] Michel Serres, in his book *Le Parasite* writes: "The parasite is always there, it is inevitable … This is the unanalyzable relation, by which I mean that there is none simpler."[38] Blue, as a parasite, discovers that the answer to his question can never be answered and, in fact, does *not* need to be answered. Serres gives this fascinating explanation of the problem of interpretation, using, interestingly, the term "spectrum" which has the same root as *speculum*, *specular*, *speculation*, and *specter*:

> The answer is a spectrum, a band, a continuum. We will never anymore answer yes or no to questions of belonging. Inside or outside? Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinity of values appears, and thus an infinity of answers. The

[33] A199.
[34] Barthes, *Essais*, 107.
[35] J. H. Miller et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 233.
[36] Ibid., 248.
[37] A176.
[38] Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1980), 85.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mathematicians describe this new rigor as vague … Let them be thanked: we have been in need of such vagueness for millennia.[39]

Two mirrors facing each other can only produce a *mise en abyme*, a virtual kaleidoscoping of signification, where no substantial signified can be pinpointed. Blue discovers the interpenetrability between the critic and the text when he goes with Black to take a drink at the Algonquin Hotel, named after the "Indians who lived in the city long ago when it was all woods and fields," obviously a hint about the primal nature of the discussion which will take place between the two men.[40] In fact, Black does not waste time and abruptly says: "I'm a private detective, says Black, point blank, all cool and collected," and for a brief moment Blue is "tempted to throw his drink in Black's face, he's that peeved, that burned at the man's gall."[41] To Blue's unending surprise, Black continues:

> My job is to watch someone, no one in particular as far as I can tell, and send in a report about him every week. Just that. Watch this guy and write about it. Not one damned thing more … He doesn't do anything … He just sits in his room all day and writes. It's enough to drive you crazy.[42]

As Barthes masterfully announces, "Depth is born only when the spectacle itself slowly turns its shadow towards man and begins to look at him."[43] And then Black delivers the coup de grâce: "I think he's writing about himself. The story of his life. That's the only possible answer. Nothing else would fit."[44] Blue discovers that all of Black's reports to White were in fact his own: "He picks up the papers he has stolen … But this only compounds the problem, for once he begins to read them, he sees they are nothing more than his own reports."[45] Baudrillard, in his essay on simulacra and science fiction, warns that simulation is not that entities are fake but precisely that they are real and, more, that they are *hyperreal*. It is not the opposition between the real and the fake which is, to Baudrillard – and here, to Blue and to us as readers and to Auster – fascinating, but on the contrary it is the lack of distinction between them and hence the "hyperreal indifference."[46] Then the hyperreal natures of Blue and Black become evident. Who is who? Who resembles who or what? Baudrillard answers: "Nothing resembles itself, and holographic reproduction, like all fantasies of the exact synthesis or resurrection of the real … is already no longer real, is already *hyperreal*."[47] Poststructuralism and hyperreality allow and encourage writing to turn back upon itself, to use the text as an excuse to investigate the investigative process at its

[39] Ibid., 78. [40] A213. [41] A213. [42] A214.
[43] Barthes, *Essais*, 28. [44] A215. [45] A224.
[46] Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 126. [47] Ibid., 108.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

source. As in the story of the skier who finds his father under the mirror-like layer of ice, the text needs the critic but the critic also needs the text for Black says: "He needs my eyes looking at him. He needs me to prove he's alive."[48]

4. LOSS AND THE PLEASURE OF THE SPECTER

The price to pay is high, for Blue, as soon as he discovers the nature of things brought up by White, cannot live in the world anymore. Writing beholds writing and a *loss*, the fourth stage, follows. Having beheld the specular reflection and having speculated on it, writing enters a state where nothing can be said anymore. Jean Baudrillard writes about the holographic double image: "One must never pass over to the side of the double, because then the dual relation disappears, and with it all seduction."[49] He adds:

> We dream of passing through ourselves and of finding ourselves in the beyond: the day when your holographic double will be there in space, eventually moving and talking, you will have realized this miracle. Of course, it will no longer be a dream, so its charm will be lost.[50]

