Journal of American Studies, **48** (2014), 1, 147–171 © Cambridge University Press 2013
doi:10.1017/S0021875813000698 First published online 19 April 2013

Coping with the Postmodern: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy

RAMÓN ESPEJO

Throughout this essay, I will show the characters of Paul Auster's New York Trilogy moving between modernism and postmodernism, and discuss the way some of them epitomize either largely modernist or postmodernist epistemologies. My purpose is to offer a reconstruction of Auster's dialogue across both, and I will resist situating the novelist in either the modern or the postmodern camp. I see him as rather watching from a distance, while his characters scour the terrain (both terrains, as a matter of fact) for him. My conclusion is that Auster seems to acknowledge the inevitability of inhabiting the cultural space of the postmodern, while staking out a claim to question, or even to challenge, some of its presumptions. While modernism still holds a powerful spell for the protagonists of *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* (less so for the latter), the narrator of *The Locked Room* posits the inextricability of embracing our contemporary sensibility, the postmodern, without necessarily rejecting altogether what went before. Auster associates modernism largely with the secluded, invisible, despicable Fanshawe, whose spell and influence over him the narrator of the third novel of the trilogy manages to break.

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as a

> periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism.[1]

Though such an opening might seem to suggest that my purpose here is to examine the trilogy in the light of postmodern reflection, it is not, even if it is hard to find a better summary of these three groundbreaking novels than that which Jameson gave of the postmodern text as "a structure or sign-flow which resists meaning, whose fundamental inner logic is the exclusion of the emergence of themes as such in that sense, and which therefore systematically sets out to shortcircuit traditional interpretive temptations."[2] The trilogy

Universidad de Sevilla, Filología Inglesa (Literatura Inglesa y Norteamericana). Email: respejo@us.es.

[1] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 1–20, 3.

[2] Quoted in Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 177. Susan Sontag's critical work is an inevitable reference in connection with such

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indeed bursts any possibility of meaning in a traditional sense, just as even postmodern science is largely about that which it cannot explain, is not fixed and stable, and brings unease and not the comfort of "knowing." There is, hence, no ground for denying the trilogy postmodern status. However, in a previous work, I already intimated that the trilogy is more postmodern in the kind of universe it depicts than in the narrative strategies it deploys. I also pointed out that there might be more of traditional meaning in *City of Glass*, the novel on which I then focussed, than might appear at first sight. Why could we not regard Quinn as a lunatic and interpret the stranger occurrences in the novel (the food mysteriously served him at the end, or the dwindling light) as hallucinations of a famished and distraught mind? The narrator of *City of Glass* even tells Auster (the character) off on the ground that he could have done something for Quinn, that he was a man to whom "attention must be paid," to echo Linda Loman's words about one of the most memorable characters of American drama, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

Auster's recent fiction and its incorporation of realist traits, in some cases very conspicuously, clearly shows something that, in my view, the trilogy already revealed, namely that this novelist's major search is one for style, and, in true postmodern fashion, he neither discards nor embraces anything fully, but is always seeking, always experimenting. He could subscribe to Emerson's words in "Circles": "No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back."[3] In Auster's case, however, the "past" is a cheerful travel companion. The debate on the degree to which the New York Trilogy is a Postmodern work has been raging ever since its first publication. Very bluntly, Steven A. Alford considered that it could be characterized accurately as postmodern, in that it employs "a pop culture form to reflect on issues more profound than the 'whodunit'."[4] Even though he borrows from a popular genre, Auster is clearly up to more than merely entertaining lovers of a given formula. Taking into account Auster's much more complex engagement with the postmodern, Alford also states that "in Auster's work we have moved from the modernist, alienated fiction of the other, exemplified in Hammett and others of the hard-boiled school, to a postmodern fiction of difference" – "difference" meaning, with Linda

---

postmodern resistance to interpretation. See the seminal "On Interpretation," but also the very perceptive "Godard's Vivre Sa Vie," for an analysis of the way postmodern art thrives on interpretive blanks. Both in Sontag, *"Against Interpretation" and Other Essays* (New York: Delta, 1966).

[3] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles", in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1981), 228–40, 238.

[4] Steven E. Alford, "Mirrors of Madness: Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," *Critique*, 37, 1 (Fall 1995), 17–33, 18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hutcheon, the refusal to encapsulate meaning through binary categories.[5] That is why in *City of Glass* "Dark's (and Stillman's) return to pure logos is impossible because of the nature of language. As a play of differences, language offers no basis for attributing a determinate meaning to any word or utterance."[6] In true postmodern fashion, Allison Russell notes that in Auster's novels the "distinction among author, narrator, and character is increasingly blurred. Similarly, the textual boundary of each volume of the trilogy distintegrates: characters in one book dream of characters in another and reappear in different disguises."[7]

Some critics have tackled the postmodern in Auster, but without actually taking a firm stand as to his generic classification. Chris Tysh considers that *City of Glass* opens an "abyss into which will fall the reader's certainties, determining agencies, characters, and, at some point, narrative bodies."[8] He goes on to insist that Auster's books "flaunt a fan of issues and textual strategies we've come to associate with postmodern logic (intertextuality, critique of origins, mise-en-abyme structures, to name just a few)."[9] From my point of view, he comes closest to the argument set forth in the present essay when he wonders,

> Does Auster's novel promote ... a romantic lament of loss congruent with the modernist ethos at the service of a social critique, or is it an emblematic attack on essentializing narratives of order, meaning and identity arrogated by the *post* lapsarian discourses and postmodernism in particular? ... This seesaw between the pre and post recalls the vicissitudes of la querelle *des anciens et des modernes* and by extension all such argument greeting artistic innovation.[10]

By the end of his essay on *City of Glass*, Tysh concludes that the novel is caught between the "Babel-like confusion and decay of modernity" and "post-modernism's crisis of representation."[11] But, very perceptively, Tysh does not resolve the dichotomy, and sees Auster in a stasis as to his involvement with the issue. William G. Little is similarly neutral in acknowledging *City of Glass* as "a response to a modern, secularized conception of experience as fractured, arbitrary and incoherent."[12]

[5] Ibid., 29.
[6] Alison Russell, "Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster's Anti-detective Fiction," *Critique*, 21, 2 (Winter 1990), 71–84, 75.
[7] Ibid., 72. For another approach tilted towards acknowledging the postmodern in Auster, see Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).
[8] Chris Tysh, "From One Mirror to Another: The Rhetoric of Disaffiliation in *City of Glass*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14, 1 (Spring 1994), 46–52, 46.
[9] Ibid. [10] Ibid., 47, original italics. [11] Ibid., 51.
[12] William G. Little, "Nothing to Go on: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*," *Contemporary Literature*, 38, 1 (Spring 1997), 133–63, 134.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While early criticism of Auster and the trilogy simply took for granted the postmodern label, and a later moment showed critics less comfortable with merely tagging the novelist as postmodern, recent critics have been bolder in challenging Auster's postmodern character. While I do not go that far here, I find it certainly inspiring how Debra Shostak, in a recent essay on *Moon Palace* (1989), boldly posits that Auster's literary agenda (one which, according to Shostak, he shares with his friend, Don DeLillo) consists in great part in proposing that realism and postmodernism should coexist, and neither is negligible as contributing to what readers expect or identify with. In her analysis of *Moon Palace*, Shostak maintains that its protagonist, Fogg,

> begins at the point of the postmodern[;] his grandfather Effing recapitulates the history of modern art, moving from a nineteenth-century pictorial realism to a modernist shoring up of fragments in the wasteland against the vanished authority of a patriarchal order. At last, Effing is doomed to run up against the postmodern condition.[13]

It is this presentation of characters who endorse, run up against, and inadvertently are surprised by these cultural categories that I will also attempt here. Classifying Auster is then of much less consequence than showing how he, through his characters, explores different literary and aesthetic sensibilities.

