

SOPHISTICATED SURFACES AND SUBLIMINAL MYTHOLOGIES IN THE LINGUISTIC DE/CONSTRUCTION OF PAUL AUSTER'S *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

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Abstract. This article studies the imagery of writing in the work of Paul Auster, as an actual building craft that uses words as its raw-material. Though paying special attention to *The New York Trilogy*, the article uses several intertextual references, not only from other works by Paul Auster but also from Kafka, Beckett, Melville and Hawthorne. There is freedom inside the closed space of the writing-scene, which is a refuge of endless possibilities, where an alternative universe is created with a perfect order set by imagination. The writer-character builds pages that become the walls of the room that surrounds him, so that the written genesis may grow and expand. The room is like a womb that conceives and gives birth to the written work, after a gestation in solitary confinement. The writer is the creator of a cosmogony, using the power of genesis revealed in the solitude of the room. In Auster's work, the building of the written work is similar to the ordered building of an imaginary universe. Nevertheless, the writer can also be, in another context, a creator of lethal vacuum, describing a caogony, throwing the universe he has conceived into disorder, conjuring the wall of death around him and his characters. The writer-character in constant self-reflection is like an inexperienced God, whose hands may originate either cosmos or chaos, life or death, hence Auster's recurring meditation on the work and the power of writing, at the same time an autobiography and a self-criticism.

Key words: Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, postmodern, American, literature, construction, cosmos

INTRODUCTION

Originally published in the United States as *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* (1986), *The New York Trilogy* appeared in the sequence of *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), as we can read in Paul Auster's interview with Joseph Mallia: 'I believe the world is filled with strange events. Reality is a great deal more mysterious than we ever give it credit for. In that sense, the *Trilogy* grows directly out of *The Invention of Solitude*' (Auster, 1992: 260). Auster frequently uses a conventional genre, like the detective novel, for metaphysical and epistemological ends. He generally starts in the real, outside world (rough, concrete, dangerous), and slowly leads us into another place, an interior, dream-like 'moon palace'. In that same interview, Auster states that *The New York*

Trilogy focuses on the problem of identity, blurring the lines between madness and creativity and between reality and imagination. In *Ghosts*, according to the author, the spirit of Thoreau prevails, and the confinement within the walls of New York is very similar to the solitude of the forest in *Walden*. In both cases, perfect isolation is achieved, out of which comes a transcendent capacity to observe and reflect in the spaces delimited by walls or by the forest.

The fictional universe the writer-character creates is delimited by the page and ordered by writing, building a legible cosmos out of the imaginary chaos. This also includes the search for an actual space where the subject may put an end to his own fragmentation. Nathaniel Hawthorne, a tutelary figure mentioned in *Ghosts* and prominent in *The Locked Room*, locked himself for twelve years in a room so that he could build his written work. Herman Melville, another of Auster's favourite authors, searched for his own identity in the sea. By transferring his adventures into writing, he secured a place in the literary canon. It is the classic search for identity and for a place in the world, only possible, in postmodernity, through the protective, but also creative, seclusion within the room, amidst the city's wilderness. In *The New York Trilogy*, the external labyrinth is the city of New York itself, an iconic city for postmodernism, where the dilution of the individual identity in the crowd is most acutely felt. New York has the utopian image of an inexhaustible space that invites exploration, since there is a similarity between the vastness of the natural space and the wild space of the skyscraper forest, as utopia and dystopia. In the essay *The Decisive Moment*, in *The Art of Hunger*, Auster analyzes the poetry of Charles Reznikoff, whom he classifies as 'a poet of the eye [...] For it is he who must learn to speak from his eye and cure himself of seeing with his mouth' (Auster, 1992: 35). Like Auster's, Reznikoff's work is deeply rooted in New York City, where the poet wanders about through writing. But Auster knows that the omniscient identification with the metropolis is born of invisible observation, by blending with the city's stones and walls:

If the poet's primary obligation is to see, there is a similar though less obvious injunction upon the poet – the duty of not being seen. The Reznikoff equation, which weds seeing to invisibility, cannot be made except by renunciation. In order to see, the poet must make himself invisible. He must disappear, efface himself in anonymity. (ibid.: 38)