Does postmodernity essentially signal the loss of writing? Or does it signal, on the contrary, the loss of *meaning* which ultimately leads to the gain of *signification*, the *starring* of the text, and the ultimate preeminence of the signifier? To Barthes, the loss of literature, following the spectral gaze, carries with it a certain duplicity, a certain game-like nature which partakes at the same time of deceit and pleasure. Writing, when turned upon itself, creates its own rules, and death or loss is, paradoxically, not necessarily the end of the game: "Every literature knows well that, like Orpheus, it cannot, under pain of death, turn back on what it sees: it is condemned to mediation, in other words, to lying."[51] When Blue, as writer – for what does he do except strive to write a report? – comes finally to terms with the newly discovered *mise en abyme* nature of all writing, then his own writing, chameleon-like, immediately assumes these new characteristics. It is as such that we readers and critics, similar to Blue, must read *Ghosts*, and realize the ultimate Austerian trick of keeping the whole novel with no answer. Barthes says: "To write is to shatter the meaning of the world, to put in an *indirect* interrogation to which the writer, with a last suspenseful act, does not answer"[52] and, talking about Pierre Loti's novel *Aziyadé*, he describes it as an

[48] A216.
[49] Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 106.
[50] Ibid., 105.
[51] Barthes, *Essais*, 133.
[52] Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"almost motionless discourse which posits meanings but does not resolve them."[53] White has put together, in pure and perfect confrontation, Blue and Black, and the ensuing duplicity (meaning "double" in Latin) of each towards the other produces the moment of loss:

… the pleasure of reading obviously comes from certain ruptures (or from certain collisions): antipathetical codes are created … As the theory of the text says: the language is redistributed … The pleasure of the text is like that untenable instant, impossible, purely *romanesque*, which the libertine tastes at the end of a bold machination, cutting, at the very moment of his pleasure, the rope which hangs him.[54]

Blue was looking for answers, for signifieds which would nicely fit with the signifiers he was witnessing. Black, a giant signifier put in place by White as a decoy yielded no signified, yielded no substance capable of being analyzed and entered into interpretive reports. But such are the rules of the ultimate game of writing, and Barthes ecstatically says:

There is no answer: the journey … is without aim and without end, there is no *why* and no *wherefore*; it belongs to no determination, to no teleology: something which very often belongs to the pure signifier has been enunciated – and the signifier is never outmoded.[55]

"The signifier is never outmoded" is the point where all previous interpretive strategies converge and where writing, devoid of all meaning, devoid and empty of all dictatorial signified, in other words a *specter*, a *ghost*, grants its writer and its reader the ultimate satisfaction and pleasure: "This is the pleasure of the text: value promoted to the sumptuous rank of signifier."[56] All of this is clearly mirrored in Blue's progression from the panic of loss (Mrs. Blue represents the stable world of fixed meanings which cannot be handled anymore) to the pleasure of non-determinacy:

But while he feels reasonably content whenever he confines his thoughts to Black, to his room, to the case he is working on, whenever the future Mrs. Blue enters his consciousness, he is seized by a kind of panic. All of a sudden, his calm turns to anguish, and he feels as though he is falling into some dark, cave-like place, with no hope of finding a way out.[57]

But

As the days go on, Blue realizes there is no end to the stories he can tell. For Black is no more than a kind of blankness, a hole in the texture of things, and one story can fill this hole as well as any other.[58]

[53] Roland Barthes, *Le Degré Zéro de l'Ecriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 169.
[54] Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 14–15.
[55] Barthes, *Zéro*, 179.
[56] Barthes, *Plaisir*, 103.
[57] A173.
[58] A173.

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Indeed, the many walks Blue takes in *Ghosts*, and which represent the many readings of the text, change from a tedious close tailing of Black to a realization that Blue partakes of the text's pleasure in wandering:

> These divagations last several hours, and at no point does Blue have the sense that Black is walking to any purpose. He seems rather to be airing his lungs, walking for the pure pleasure of walking, and as the journey goes on Blue confesses to himself for the first time that he is developing a certain fondness for Black.[59]

Here the paradox of spectral reading – and, by the same token, of spectral writing – becomes clear: the more one wanders into the hitherto supplementalized regions of the text, and the more one wanders away from an ultimate signified to be caught by all means, the more in tune with the potentialities of the text one becomes:

> Once again, Blue falls into step with Black, perhaps even more harmoniously than before. In doing so, he discovers the inherent paradox of his situation. For the closer he feels to Black, the less he finds it necessary to think about him. In other words, the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is … At those moments when he feels closest to Black, however, he can even begin to lead the semblance of an independent life.[60]

Uncertainty suddenly becomes a textual strategy to be enjoyed for its own sake:

> There is something nice about being in the dark, he discovers, something thrilling about not knowing what is going to happen next. It keeps you alert, he thinks, and there's no harm in that, is there? Wide awake and on your toes, taking it all in, ready for anything.[61]