Indeed, to question at this point in time whether or not Auster is a postmodern writer is probably beside the point. Labelling authors may have been necessary (or fashionable) at certain times in the history of literary criticism, but it falls largely outside what is now deemed relevant – or useful, for that matter. Our contemporary sensibility is one that resists too strict categorization of artistic products. On the other hand, our idea of what a postmodern work is differs radically from that widely held a few decades back, when postmodernism looked like a definite new way of writing fiction, and had to be contained within narrow definitions, and writers either counted in or out. Nowadays, there are even those who argue that postmodern fiction is no more than an unexpected development or outgrowth of realism, with a reality which, being more convoluted and complex than that of the nineteenth century, demands a wholly new "realistic" approach. Such a claim seems to be warranted by the fact that some of the American postmodernists have, like Auster, fallen short of clinging to the radical rupture with realism that once seemed the

[13] Debra Shostak, "Under the Sign of *Moon Palace*: Paul Auster and the Body of the Text," *Critique*, 49, 2 (Winter 2008), Literature Online, at http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk, accessed 8 June 2011. I subscribe to her distinction between "the Postmodern condition as a political-philosophical-cultural situation that is theoretically described, postmodernism as an historical movement and set of formal conventions in the arts, and poststructuralism as a discursive theory." Refusing to go further into the distinction, she professes to "rely on a commonsense use of postmodern to embrace all of the above insofar as they are often seen to intersect in literary representation."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trademark of postmodern fiction.[14] It is indeed hard to imagine the New York Trilogy holding the same spell it does without its suspense, plot(s), realistic characterization, or detailed description of settings and situations. Auster has counted himself a realistic novelist, and yet has pointed out that realism may have larger boundaries than often thought.[15] On the other hand, Auster's "realism" would not be half as attractive without the inclusion, for example, of a character named as the author, playful readings of great masterpieces of literature, or the abundant intertextual echoes.[16] It is obviously a negotiated postmodern fiction that Auster offers us, probably also a key to understanding the admiration so many readers around the world feel for his books.

Such a key to Auster's success as a writer is definitely what much of his early masterpiece is about, which is why returning to it is necessary in order to place his later work in a right focus. Anyway, concerning Auster's recent fiction, *Brooklyn Follies* (2005) and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) would stand at opposite ends of the axis which can be drawn between postmodernism and realism. *Travels in the Scriptorium*, to which some of Auster's characters from other novels "return," would be the most postmodern (and conspicously Beckettian), and *Brooklyn Follies* the most realistic. Mention must be made in passing of how successful the latter has been, and how harsh critics have been with the former (sparking from or capitalizing on readers' discomfort). In *Travels in the Scriptorium* Auster's alter ego, Mr. Blank, aims to

> appreciate the importance of precision and clarity in all things, and during the years when he was sending out his charges on their various missions around the world, he always took great pains to write up his reports on their activities in a language that would not betray the truth of what they saw and thought and felt at each step along the way. It will not do, then, to call a chair a desk or a desk a lamp. To indulge in such infantile whimsy is to throw the world into chaos, to make life intolerable for all but the mad.[17]

[14] For a categorical rejection of any postmodern label for Auster see Scott A. Dimovitz, "Public Personae and the Private I: De-compositional Ontology in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 52–3 (Fall 2006), 613–33.

[15] Cf. Dennis Barone, "Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern American Novel," in Barone, ed., *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1–26.

[16] Quinn's preparations for taking up residence in front of the Stillman's seem literally borrowed from "Economy," the opening section of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, and his subsequent recordings of the swiftly changing hues of the sky and clouds again strongly remind us of the nineteenth-century masterpiece, which will be given due acknowledgement, however, in *Ghosts*, the second novel of the trilogy. For more intertexts (but by no means all that can be found) see Marc Chenetier, who believes that all Auster does is "talking of writing to other writings. As an American, he speaks of and to all of classical American literature and tells it of Beckett." Cf. "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World," in Barone, 34–43, 39.

[17] Paul Auster, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (London: Faber, 2006), 104–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is an outright vindication of realism, though the fact that it is in such a strongly postmodern text underscores the liminality of Auster's fiction in terms of generic affiliation. On the other hand, Shostak notes that *Travels* also pits "the realism of bodily existence against the postmodern indeterminacy of the sign."[18]

My purpose in this essay is to offer a reconstruction of Auster's dialogue across both modern and postmodern epistemologies in the New York Trilogy, refusing to situate the novelist firmly in either camp, and surveying the way he scoured the terrain (both terrains, as a matter of fact). And a novelist in the 1980s must have conceivably found the exploration fruitful, regardless of how pertinent it is for us, who view the trilogy from a distance of three decades. The divide between modernism and postmodernism which my article addresses is therefore that of almost thirty years ago, when the New York Trilogy was published. By then, postmodernism seemed to have the defining traits which will be exposed in this essay, and whether or not we still take them for granted matters less than the fact that Auster seemed to do so. In other words, my reading of Auster's interpolation of the modern versus the postmodern is based on what a writer like him could have had in mind in the 1980s, a writer for whom postmodernism would have seemed more of a radical departure from what went before than it does to us.

Andrew Hoberek, in his introduction to a *Twentieth-Century Literature* issue devoted to the future directions of postmodernism and where we are right now in assessing it, quotes Wendy Steiner's positing of a second-generation postmodernism in which the experimental, the realist, and the autobiographical are blended,[19] and in which we might as well include Auster. In that same issue, Rachel Adams proposes the waning of the Cold War in the 1980s as the bookend of "classic" postmodernism, whether what follows is a post-postmodernism or a late postmodernism, less concerned with experimental innovation and more with globalization; meanwhile, Timothy Bewes, in a clear demonstration of the dialogical character of the issue, refuses to circumscribe the postmodern to a given time, convincingly arguing that the postmodern is a sufficiently broad sensibility to encompass even whatever it is that follows it.[20] In a similarly inspired essay, Amy Hungerford carefully avoids the term "postmodern," and rather categorizes all American literature after 1945 as late "modernist," or "merely contemporary."[21] In any case, all these

[18] Shostak.

[19] Andrew Hoberek, "Introduction: After Postmodernism," *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53, 3 (Fall 2007), 233–47, 243.

[20] Rachel Adams, "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53, 3 (Fall 2007), 248–72, 273–74.

[21] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," *American Literary History*, 20, 1–2 (2008), 410–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

works are more useful for situating Auster and his work than for determining how the trilogy engages theory. Among other things, Auster cannot in the 1980s be addressing theory that had not yet come into being.