If 'Lives make no sense, I argued' (Auster, 1987: 250); 'The point being that, in the end, each life is irreducible to anything other than itself. Which is as much as to say: lives make no sense' (ibid.: 253); 'In the end, 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' (ibid.: 217), a possible solution is to get locked in a room and, within it, create a personal and imaginary meaning for everything, that is, to rewrite the universe. According to Paul Auster: '[...] stories are crucial. It's through stories that we struggle

to make sense of the world. This is what keeps me going – the justification for spending my life locked up in a little room, putting words on paper’ (Irwin, 1994: 119). Auster’s characters use very particular routine processes to structure existential chaos, and all of them have to do with writing, like the detailed records, reports and catalogs of Stillman, Blue, Quinn, Jim Nashe, and Maria Turner. As an alternative to the ineffectual system imposed by external reality, those characters-writers-recorders show an elitist and classical need for order, associated with an anarchistic impulse to destroy pre-existing systems. Language can rearrange the world because it is intimately connected with it: ‘The sign cannot be separated from the social situation without relinquishing its nature as sign. Verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of this connection with a concrete situation’ (Bakhtin, 1973: 95). The concept of a unified and closed text changes into that of a plural and open text, to use Roland Barthes’ distinction (1977: 58). This urgency to fill the room and the blank page has to do with the great ghost of Auster, the fear of emptiness, symbolized by death. That is the reason for the open endings of so many of his stories, as death remains an unsolvable mystery. The idea that ‘lives make no sense’ explains the absence of a definite meaning to *The New York Trilogy*, and its inconclusive and frustrating epilogues. Due to that impossibility of attributing meaning to human existence, the open endings of Paul Auster’s narratives establish a compromise between the individual and reality.

‘THE ROOM THAT IS THE BOOK’: THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION IN *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

In *The New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster travels through writing, presenting extreme situations, focusing on solitary characters with a great need to communicate, beyond the physical barriers imposed by the walls of the rooms where they isolate themselves. The written journey is equivalent to a journey of the mind, and walking becomes the factual representation of the cognitive process. In *White Spaces*, Auster conceptualizes movement not as a simple function of the body but rather as an extension of the mind. Inside a simple room, the writer-character experiences the infinite possibilities of a limited space, because words shape and expand both mental and material spaces. In Auster’s fiction, the spaces of the city, of the author’s mind, and of the text implode into a single space of verbal representation, into an area defined by physical and metaphysical walls. This area presents similarities with Brian McHale’s theory that postmodern fiction builds spaces that enable experimentation, that open up new ontological horizons in a territory situated between two worlds, the ‘zone’ (McHale, 1994: 43–58). This originates the need to create the written work in order to survive and confer meaning to life and to the world, as things only exist as long as we see and describe them. From this perspective, the empirical subject, with his subjective states, makes up the whole of reality, and other subjects who supposedly exist do not

have an independent existence any more than a character in a dream has. This is simply a picture of the process of written cosmogenesis, in which apparently real entities are nothing but mere products of the writer-character's imagination, without whom that universe would have ever existed. But the solipsism of the writer-character presupposes total isolation, as he creates a world of words that cannot exist independently from his thoughts. The room symbolizes that world, made solely by writing and for writing:

Writing is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he's there, he's not really there.

Another ghost.

Exactly. (Auster, 1987: 175)

In *Ghosts*, appropriately called the *Inward Gaze of a Private Eye* by Stephen Schiff (1987: 14), Blue and Black sit face to face in their rooms, spaces for reflection, solitude, and knowledge. Blue is confined, as is Quinn, and he too observes the other while, in reality, he is observing himself, in a mediated process of self-discovery. Initially, Blue sees his solitude with some optimism, as it has allowed him to become his own master, like Quinn and Marco Fogg when they set themselves free of everything in the heart of the city. But Blue ignores that he is also falling into a dark cave, where his identity will be questioned, transformed, and, ultimately, risk disappearing: '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' (Auster, 1987: 145). By observing Black (darkness, absence of colour and light), he also enters the dark cave that is the unknown inside himself and every human being.