And this is where hyperreal "nihilism" offers interesting interpretive parallels as Baudrillard, at the closure of his *Simulacra and Simulation* writes:

> We are in the era of events without consequences (and of theories without consequences). There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But … appearances, they, are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself.[62]

And he ends with the very Barthean words: "This is where seduction begins."[63] This is when the lessons of postmodernism, learnt and acknowledged, have to give place to a new vision which can cater to the exigencies of our present age. This is the final stage where even postmodernism *must* disappear. This is the reason why, in *Ghosts*, something also finally happens. Blue has begun leading "the semblance of an independent life," and is now

[59] A180–81. [60] A188. [61] A182.
[62] Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 164. [63] Ibid., 164.

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"in the dark." Blue *disappears*, even as voice, and melts into the void of his own writing. He becomes yet another *specter*, a *ghost*. Auster's novel ends fittingly with these words:

> For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing.[64]

Appropriately, Baudrillard is fascinated "by all forms of disapperance, of our disappearance" and we too share in this fascination.[65] Blue has entered into the hyperreal, as well as Black. Indeed, we have all, in Baudrillard's words, "entered live into simulation."[66]

CONCLUSION

As such, a *zero degree of writing* is achieved in *Ghosts* for, in Barthes' words, "remembrance is the beginning of writing and writing, in its turn, is the beginning of death."[67] Writing is forced to behold itself but the moment of enlightenment is followed by death. The *specter* heralds death, the "tragic of writing,"[68] the "nothingness,"[69] the "murder" of writing[70]: Blue finally murders Black and we are plunged into the absence of writing.[71] Julia Kristeva, in her essay on Narcissus, sees the same process at work:

> *Narcissus' object is psychic space: it is representation itself, the fantasm*. But he does not know it, and dies. If he knew it, he would be an intellectual, a creator of *speculative* fiction, an artist, a writer, a psychologist, a psychoanalyst.[72]

But the mirror image and the double are also allegories of a reader faced with a writing: *we* are Blue *investigating*, *interpreting*, *criticizing* Black who is seen, innocently at first, in a *Brownian* perspective but which reveals itself, through the agency of White and in true hyperreal fashion, as the locus of a reading investigating, interpreting, criticizing itself, and then discovering its ultimate vacuity. Our speculation directly stems from this specular image and reflects back our own specter and thus our own reading process. And this is the final specter, the zero degree of the reader. For we are readers, in turn looking at Blue's case through the frame of the book, in turn looking at Gold looking at the death mask, in turn looking at the bridge – the Book again – through the telescope, in turn looking at our dead father through the thin sheet of ice. And we are also looking at Paul Auster looking at us. Duplicity doubles itself

[64] A232. [65] Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 160.
[66] Ibid., 159. [67] Barthes, *Zéro*, 108. [68] Ibid., 66.
[69] Ibid., 167. [70] Ibid., 11. [71] Ibid., 32.
[72] Julia Kristeva, *Histoires d'Amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), 147–48. My italicizing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875803007151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and becomes, one is tempted to say, quadruple, almost a *quadruplicity*. Roles are inverted and strategies are exchanged as described by Barthes who writes that "to the fatal duplicity of the writer, who interrogates under the guise of affirming, should correspond the duplicity of the critic, who answers under the guise of interrogating."[73] The game, as Blue discovered, never ends: "It's got to be hide and seek, he says, hide and seek to the end."[74]

It is proper to end this paper with Roland Barthes's words on Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*:

> It is a book which can sustain itself only as an absolute exercise of negation, and it is as such that it can take its place in this very thin zone, in this rare dizziness where literature wants to destroy itself but cannot, and catches itself in one movement, destroying and destroyed. Few works enter into this deadly margin, but they are today, without doubt, the only ones which matter.[75]

Paul Auster's *Ghosts* is, as I hope to have shown throughout this paper, one of those few works which, for the same reasons mentioned by Barthes and more, deserve our unmitigated admiration. But if Jameson calls Robbe-Grillet's Nouveau Roman technique "sadoaestheticism,"[76] a clear reference to the conspicuous focusing on the object itself and the complete absence of cultural referents, *Ghosts*, by virtue of its virtualization of identities, literally teems with intertextual references, with embedded narratives, and with a foreboding sense of what lies ahead when hyperreality, the logical development of the postmodernist era, finally takes over.

[73] Barthes, *Racine*, 11.
[74] A213.
[75] Barthes, *Essais*, 69.
[76] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 131.

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