Auster's contention seems to be that, in spite of the inevitability of inhabiting the cultural space of the postmodern, such a space is far from clearly defined and rather in need of constant questioning and interrogation. Modernism still holds a powerful spell for the protagonists of *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* (less so for the latter), but the narrator of *The Locked Room* posits both the inevitability of embracing the postmodern and simultaneously the convenience of not rejecting entirely what went before. Auster associated modernism largely with the secluded, invisible, despicable Fanshawe, whose spell and influence over him the narrator of the third novel of the trilogy struggles to break, and eventually manages to do so. That a writer of fiction should target literary theory in a novel is one of the most enticing aspects of the trilogy, but Auster is not the only one among writers often labelled postmodern to do so.[22] No other tendency is more truly postmodern than the dialogue in which recent novelists have engaged with those traditionally in charge of assessing and making sense of their work (i.e. literary critics). Just as the reader has become more and more a figment deployed at will by writers, and shaken out of a customary distance, so too has the critic or professor, who until now was free from direct addresses by the writers he or she cared to teach and investigate.

Pastiche has often been a term associated with postmodern art, and Jameson defines it as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language," and

> a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour.[23]

For Linda Hutcheon, it is "repetition with critical distance."[24] There is in postmodernism a curious rejection of past forms and the values they shared,

[22] For a groundbreaking account of how literary theory, or just "theory," has impacted American and European fiction over the past decades see Judith Ryan, *The Novel after Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Ryan, however, does not include Auster in the roster of writers tackled in the book, maybe because she sees this incorporation of theory into fiction as spawning a new subgenre. Auster's trilogy is in my opinion too complex and multivocal to fit into such a constraining category, though. On the other hand, see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), for an insightful account of how theory (by means of creative writing programs) has enriched contemporary writing and caused it to move in certain directions. I am indebted to an anonymous reader for *JAS*, who brought McGurl's study to my attention.

[23] Jameson, "Postmodernism," 5, original emphasis.

[24] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fostered or assumed, with a nostalgia for them which is responsible for their oblique incorporation into new forms. Referring to postmodern architecture and its borrowings from the architectural past, Robert Venturi maintains that such elements "contain in their changed use and expression some of their past meaning as well as their new meaning,"[25] which describes very well why Auster uses the pattern of the detective novel in his trilogy, as a palimpsest through which he inscribes an old form with new meaning. It is what Quinn does when trying to reach Stillman and take notes at the same time, giving the note taking of traditional literary detectives a new function, that of recording Stillman's very postmodern journey. Beyond the creation of suspense, which is so useful when conceiving of a work of fiction, the detective novel acknowledges that one of the most pressing urges of human beings is the desire to know, a fact that holds true for the postmodern age as well (attested by the success of Google or Wikipedia). Yet the postmodern novelist (as well as many of his or her readers) is painfully aware of the bridge between such urge to know and a reality which keeps eluding us, all easy explanations used in the past deconstructed and discarded long ago. Hence Auster's amateur "detectives" rarely achieve the satisfaction of a complete closure of their cases, Quinn least of all, and they are often left with so much that remains to be known.

Concentrating for the time being on *City of Glass*, I would like to propose a reading of Quinn as largely embodying a modernist agenda, misplaced in the wrong time, and coping with a world for which he is not prepared. Neither are, in Jameson's view, so many contemporary individuals able to keep pace with an evolution of the artistic and social object "unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject"; the reason why such individuals cannot cope is that "our perceptual habits" were formed in "that older kind of space" called modernism.[26] Quinn is a devastated man after the loss of his family, a wife and a son, and suffers from, in the words of Hans Bertens, "the modernist feeling of alienation and *Angst* embodied in a painting like Edvard Munch's *The Scream*."[27] His plight would be described by Jameson, drawing from Lacan's concept of schizophrenia, as one of living in a perpetual present, as a

[25] Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1977), 38.

[26] Jameson, 11. The Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles is taken by Jameson to epitomize that disorientation with the postmodern, successful in "transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world." Cf. Jameson, 15–16.

[27] Bertens, *The Idea*, 166. Alienation as a modernist stand is also suggested by Steven Alford, "Spaced-Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," at http://polaris.nova.edu/~alford/articles/ausspace.html, accessed 6 May 2011.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

result of the shortcomings of language to provide him with a sense of personal identity or coherent memories, and of the presence of "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence."[28] Quinn used to have a self, an identity which was largely defined by a family to care for and the writing of those books which gave him a sense of fulfilment, never described in the novel but in all probability too highbrow for a world in which literature has become an object of consumption and not the legitimate conduit into the infinitely complex modernist consciousness.[29] When Quinn meets a reader, he is anxious to find in her a grateful devotee and supporter. But the girl belongs to a world in which literature has lost its privileged status and become a leisurely activity for most people, hardly the center of their lives. The book industry incites us to consume, but consumption rarely satisfies us completely, and Quinn's reader is quite indifferent before his novel. She is nonetheless a truly postmodern reader, rather unlike the modernist ones who expected books to transform them.

Even though Quinn has always been a triad of selves and has hardly possessed a stable identity, when spying Stillman's photograph he still hopes for "a sudden epiphany, some sudden rush of subterranean knowledge that would help him to understand the man,"[30] as though every man was a monad, a coherent self. Later still, on surveying the crowd emerging from the train at Grand Central, he marvels at how much every one of them is "irreducibly himself."[31] Oddly enough, Quinn finds two exactly identical Stillmans, thus contradicting all his assumptions and facing him with a postmodernism that thrives on doubles, pastiche, or outright imitation, even as far as selves are concerned, and which he was already familiar with. Forced to choose one, he yields to a postmodern impulse to follow the most unlikely Stillman. But Quinn is aware that he is submitting to chance and a world of entirely arbitrary choices, and that uncertainty "would haunt him to the end,"[32] thereby backing off from following the Stillman of his first choice. He will choose the one who rationally has to be the man: "This shabby creature, so broken down and disconnected from his surroundings – surely this was the mad Stillman."[33]

The postmodern is characterized, in Ihab Hassan's terms, by a "self-unmaking" agenda that prefers to celebrate the fluidity of identities.[34] Madeleine Sorapure believes that *City of Glass* is a "deconstructive anti-detective novel" in narrating a "quest for identity" that "calls into question the