In his first incursion to the interior of Black's room, Blue realizes he is entering something more than a simple and trivial accommodation. When he goes inside, 'the door will open, and after that Black will be inside of him forever' (ibid.: 183). To enter Black's room will be like entering the mystery, and to explore it will be like exploring the mind of Black himself, the remotest place in this endless mirror game: 'The door opens, and suddenly there is no more distance, the thing and the thought of the thing are one and the same' (ibid.: 184). Blue enters Black's room, who seems to be waiting for him, and steals his writings, which are but his own useless reports: 'To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else. But this is precisely where Black is, even though Blue does not know it' (ibid.: 190). As in *City of Glass*, the detective story turns into a narrative of self-discovery. Blue has entered the space of the room and the mind, he is inside the sacred space of the man he has been observing for more than a year, and, because of that, there is a certain feeling of disappointment at the austerity of the room. There are no images evoking Black's emotional bonds, since there are no connections with the outside world. 'It's no man's land, the place you come to at the end of the world' (ibid.: 185): here, only the characters move about, in an empty no

man's land, between fantasy and reality, as a page that is still blank. At the end of the world, everything is called into question and everything will have to be rebuilt, in a new cosmogony by the hand of the writer. This is a *White Space*, antithetically inhabited by Black, where perfect order and the endless book reign supreme. The room is simply the space of writing; it exists so that the book may be created or infinitely reread within it:

It looks like a big book, Blue continues.

Yes, says Black. I've been working on it for many years.

Are you almost finished ?

I'm getting there, Black says thoughtfully. But sometimes it's hard to know where you are. I think I'm almost done, and then I realize I've left out something important, and so I have to go back to the beginning again. But yes, I do dream of finishing it one day. One day soon, perhaps.

I hope I get a chance to read it, says Blue.

Anything is possible, says Black. But first of all, I've got to finish it. There are days when I don't even know if I'll live that long. (Auster, 1987: 185)

The void witnessed in this first visit adds to the mystery and to the torment of Blue's self-questioning. The room is the scene of the drama, not an explanation for its protagonists. To enter or to leave it is like entering or leaving the story that took over the lives of Blue and Black. 'What if he stood up, went out the door, and walked away from the whole business?' (ibid.: 186), ponders Blue, in what can be understood as a curious metafictional allusion. That would be impossible, because leaving the room, getting away from the story, is the same as abandoning the life that the book concedes to its fictional instances. Fate must be fulfilled: Blue only leaves the room in the last lines of the story, after killing Black and deciphering the mystery of the book, written and lived by both of them.

On the other hand, to enter Black's room alone, undisguised and with access to his written work, provides the key to the enigma that had become the centre of their lives. However, the key reveals itself to be more enigmatic than the mystery, because chance – 'the light falls by chance on a pile of papers stacked neatly at the edge of Black's desk' (ibid.: 188) – has determined that Blue should pick up the pile of papers that contains his own reports. Chance and text are intertwined in perfect postmodern fashion, bringing to mind the origin of *City of Glass*, which, according to Auster, was caused by chance, by a mistaken phone call. A mysterious interlocutor also takes Quinn for a certain Paul Auster, the owner of a detective agency. In reality, the novelist Paul Auster is the 'agency' from where all the complex characters of *The New York Trilogy* derive. In the same way *The Red Notebook* is a written record of chance happenings that took place in the author's life, Blue's reports are a written record of all the (chance) occurrences in Black's life.