[28] Ibid., 163.
[29] Such "highbrow" books may undoubtedly mirror Auster's own early years as a writer. I am again indebted to yet another anonymous reader for *JAS* for such a perceptive remark.
[30] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber, 1988), 31.
[31] Ibid., 54. [32] Ibid., 56. [33] Ibid., 56. [34] Quoted in Bertens, 37.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

very notion of a stable, consistent self."[35] For Alford, "*The New York Trilogy* argues that the self . . . is a textual construct."[36] Tysh affirms that because of the "musical-chair games of being, the vertiginous reprises, coincidences, and *sosie* series which punctuate the novel, contaminate the principle of identity and block its transcending privilege, Auster's scene of writing unmasks the fiction of selfhood and its alleged autonomy."[37] Later on, he identifies this unitary notion of selfhood with bourgeois ideology.[38] As it is, Quinn comes before Stillman three times and each time pretends a different identity. For Quinn, it is merely disguises that a detective is entitled to use. But Stillman accepts such fluidity gladly and reassures Quinn by remarking that "people change, don't they? One minute we're one thing, and then another another."[39] That is, against a modernism which had tried to access the individual self with deeper and more thorough intensity than ever before, postmodernism denies the individual such a thing as a unique self which sets one apart from other individuals. When, at the outset of *City of Glass*, Quinn receives the call and someone inquires after one Paul Auster, he, clinging to the uniqueness of the modernist self, just wants to hang up (he is not Paul Auster!). But the caller does not care if he is Paul Auster or not and files his plea for help nonetheless; in a world of fluid identities, it is no longer relevant to differentiate between "true" selves and "faked" ones, there being so much faking in the constitution of modernist selves to begin with. Yet Quinn tries throughout a large part of the novel to vindicate a self, fleeing from all this postmodern self-decenterment; he accordingly includes in an entry into the red notebook, "And then most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be," as though he had begun to fear that in the postmodern mess he is getting in (or has always been in, whether or not he is aware of it), identities might get confused, especially his real one and that of Auster the detective: "who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name"[40] – borrowing the syntax, by the way, from the postmodern Stillman, the son this time.

The landscape which Auster's protagonists inhabit is said to be that which had had its earliest formulations under post-structuralism and late Marxism: shapeless and aimless, "sheltering" alienated, indifferent, solitary human beings, relishing consumerism and having opinions shaped exclusively by the media, endorsing capitalism and refusing to distinguish between "high" and "low" culture, defined by chance and hostile to attempts at order unless geared

[35] Madeleine Sorapure, "The Detective and the Author: *City of Glass*," in Barone, *Beyond the Red Notebook*, 71–87, 77.
[36] Alford, "Mirrors," 17.
[37] Tysh, "From One Mirror," 48, original italics.
[38] Ibid., 50.
[39] Auster, 84.
[40] Ibid., 40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the needs of the system itself. Ihab Hassan defines the postmodern age as one "compounded of subtendencies that the following words evoke: heterodoxy, pluralism, eclecticism, randomness, revolt, deformation. The latter alone subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation."[41] All of the final dozen words are to a large extent what the entire trilogy is about. Postmodernism revels further in its shallow and superficial character and mocks anything sounding distantly transcendental, a fact which has probably driven Quinn to write cheap potboilers to make a living.

But Quinn is also an avid reader of mystery novels, no matter how clumsily written; he displays "a kind of hunger that took hold of him, a craving for a special food, and he would not stop until he had eaten his fill."[42] On the one hand, Quinn enjoys how ambivalent everything is during the process of reading, as any seemingly trivial detail might be of great significance, but it is only temporary ambivalence, as the ending of such novels usually settles what is significant and what is not. Apparently he enjoys their suggestion of a world which, though apparently impenetrable, can be ultimately solved and reduced to manageable terms. But since Derrida, it is widely assumed that a text cannot "mean," but only evoke other texts. In Allen Thiher's words, "reality only exists in function of the discourse that articulates it."[43] The referentiality of meaning as the vertical (hierarchical) relationship between a signifier and the signified now becomes a horizontal and democratic interplay of different signifiers. In *City of Glass* we read the following:

> Like most people, Quinn knew almost nothing about crime. He had never murdered anyone, had never stolen anything, and he did not know anyone who had. He had never been inside a police station, had never met a private detective, had never spoken to a criminal. Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films, and newspapers. He did not, however, consider this to be a handicap. What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories.[44]

In a way the profoundly modernist Quinn had begun to flirt with the quintessential postmodern reading and writing experience as encapsulated by Derridean reflection. Thus it turns out to be contradictory to find him experiencing a pang of disappointment upon encountering one of his readers, whose opinion about the novel she is reading is that, after comparing it with other detective stories, "I've read better and I've read worse," also the detective "talks too much" (compared with other stories, likely to be more

[41] Quoted in Bertens, 44.
[42] Auster, 8.
[43] Quoted in Alford, "Spaced-Out," 29.
[44] Auster, 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

action-packed), and finally, after all, it's "just a book."[45] Its reader cannot see in Quinn's novel more than its paradigmatic relationship with similar works.

Quinn's journey starts with a phone call, which took place just as he was commencing the reading of another journey, Marco Polo's, and just as he was going through the part in which total verisimilitude is alleged: "Just as Quinn was beginning to ponder the meaning of the sentences, to turn their crisp assurances over in his mind, the telephone rang," in a way waking him up from the notion that any book may be "an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication" and "nothing but the truth."[46] Quinn goes to answer the phone completely naked, so as to better embrace the new identity that the call will bring for him. Quinn's nakedness is a recurrent symbol in the novel, and opens a circle that will be continued in his nudity (and that of the table he is to use) when he begins taking notes in the red notebook, and is closed by the end of the novel, when Quinn again, now for good, strips himself of his clothes, and of his old self by the same token. But nothing came of that first call. There is, however, a second one, which also comes at a significant moment: Quinn's birthday, or at least the day he was told by his parents he had been conceived. Aside from one of Auster's characteristic coincidences, it might as well be signalling a sort of rebirth into a heightened awareness of the postmodern. The voice talking to Quinn this second time is quite urgent: "You must come."[47] On doing so and making it to the Stillmans', he is received by a seductive Virginia Stillman, luring him further into a path of no return. Quinn goes into the apartment and at first has difficulty concentrating on what he sees, as if, significantly, "his brain had suddenly shut off,"[48] which is not strange given the new universe he has just entered. A number of remarks point to Quinn's visit to the Stillmans' as the dawning of a new awareness. Quinn cannot even look at his watch, as though time had acquired a new meaning for which his watch has no vocabulary, and even the smoke from his cigarette seems to "take on new definition as the light caught it."[49] Stillman is dressed in white, the blank page that his father had once tried to fill with "natural language" and which Quinn will also try to fill throughout the novel.

Post-structuralist distrust of language as a window into the world and its assumption of a world rather constituted by language is reflected in Stillman's project and denunciations that "the world is in fragments,"[50] that language is divorced from reality and only seems to refer to itself: "words no longer correspond to the world . . . When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the

[45] Ibid., 53. [46] Ibid., 6. [47] Ibid., 11.
[48] Ibid., 14. [49] Ibid., 14. [50] Ibid., 76.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

same," consequently "hiding the thing [they are] supposed to reveal."[51] Thus, even if he is against it and feebly tries to correct such a state of affairs by collecting garbage in the streets of New York, he confirms what post-structuralism had already glimpsed and what not only Stillman denounced. One of the theorists of the postmodern, Ihab Hassan, had voiced similar views, a fact pointed out by Hans Bertens as slightly contradictory:

> In suggesting a prelapsarian time when words had not yet severed themselves from things, and in presenting the emergence of man as a self-constituting "gnostic creature," as a virtually contemporary phenomenon, Hassan adopts a rather more traditional scheme of things that leaves open the possibility of a return to an older, representational order,[52]

the very one which has become Stillman's target. But it is a recurrent argument in the most progressive theorists of the postmodern that language is in the way of a true encounter between self and world, that alienation is a consequence of language and its abuse. Baudrillard has often repeated that capitalism is responsible for the crisis of representation in the postmodern age. Things no longer come across intact but so mediated by language that they end up bearing no connection at all with reality. Through Stillman, Quinn will even come to distrust his own words, the ones with which he had constructed his own self.

Of course, postmodern language and epistemology also have their playful character:

> Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary – at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation.[53]

After admitting that "the self only exists insofar as language grants existence to it," Russell points out how Auster's trilogy achieves a "deconstructive effect through the use of other language games, such as intertextual references, mirror images and puns, thereby exploding the centering and unifying conventions of detective stories."[54] In Little's words, the language of a postmodern Auster says very much and nothing at the same time.[55] Stillman derives great pleasure from playing with Quinn's name and its materiality: "I like your name enormously, Mr Quinn. It flies off in so many directions at once."[56] It is as though language had indeed exploded, or imploded. The old man's world is certainly one of language games, puns, double meanings, intertextuality,

[51] Ibid., 77.
[52] Bertens, 44–45.
[53] Jean-François Lyotard, *Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 10.
[54] Russell, "Deconstructing," 72.
[55] Little, "Nothing to Go on," 140.
[56] Auster, 74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contradictions, words just evoking other words. He is thus trapped in a universe made up of discursive "chunks" clumsily and nonsensically put together, often send-ups of traditional stories arriving at meaning through slightly convoluted paths:

> Remember what happened to the father of our country. He chopped down the cherry tree, and then he said to his father, "I cannot tell a lie." Soon thereafter, he threw the coin across the river. These two stories are crucial events in American history. George Washington chopped down the tree, and then he threw away the money. Do you understand? He was telling an essential truth. Namely, that money doesn't grow on trees.[57]

Stillman's text is, moreover, one that his footsteps configure and is thus temporary, provisional, postmodern, not meant to last and relishing its very ephemeral quality, even if Quinn is all the time trying to attribute to it some transcendent meaning: "Stillman had known he would be followed, had known his movements would be recorded, had known his message would be deciphered . . . Stillman was far more dangerous than previously imagined."[58] It is not like Quinn to accept meaninglessness as a plausible goal for anyone's action.

But if Stillman Senior is the spokesman for a certain view of language within postmodernism, his son is the sad consequence of such a view, a man to whom Quinn "could not image himself addressing a word,"[59] being almost invisible or transparent. In his long speech to Quinn he will admit no questions, having no final answers and only being able to offer limited, partial and probably suspect truths. Great metanarratives (Lyotard) were still believed in by modernism, but that is Quinn's world, and not the Stillmans', neither parent's nor son's. The latter keeps repeating, "Yes. No," or "I will tell you. Or else I will not tell you,"[60] as though implying that nothing is completely one thing or the other. Though he has made feeble attempts at fixing a self ("I say this of my own free will"[61]) and disengaging it from the maze of discourses making up the postmodern self, the fluidity of identities is still glimpsed in his concluding remark: "I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name."[62] Certainties and identities collapsed, Quinn is speechless, unable to move, turning automatically to any source of light for guidance.

Quinn is nevertheless inspired by Stillman's case, as he sees in it the possibility of following up a story, ambiguous and demanding but a story nonetheless. Let us remember that modernist fiction is always held together by some story, no matter how unconventionally told. Quinn is faced with the possibility of some final meaning, of some case that might give his life a

[57] Ibid., 85.
[58] Ibid., 71.
[59] Ibid., 15.
[60] Ibid., 15–16.
[61] Ibid., 15.
[62] Ibid., 22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transcendent value and even the possibility of doing for another son what he could not do for his own:

> The subject of children was too painful for him, especially children who had suffered, had been mistreated, had died before they could grow up. If Stillman was the man with the dagger, come back to avenge himself on the boy whose life he had destroyed, Quinn wanted to be there to stop him. He knew he could not bring his own son back to life, but at least he could prevent another from dying,[63]

a Quixote or Romantic hero out to rescue the frail and helpless.[64] He will try to pursue the case using the conventional paraphernalia of the potboiler's detective: some intuition, a basic familiarity with the details of the case, cold detachment, and even the seduction of the "girl," both to probe for information and also to spice up the tale. Nonetheless, this is a world that does not abide by the rules of the traditional detective story, and Quinn begins to move in a sea of uncertainties.

Quinn's Romantic agenda is blended seamlessly with a modernist one. Clinging to the belief that we make sense of the world by writing about it, he naively points out that by writing down his thoughts in a brand-new notebook "things might not get out of control."[65] Stillman also has his (postmodern) red notebook, identical to Quinn's (modernist) one, "as if this formed a secret link between them."[66] But while the latter records the facts with which he hopes to reach meaning, his greatest fear being having embarked "on a meaningless project,"[67] Stillman's merely registers the disintegration of language, its disconnectedness and divorce from reality. Significantly, "Quinn suspected that Stillman's red notebook contained answers to the questions that had been accumulating in his mind, and he began to plot various stratagems for stealing it from the old man. But the time had not yet come for such a step."[68] Another curious coincidence is the spot where Quinn and Stillman meet for the third time, a knobby outcrop in Riverside Park where Edgar Allan Poe (Romantic) had sat, Quinn (modernist) had also often sat himself and now Stillman (postmodernist) is sitting, having displaced the other two in more than one sense.

Quinn arrives early at Grand Central Station to wait for Stillman, with the purpose to "study the geography of the place" and look for "hidden staircases,

[63] Ibid., 35.

[64] In a previous work I studied the reasons for Quinn's adoption of Auster's identity – mostly to suppress his pain and acquire a sense of purpose for a life that had become aimless, as well as the reasons for the impossibility of Quinn's returning to his old self and his unwillingness to do so once the evaporation of the Stillman case prevents "Auster" from proceeding further. See Ramón Espejo, "Las dos caras de Nueva York en *City of Glass*, de Paul Auster," in Pilar Marín et al., eds., *Imágenes de la gran ciudad en la novela norteamericana contemporánea* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 2001), 139–58.

[65] Auster, 38.

[66] Ibid., 59.

[67] Ibid., 60.

[68] Ibid., 59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unmarked exits, dark alcoves," outlets through which meaning might elude him.[69] It is also significant that, in his view, if Stillman manages to escape, it can only be through Virginia's complicity. Quinn entertains only two alternatives and banishes any further possibility, when postmodern epistemology would see a multitude of them. Virginia Stillman had already warned him that "anything is possible," that there need not be a connection between sign and meaning, Quinn immediately contending that he would of course remember it as he would "be a fool not to."[70] But before the proliferation of meaning that the novel offers the protagonist, he can only respond by attempting to narrow it down, forgetting the warning and becoming a "fool" indeed:

> He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behaviour could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. But after struggling to take in all these surface effects, Quinn felt no closer to Stillman than when he first started following him … Instead of narrowing the distance that lay between him and Stillman, he had seen the old man slip away from him, even as he remained before his eyes.[71]

At the outset of the story, Quinn had already admitted that "nothing was real except chance,"[72] but he had added that such knowledge he had only got after, or probably out of, embarking on the Stillman case.