Not being an intellectual, and even less a reader, Blue has metamorphosed into a writer, that is, into someone who lives inside a book. He becomes a virtual prisoner in his own room and he understands the writer's horror:

[...] seeing the world only through words, living only through the lives of others. [...] There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book. That's all there is, Blue realizes, and he no longer wants any part of it. But how to get out? 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? (Auster, 1987: 169–70)

The primal condition of the imprisoned writer is to look at the blank page without the structure of the story, of the plot, or of the action to support him. Blue is lost in the book and in the room and suspects his life has been captured by both, something his two visits to Black's room confirm. But it turns out that he actually created the room that has imprisoned him, since Blue and Black wrote the same book. When Blue understands that Black is his double, he also realizes that Black's room is just another scenery of writing. When confronted with Black's writing, Blue recovers his own writing and understands what he has become, because to enter the room is the same as to enter the soul of the person who lives or writes inside it. Once again, 'to enter Black [...] was the equivalent of entering himself' (Auster, 1987: 190). Through writing, Blue confers a meaning and an order to Black's existence, in his total isolation. And he similarly orders his own existence, since, in this mirror-like universe of doubles, we cannot know for sure who is the satellite of whom. In a wider context, some cultures and civilizations, with their respective universes, also found their cosmognosis in writing, through books such as the Bible, the Koran or the Talmud. As an author of cosmogonic writing, Blue acquires power over Black and over his own destiny. In fact, Blue physically dominates Black, puts a more than probable end to his life, and decides the end of the story by leaving the room of the book for good. Through this character, Auster composes the portrait of a kind of writer about whom Blue knows nothing: the postmodern writer. Moreover, we infer here a correspondence between the problem of personal identity in the postmodern text and the critical uncertainty concerning the status of the postmodern text itself, represented by the rejection of a single, consistent style or genre, and related to the liquidation of illusory self-identity. 'There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book' (Auster, 1987: 169): this is the solipsistic solitude of the writer, in a society fragmented into isolated individuals. By leaving the room, Blue also leaves the book and all the cosmogonic power that the work of writing has given him.

Ghosts had its origin in *Black-Outs*, a barely known play in one act from 1976, published for the first time in 1995 by Gérard de Cortanze, in the *Magazine Littéraire* dedicated to Paul Auster (in Auster, 1995 [1976]). *Blackouts* appears in *The Locked Room* as the title of one of Fanshawe's successful works. In this play, the scenery is similarly limited to an out-of-use office, filled with papers

and archives, with a single glass panel door and two windows, bringing to mind Beckett's dramaturgy. The place is inhabited by characters almost homonymous to those of *Ghosts*, in a very similar context: Green is a submissive and silent writer of the words dictated by Black, who defines him as 'the hand that writes the words', all ears, no mouth, like *Bartleby*. The long awaited Blue finally enters the closed space of Black. In the past, Blue had also observed and written about a man who, like him, lived in complete solitude, in what turned out to be a subtle form of annihilation. In fact, by transforming the subject into words, Blue took away his ability to exist independently from those words and from the writing he controlled. He transformed that man into a character dependent upon an author, in the same way Blue himself depends on Auster in the context of *Black-Outs*. Blue exerted the author's supreme power, transformed into a despotic solipsist: 'No. Everything is gone. We turned it into words, that's all (Auster, 1995 [1976]: 57). That is the plot of *Black-Outs*: Blue tells how he has recorded in writing everything the 'observed man' did, and Green records in writing everything Blue says. As in *Ghosts*, Blue describes the room of the 'observed man' as completely austere and isolated, focused solely on the writing of the work to which he has devoted his entire life. This circular story, whose open ending consists of a dialogue that restarts, happens inside a room, with characters forever trapped in there, as if they were walking in circles, in an infinite *White Space*. The space of the room squares within itself the infinite circle of the story.

In *The Locked Room*, the third narrative of the trilogy, the space of creation rematerializes in the box where Fanshawe used to hide as a child, so as to exert what the narrator saw as his magical power: 'It was his secret place, he told me, and when he sat inside and closed it up around him, he could go wherever he wanted to go, could be wherever he wanted to be. But if another person ever entered his box, then its magic would be lost for good' (Auster, 1987: 220). This definition of the magic box matches the sublime confinement of the room that is the book, and almost transcribes the words of *White Spaces*: 'I walk within these four walls, and for as long as I am here I can go anywhere I like. [...] I feel myself on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth. These are moments of great happiness for me' (Auster, 1991 [1990]: 85).