The pang of regret felt by Quinn over the lack of a follow-up to his early "Romantic" encounter with Virginia Stillman already brings home to him the inadequacy of his initial agenda:

> he realized that deep inside he had been nurturing the chivalric hope of solving the case so brilliantly, of removing Peter Stillman from danger so swiftly and irrevocably, that he would win Mrs Stillman's desire for as long as he wanted it. That, of course, was a mistake. But of all the mistakes Quinn made from beginning to end, it was no worse than any other.[73]

Quinn is also bound to experience serious disappointment at Stillman's disappearance, a fact, however, which does not discourage him from reverting to his old (logical) epistemology. After Stillman vanishes, he goes in search of Auster, the true detective with that name, who will hopefully help Quinn out of the terrible mess he has gotten himself into. The "very air of bourgeois sobriety" of Auster's building "appealed to Quinn at that moment,"[74] trying to find as he was some modernist (a bourgeois art) comfort, some key to the mystery which has unravelled so painfully before him. The sobriety of the building contrasts dramatically with the playfulness of the postmodernism

[69] Ibid., 50. [70] Ibid., 65. [71] Ibid., 67.
[72] Ibid., 3. [73] Ibid., 63–64. [74] Ibid., 92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which is giving Quinn such a hard time. But what does Quinn find instead of the detective he was looking for? A writer, a fabricator of lies, who offers him more postmodern nonsense, as though Quinn had not had enough.[75] Auster's comes in the form of a critical reading of *Don Quixote*, on which he is working, and which, in true postmodern fashion, is not "to prove anything. In fact, it's all done tongue-in-cheek. An imaginative reading, I guess you could say,"[76] words that cannot be more reminiscent of deconstructionist criticism and its purposeless re-creation of literary texts, not seeking meaning in them but new creative acts. Auster's handling of Cervantes's novel is truly postmodern in its play on the notion of authorship, the object of much postmodern debate ever since Barthes posited the death of the author in his seminal essay. In a way, Auster also kills Cervantes by leaving him no part in the genesis of the story of Don Quixote. We could even pursue the nonsense and argue that, given Auster's reading of *Don Quixote* as written by the protagonist, and constant insistence on verisimilitude throughout *City of Glass*, the whole account could have been written by Quinn himself, perhaps to warn other "detectives" against pretending to be who they are not. In an entry in the red notebook, Quinn "thought through the question of why Don Quixote had not simply wanted to write books like the ones he loved – instead of living out their adventures. He wondered why he had the same initials as Don Quixote."[77]

After his visit to Auster, all is downhill for Quinn. Chapter 11 shows the effect of his meeting both Auster and the Stillmans: "He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing."[78] The last statement is the really important one, signalling as it does Quinn's acceptance of an epistemological impossibility at the center of his quest. In the next paragraph, he experiences trouble even to set the straightest facts, such as the date: "This is New York, and tomorrow will be June third. If all goes well, the following day will be the fourth. But nothing is certain."[79] Yet Quinn finally decides to go on with the Stillman case, as though he needed this novel to be a detective novel, and could not accept living in a world where cases simply vanish and actions do not have consistent explanations. It is only in the last chapter of the novel that Quinn seems to have accepted postmodernism fully. In entering the Stillmans' apartment so easily, and then finding it empty, he no longer searches for rational explanations, or explanations at all, for that matter. The barrenness of the rooms is the barrenness of postmodernism, in Quinn's view. He then strips himself naked and throws his clothes, still tokens of his modernist identity, out of the window. He just remains a body without a self but with a notebook in which he can still do some writing. He does not care who keeps bringing him

[75] When Auster goes to the kitchen to prepare an omelette and Quinn closes his eyes, he can only hear Stillman's words: "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." Ibid., 97.
[76] Ibid., 97. [77] Ibid., 129. [78] Ibid., 104. [79] Ibid., 104.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

food, ironically of the most old-fashioned kind, "two large slices of roast beef . . . roast potatoes, a plate of asparagus, a fresh roll, a salad, a carafe of red wine, and wedges of cheese and a pear for dessert," and on the most old-fashioned tableware, "white linen napkin" and silverware "of the finest quality,"[80] perhaps assuming that Quinn would like it better that way. He does not care either whether it is day or night, meaning that he has assumed the relativitity of the postmodern sensibility; in other words, that "[n]ight and day were no more than relative terms,"[81] as well as the lack of absolutes, or the elusive nature of reality and the impossibility of fixing it. He also assumes that no explanations exist for all observable facts. His entries in the red notebook are very much Stillman-like, i.e. postmodern gibberish, odd coincidences, word plays, bookish allusions, interspersed with some bits of his old concern for the case:

> Quinn wondered , for example, why he had not bothered to look up the newspaper reports of Stillman's arrest in 1969. He examined the problem of whether the moon landing of that same year had been connected in any way with what had happened . . . He tried to think about eggs and wrote out such phrases as "a good egg", "egg on his face", "to lay an egg", "to be as like as two eggs". He wondered what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman instead of the first. He asked himself why Christopher, the patron saint of travel, had been decanonized by the Pope in 1969, just at the time of the trip to the moon.[82]

But with a self that has all but gone and shrinking light and pages as the symbolic transmutations of that vanishing self, Quinn regrets having wasted so many pages at the beginning,

> and in fact felt sorry that he had bothered to write about the Stillman case at all. For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost,[83]

apparently meaning that the Stillman case was only a rite of passage into the postmodern. His urge to write is unaltered, but with a self that only retains some memories of love given and taken, and the physical sensation of birth, there is sadly very little else for him to write about.

Such a reading as I have offered of Quinn holds partly true for the protagonist of *Ghosts*. At the beginning of the second novel in the trilogy, Blue insists that he has learnt all that he knows about his trade from Brown, an old detective who is now enjoying a golden retirement in Florida. "*In his day* Brown was the best in the business,"[84] Blue claims. Much as Brown's *old* skills go unquestioned, Blue plunges into the White/Black case believing it to be regular stuff of someone trying to hide his identity, a belief which is perhaps

[80] Ibid., 128. [81] Ibid., 127. [82] Ibid., 129.
[83] Ibid., 130. [84] Ibid., 135, added emphasis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the seamless continuation of a world in which Blue thinks of his own girlfriend in the most conventional of terms, as dining with her and she "laughing with lowered eyes, feigning embarrassment"[85] before the conventional follow-up of the dinner. Though he is itching to call her throughout the early part of the novel, he does not do so: "He doesn't want to seem weak. If she knew how much he needed her, he would begin to lose his advantage, and that wouldn't be good. The man must always be the stronger one."[86] But already upon entering the apartment White has rented for him to carry out the surveillance of Black, Blue is struck by the fact that everything is dazzlingly new. There is even "a complete set of clothes hanging in the closet, and Blue . . . tries them on and sees that they fit,"[87] somehow offering him a new identity and signalling his entrance into a universe that he is entirely unfamiliar with, which keeps him from even contacting his girlfriend and is totally removed from what his life had been so far. Such "newness" brings alternately the not uncomfortable sense that "things will never be the same again," and also anguish, "as though he is falling into some dark, cave-like place, with no hope of finding a way out."[88]

Like Quinn before him, Blue is bound to experience the (postmodern) inadequacy of language to really contain the world –"For the first time . . . he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say"[89] – and the uselessness of "old procedures" for detection based on "[c]lues, legwork, investigative routine" and logical deduction from observed reality. The problem for Blue is that "when he tries to imagine what will replace these things, he gets nowhere."[90] Later on, he must also admit that in spite of his knowing "everything there is to know about Black: what kind of soap he buys, what clothes he wears" and another "thousand facts," yet "the only thing that they have taught him is that he knows nothing."[91] He is lost because of a proliferation of meanings that he cannot marshal into a single rationale for explaining the case. At the very end, he tries to obtain such rationale from Black himself, in a send-up of conventional detective stories: "But you're forgetting something, aren't you?" Blue asks Black, and adds, "You're supposed to tell me the story [before killing me]. Isn't that how it's supposed to end? You tell me the story, and then we say goodbye."[92] When he had attempted before to enlist Brown's help, he had made the painful discovery that he was completely on his own and that there was nothing else he could learn from his old master.