Fanshawe achieves unique capacities in secluded and secret spaces, in fact located within his mind: 'This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull' (Auster, 1987: 293). This space of impenetrable secrecy is a kind of 'room of one's own', to adapt Virginia Woolf's expression. The process of literary creation takes place in the innermost room, as it is a psychological process. However, the ultimate truth is beyond the narrator's reach, and, because of that, it is also unattainable for the reader. While Fanshawe never invites his friend inside the box, Aesop shares his imaginary world with Walt, disclosing horizons which will, much later, allow Walt to write the story of his life. It is easier to share the words already written than the magical space of creation, an exclusive property of the writer. We neither have access to the content of Fanshawe's travels and meditations inside the box, nor to the content of the book where

for six months he annotated the reasons for his seclusion. In the last moments of *The Locked Room*, the narrator gains access to the red notebook, which he immediately reads, forgets and destroys, without disclosing its meaning. In fact, even though Fanshawe refuses to leave the room, he offers the narrator his red notebook, which he affirms will clarify his plans. Having ingested poison, he does not fear any intervention from the outside world anymore. However, there is nothing in the book that may clarify the meaning of the two preceding stories in the *Trilogy*. As the narrator acknowledges, the book remains one last monument to Fanshawe's unintelligibility: 'Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible' (Auster, 1987: 314). Hesitating at each step, at every word he encounters, the narrator destroys the book, page after page, as he reads it, and gets to the end of *The Locked Room* at the same time as the reader and with an identical degree of understanding.

That is also the case with Fanshawe's posthumous best-sellers, *Neverland*, *Miracles*, and *Blackouts*, edited by the narrator but whose contents we ignore, just as we ignore the content of Ben Sachs' *Leviathan* in the homonymous *Leviathan*, or of Samuel Farr's infinite book in *In the Country of Last Things*, works of supposedly universal and transcendental scope, true revelations, in the sacred sense of the term. We also do not know the content of the book where Quinn annotates his last thoughts of super-human nature, or of the work to which Black devoted his entire life. Even the poetic persona of *White Spaces* is just 'on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth' (Auster, 1991 [1990]: 85), which will remain undiscovered or, at least, unshared with the reader because the imaginary universe can be ordered by the writer-character, but not explained in its essential mysteries, those of creation and death.

These are works that describe universes untouched by the conditions of narratability, trapped in an inenarrable self-closure. Auster uses the mystery novel to explore linguistic and philosophical absences, deliberately avoiding solutions, since he understands that, as an author-detective, he cannot find the single clue, the simple answer. He writes a novel about higher metaphysical quests. These are meta-textual commentaries on an unknown original text, and they point to the world-creating and world-destroying power of language – 'American postmodernism may be seen to endorse a rhetorical view of life which begins with the primacy of language' (Currie, 1987: 64) – and to the relationship between fictional and (illusory) real being. A cycle of fictional creation, destruction, and recreation is evident in the cosmogonic process of the novelist, underlining his freedom to project an alternative world: 'Shall I project a world?', asks Pynchon's hero in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966: 59, 63). In this process we get a glimpse of the characteristics of the fictional worlds' ontological structure, which postmodernism displays. Postmodernism simultaneously confirms and subverts the power of literary representation, since it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a system in order to reject and deconstruct it afterwards. This is what Auster does with Northern-American literary tradition – from names like Melville and Hawthorne to the hard-boiled detective novel à la Philip Marlowe –,

which he uses to underlie its own parody. An emblematic example of this subversion is the moment when the narrator of *The Locked Room* baptizes the girl in the Parisian bar as Fayaway, and himself as Herman Melville, evoking the author of *Moby-Dick*, a book that Sophie had offered him. The postmodern conundrum emerges in Auster's anti-mystery and anti-epistemological novels, leading him again to the ontological categories of writing. According to Peter Currie, the fragmentation of postmodern identity applies not only to the subject but also to the literary genre itself: 'The plausible coherence, pre-existent unity and propriety of the firm and fixed identity has also been called into question. [...] a recognition of subjectivity as the trace of plural and intersecting discourses, of non-unified, contradictory ideologies' (Currie, 1987: 64).