Blue tries writing down the stories that crossed his mind while he was observing Black, counting them in as part of the reality of the past few weeks,

[85] Ibid., 138. [86] Ibid., 138. [87] Ibid., 137. [88] Ibid., 145.
[89] Ibid., 147–48. [90] Ibid., 147. [91] Ibid., 170. [92] Ibid., 193.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fanciful as most of them were. He seeks reinforcement in the notion that language is still a valid tool:

> He sees the bed and says to himself, bed. He sees the notebook and says to himself, notebook. 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 had just proved the existence of the world.[93]

Thus he will go on in search of Black's reality and the words that may contain it, as well as of a valid story he can weave around his stranger across the street. His temporary relishing of "being in the dark" and enjoyment of "something thrilling about not knowing what is going to happen next"[94] are based only on his belief that in the end the mystery will be ironed out. Like Stillman with Quinn, Black shares with Blue plenty of nonsense about American writers, some of them amounting to little more than blabbering and also displaying a characteristically postmodern relish for the demystification of enshrined "culture," evident in the story of Whitman's brains ending up smashed all over the floor. Yet Blue clings to modernist patterns of reading and tries to find in such playful readings some clue to lift off the veil that covers the case.

As mentioned before, the whole trilogy, and *Ghosts* is no exception, is about such an iconic subject of postmodernism as the fluidity of identities and the fallacy of a unique, undisputed self: Blue adopting a number of disguises to approach Black (though he does that as part of his stock of conventional detective procedures and cares to adopt them "right,"[95] complete with all their incumbent motions), the ambiguous and interchangeable identities of White and Black, Black needing another self for his own to make sense, Black feigning to be Blue at one point and giving back to the latter the precise state of his plight after a year as the man looking at a blank, etc. As a matter of fact, the whole novel is about Blue and Black becoming two selves who are no longer autonomous and independent of each other, and at the end of the novel Blue goes as far as mentioning that wherever he goes from then on Black will always be with him. In a way, by being forced to gaze for so long upon Black's solitude, he has had to come to terms with his own: "Just look at him, Blue says to himself. He's the saddest creature in the world. And then, the moment he says these words, he understands that he's also talking about himself."[96]

All in all, Blue is a much more balanced individual and less single-minded than Quinn. Confronted, for example, with Brown's symbolic desertion of his old pupil, and after a fit of anger and disappointment, he begins to look on the bright side and feel some comfort in not having to depend on anyone else any longer. That is why he does not go to the no-return extremes to which Quinn does in defence of his modernist stand. Though Blue will not yield to

[93] Ibid., 148. [94] Ibid., 152. [95] Ibid., 185. [96] Ibid., 191.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postmodern temptation, he incorporates some of its lessons. After learning that Brown is no longer there to help him, he decides to forget his previous macho strategies and call his bride. He will discover that he has waited for too long, but at least he has managed to step out of his "old" identity. Other aspects of the postmodern, Blue will not feel so comfortable with. Postmodernism defined the world as largely a textual construct, a sort of big text, denying reality any status beyond the strictly textual, as, after all, in explaining the world, we reduce it to words. Blue feels that his life has become a formless book, which does not offer him the promise of an outcome, and which can go on forever: "But how to get out?" Blue wonders, "How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?"[97] And precisely because he has shown him very uncomfortable aspects of the postmodern, Blue will wreak his vengeance upon Black. After beating the hell out of him, he leaves his apartment not knowing whether Black is alive or dead. But he takes home his story to read. And he discovers that it is a story about himself as well, communicated to him by another self, a sort of double, a ghost, the story of a world which is no longer what it once was and where old assurances have been all but torn down. Confronted, then, with a postmodernscape of undisputed textuality, intertextual echoes of the past, blanks, gaps, mirrors, and profound and unending emptiness, and about to be destroyed by it in the form of Black's pointing a gun at him, Blue refuses to be swallowed by it. After wounding or killing Black, he learns what he can from it and goes on to embrace a new life (the older one he can no longer get back). Quinn is engulfed and destroyed by the postmodern, but Blue, just at the brink of also being, pulls it off at the end.

If the first novel of the trilogy had presented a rather bleak view of the postmodern, and the second one softened it, the third will now insist that modernism is not a place worth going back to. If Stillman is the best embodiment of postmodernism in the trilogy, Fanshawe, the writer in *The Locked Room*, and not Quinn, is the perfect embodiment of modernism. His writing is clearly a product of another era and not of the postmodern, inspired as the latter is by "that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the Late Show and B-grade Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel," in which one would never find a quotation from "'texts' as a Joyce might have done, or a Mahler."[98] Probably Fanshawe offers us an insight into the kind of writer that Quinn had attempted to be,

> predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakeable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body . . . organically linked to the conception

[97] Ibid., 169–70.

[98] Jameson, "Postmodernism," 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.[99]

But whether one explains or not the promotion of such a unique self in ideological terms, it seems clear that it is either dead or was never really alive, much like Fanshawe is also dead, or technically so at any rate.

Fanshawe was a self-reliant man since his early youth, the guy all the boys admired, sought advice from, even modelled their lives on. In spite of taking his name from Hawthorne, and reminding one of Melville's life, or Ishmael for that matter ("Call me Redburn," a letter to his sister begins), his personality seems rather fashioned after Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Almost a creature of another time, he has an old-fashioned concern for his wife and son's well-being, to the point of inventing the whole ploy to find a new husband to take care of them. His work is truly modernist, if we are to judge by the descriptions of it throughout the novel: obscure, ambiguous, complex, but intensely personal, having gained in introspection after a prolonged stay in France, very Thoreauvian, by the way. Its hermetic character gives the novel a title: it is that locked room of the box that he, as a boy, did not suffer anyone but himself to go into, or the room from which he talks to the narrator in the last chapter. It is the locked room of that modernist consciousness from which only some echoes may possibly come out. It is that self which is unique, impenetrable to other selves, and often to one's own attempts to probe. As a boy, Fanshawe had already written a novel "that was infinitely complex, with the outcome hinging on something like the confused identities of two sets of twins."[100] In conflict with himself, he tried to go through extreme experiences as much as possible, and all of it was witnessed from an emotional distance by the narrator. He even stepped down to a newly dug grave to lie down and experience what being dead "feels like,"[101] while, by the way, his father was dying at home a literal death. But Fanshawe retreats more and more into an inside world, which becomes more and more elusive to the narrator, a realm of undisputed subjectivity, the modernist self, often exploited by the modernists just because of an impenetrability that makes it attractive.