The red notebook of *The Locked Room*, successor of the red notebook of *City of Glass*, evokes the homonymous work from 1993, *The Red Notebook: True Stories, Prefaces and Interviews*. In his second true story, Auster describes a one year period he spent in south France, in 1973, staying at an isolated country house, an ideal place for a young writer to work. Solitude always appears in connection to the work of writing, and the stone house, a closed space delimited by thick walls, triggers the story. In that old labyrinthine space, the character lives a troubled existence (in itself a labyrinth), calling to mind the house of A.'s father in *The Invention of Solitude*, or the house-school of the childhood of Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson*, the character Quinn chose as a literary pseudonym. The mansion, despite being a labyrinth, is a source of pleasure for Auster, as in *William Wilson*: 'But the house! – how quaint an old building was this! – to me how veritably a palace of enchantment' (Poe, 1968: 161). In Poe's work, the interior space, filled by a mirror-like multiplication of rooms, is inhabited by shadows and by the ghost of the other, the double. Once again, identity is inseparable from space. Poe's mansion is a physical labyrinth with a mental counterpart, which provides the story's tragic density, along with the claustrophobic duplication of the protagonist, as an image of the mansion's rooms. During part of his stay in France, Fanshawe had also inhabited a particularly solid and isolated building (in a fictional transposition of the autobiographical *The Red Notebook*), which allowed him a unique work of observation, reflection, and writing, in a clear metaphor of the self as house, both unwaveringly isolated. Likewise, the closed room where the narrator finally finds Fanshawe has a physical and intellectual localization: Boston (Auster, 1992: 276) and the narrator's mind. The room is at the same time an actual space and a space made of thought and for thought.

Even though dominated by the ghost of Fanshawe, the narrator, being himself a writer (though always in a secondary role), is also aware of the cosmogonic power of writing and imagination. However, since he is a character in self-fragmentation, that awareness only appears as recollection of a distant past, or in moments of hallucination. Evoking the time when he was a census worker in Harlem, the narrator recalls the difficulties he faced to open doors, to get people to reveal their domestic interiors. He then became a creator of infinite identities, locked in the solitude of his room, taking great pleasure out of that, and even

a certain sense of duty, in one of Auster's rare references to the social and political context. The narrator created a written cosmogony within the room: 'It gave me pleasure to pluck names out of thin air, to invent lives that had never existed, that never would exist' (Auster, 1987: 250). But this cosmogony, that the narrator assumes to be imaginary, penetrates the 'reality' of the story imagined by Paul Auster (who is himself a secondary character in *City of Glass*), forming a *myse en abyme* about the work and the creative power of writing. Auster justifies that intrusion in *City of Glass* as a desire to climb over the walls that isolate fiction from reality. Later, during his period of delirious decadence in Paris, the narrator sees himself as an almighty alchemist, just because he has attributed an imaginary identity to a stranger: 'I was the sublime alchemist who could change the world at will. This man was Fanshawe because I said he was Fanshawe, and that was all there was to it. Nothing could stop me anymore' (ibid.: 296). Nonetheless, this new image of the divine power of the writer ends violently for the 'sublime creator', with a great deal of irony.

The closed rooms where Fanshawe locks himself in (both in his mind and in the real world) allow him, nevertheless, to observe the world around, as otherwise his written work would be a mere abstraction. The narrator mentions that Fanshawe's capacity for observation had reached impressive levels of clarity and aptitude, capable of seeing and writing almost simultaneously: 'By now, Fanshawe's eye has become incredibly sharp, and one senses a new availability of words inside him, as though the distance between seeing and writing had been narrowed, the two acts now almost identical, part of a single, unbroken gesture' (Auster, 1987: 277). The eyes carry images to the mind, in the same way that windows carry images to the inhabitant of the room, and both result in writing. The book is written within the room of the mind, and the windows of eyes and words stand between the room and the world. As we read in *Ghosts*, about Blue and his reports: 'Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world' (Auster, 1987: 146). This image is a metaphor for the relation between sign and referent, word and world, where the latter is filtered by the writer's mind and by language, denaturalized as in Plato's *Cratylus*.