Fanshawe's decision to vanish probably has to do with the devastating effects his writings had on his own sister, who "would spend hours puzzling over them, acting as if her life depended on it, treating the poems as secret messages, oracles written directly to her,"[102] lured by such modernist outpourings into a sort of self-awareness she was not ready to attain (and which would probably not be worth attaining). The complexity of Fanshawe's modernism did not help his sister but rather accelerated her

[99] Ibid., 6. [100] Auster, 214. [101] Ibid., 220. [102] Ibid., 263.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decline: ("When she got really bad, she would go up to perfect strangers on the bus and force them into their hands. 'Read these poems,' she'd say. 'They'll save your life'").[103] Eventually he realized how futile and devastating his art could get to be, and that probably accelerated his decision not to publish any of his writing and to go into hiding.

The narrator also confesses to having started off "with great hopes, thinking that I would become a novelist, thinking that I would eventually be able to write something that would touch people and make a difference in their lives," soon realizing that he was too infatuated with Fanshawe's views but that "this was not going to happen."[104] Unlike his friend, the narrator's concentration was more "on the immediate,"[105] a creature of his own time who did not try to be unique or better or genuine (he is given no name to begin with), and who can admit that "each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose."[106] About authorship, he adopts a Foucauldian stance in interrogating "whether or not a writer has a real life anyway"[107] or is merely a function within literary discourse. If all that was not enough, the most antimodernist passage in the novel is given by him:

> Every life is inexplicable . . . No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling. To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and that, that he married this woman and had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge – none of that tells us very much. We all want to be told stories, and we listen to them in the same way that we did when we were young. We imagine the real story inside the words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person in the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception. We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself.[108]

Consistent with such epistemology, the narrator became a postmodern puppeteer during a census-taking job, inventing characters and names, relishing it all, and not bothering about their status as real or not real, all writing of a life lending it a great deal of unreality. He was working, moreover, for a government that did not care where the facts reaching them came from, or if they came from nowhere at all, as long as they produced statistics, that epitome of factual knowledge, which is here revealed as part of the complicated status of knowledge within the postmodern.

[103] Ibid., 263. [104] Ibid., 207. [105] Ibid., 212.
[106] Ibid., 217. [107] Ibid., 236. [108] Ibid., 247.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But after Fanshawe (and modernism) are back in his life, and he goes to Paris in search of clues, he will suddenly take a fancy to call a man he encounters by chance Fanshawe. Minutes before, he had decided that the girl he was with was Fayaway, after the character from Melville's *Typee*: "I exulted in the sheer falsity of my assertion, celebrating the new power I had just bestowed upon myself. I was the sublime alchemist who could change the world at will."[109] That the man's real name is Stillman takes us back to the radical postmodernism of his namesake in *City of Glass*: "Stillman was not Fanshawe – I knew that. He was an arbitrary choice . . . But that was the thing that thrilled me – the randomness of it, the vertigo of pure chance. It made no sense, and because of that, it made all the sense in the world."[110] But his chase of the man and the fight with him show the narrator that he is asserting his postmodernism and its celebration of chance and fluid identities too strongly. In other words, he is defining himself against too strong a modernism on the part of Fanshawe, and chasing him, or the one he pretends is Fanshawe, to sort of turn the tables. Fortunately, he comes back from such a walk on the wild side to a very postmodern conversation with his son Ben at the beginning of chapter 9, now a harmless play with identities and make-believe.

The narrator is ambivalent about Fanshawe throughout the novel, admiring him enormously while they were young, but later coming to resent him. Such feelings run parallel to an appreciation of modernism while he was still young, and a later questioning of such a sensibility as too elitist and removed from the direction the world was taking. But such youthful attraction probably explains why he has a similar urge to be through with Fanshawe for good. He needs to find Fanshawe and prove to himself that he can walk away from him, that his old attachment to him and what he stands for is something he can deliberately turn his back on. That is not intended to mean that he is not tempted by a Fanshawe lurking in the dark and threatening his coexistence with the postmodern,[111] one which he achieved, among other things, by leaving Fanshawe's influence behind. At a given point, he admits that the locked room of Fanshawe's consciousness "was located inside my skull,"[112] the reason why he tries to destroy himself while trying to locate Fanshawe in Paris, one of the capitals of modernism, by the way.

The building in which the narrator finally finds Fanshawe is one with "an impressive solidity to it, a nineteenth-century elegance that continued to show through the cracks. I imagined large rooms with high ceilings, comfortable ledges by the bay window, moulded ornaments in the plaster," a real temple to

[109] Ibid., 296.

[110] Ibid., 298.

[111] Such a temptation had already been felt by the postmodern Auster of *City of Glass*, who got so absorbed by the modernist Quinn that he was even afraid to keep his notebook (for fear of following in his footsteps?).

[112] Ibid., 293.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press

modernism, even if mostly "dilapidated" now.[113] Fanshawe lives there, in perfect austerity, having reduced his needs and rarely going out. Who is there to inspire any longer? Provided, that is, there is left in Fanshawe the will to inspire anyone else, which is not the case either. His notebook is the swan's song of modernism in the trilogy:

> Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible . . . It is as if Fanshawe knew his final work had to subvert every expectation I had for it . . . 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."[114]

But the happy ending, within the terms that the trilogy has set, comes when the narrator in the next paragraph gets rid of Fanshawe's legacy and that of modernism: "One by one, I tore the pages from the notebook, crumpled them in my hand, and dropped them into a trash bin on the platform,"[115] just as the "train was pulling out" that was to take him to an imperfect postmodern world but one from which modernism certainly offers no shelter. And this narrator, unlike Quinn or Blue, has a life and loved ones to go back to.

The novels forming the New York Trilogy increasingly accommodate the postmodern (while growing increasingly realistic). The narrator of *The Locked Room* mentions at one point that the three novels in the trilogy are "finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about."[116] He immediately admits that "I have been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle."[117] The stories can also be read, then, as chronicling the characters' (and allegedly Auster's) journey towards the postmodern. Quinn cannot make it. Blue might be more fortunate than Quinn. The narrator of *The Locked Room* is certainly the most successful of the three in having managed to skirt Fanshawe's threat. As far as Auster's literary career is concerned, the trilogy spells it out with astonishing insight: his novels will not be like those of Quinn or Fanshawe, but not like those of White or Stillman either. His fiction will undoubtedly be informed by a contemporary sensibility and concerned with current issues and theoretical debates, but also sympathetic with older narrative structures and forms and certainly aware of the literary tradition. The value of this tradition may be gleaned from the fact that the narrator of *The Locked Room* may eventually break with Fanshawe, and yet it cannot be denied that he has a life worth living (a wife, a son, material comfort) precisely because of Fanshawe. We would not be anywhere without that which came before. We would not be anywhere if we refused to budge from what came before.

[113] Ibid., 304. [114] Ibid., 314. [115] Ibid., 314.
[116] Ibid., 294. [117] Ibid., 294.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875813000698 Published online by Cambridge University Press