INSIDE THE SPACE OF CHAOS: THE LINGUISTIC DECONSTRUCTION IN *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

The three narratives of *The New York Trilogy* – *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room* – employ and deconstruct conventional elements of the detective story, in a recurrent investigation not only of the nature, function, and meaning of language, but also of solitude, seclusion, and identity. The labyrinth of *The New York Trilogy* is populated by mysterious observers, alternative authors, mirrors looking into mirrors, and characters that have more or less disappeared, all of them committed to the search for lost identities. This universe of chaos and non-solutions leads Auster's detectives through paths very different from those initially established.

City of Glass, the first story of *The New York Trilogy*, fictionalizes the degeneration of language, the changes of identity, the struggle to preserve human characteristics in a great metropolis, when the city itself is immersed in a mechanical routine that erases every individual. Although this trilogy has New York City in its title, setting, and subject, interior scenes trigger the action and make it progress. *City of Glass* begins in the apartment of Quinn, a writer going through a literary and existential crisis. Quinn is a drifter in the labyrinth of the city, a man who, through motion, creates his own emptiness, an aimless utopian. He lives the postmodern condition as described by Lyotard: '[...] la dissolution du lien social et le passage des collectivités sociales à l'état d'une masse d'atomes individuels lancés dans un absurde mouvement brownien' (1979: 31).

After the first phone call, Quinn wonders what Max Work would do, since the writer cannot resist the temptation of leaving reality in order to enjoy a few moments in the space of fiction. Once he accepts the case, the spatial focus switches to Peter and Virginia Stillman's apartment, in an initial structure similar to that of *Ghosts*. The sequent narrative of Peter Stillman's childhood, trapped in the 'dark place' in search of a new divine language, establishes a dysphoric parallel with the rooms where the artist locks himself to discover the poetic word in solitude. But Stillman's isolation intends to create a whole new language, not just to recreate language with aesthetic goals in mind. The narrative of Peter, captive of darkness in the name of a threatening mock-god, occupies nine pages of uninterrupted direct speech, and, at the end, Quinn realizes that a whole day has gone by and they are now sitting in the dark. Quinn recalls several examples of children who grew up in isolation and silence, and the influence of that solitude in the language they acquired, tragically illustrating the enigmatic relationship between silence and words. Ironically, when Stillman-father is arrested, he too is incarcerated in a dark place, according to the son's narrative. The 'dark place' is like a tomb for the living, for involuntary inhabitants forced by others into it. Stillman-father buried his own living son there, establishing an antithesis with Quinn's dead son in his coffin or, intertextually, with the son of Mallarmé in *Mallarmé's Son* and *A Tomb for Anatole*.

Inside Paul Auster's house, Quinn finds an attentive listener, hospitality, and an image of the family he has lost, whereas the streets are the setting of the darkest moments in his life. New York symbolizes the nothingness that Quinn has built around himself and which he will never manage to escape. The postmodern agoraphobia continues in *The New York Trilogy* and its inescapable urban space, dominated by anarchy and constant twists of destiny. When he leaves the Austers' apartment, Quinn realizes the extent of his loss and solitude, even though he is in his own domestic space. Quinn would like to occupy Auster's space, his perfect universe, in a cruel intervention of the pseudo-author, displaying his own happiness for a character whose emotional void was caused by himself, by a whim of his almighty writing. In the meta-space between Auster and Auster (the author and the writer-character), Auster (which one?) stages a complex game involving his own name and status, at the same time associating and dissociating himself

from a writer-character who can either be a secondary character or the main figure, the main author. Realizing that he is no more than a mere object by and in the hands of the writer, Quinn, who is accustomed to use literary pseudonyms, decides to take control over his identity, in a childish but not irrelevant attempt to take revenge.

Quinn contemplates the walls of his own room, their colour showing the passage of time. White becomes gradually closer to black, until they become indistinguishable, as in the growing identification of Black with White in *Ghosts*. The city covers the walls with its stains, as it will cover Quinn's face and clothes with the indelible marks of the days spent in the alley, in growing degradation. Likewise, in the story of Peter Freuchen, in *The Invention of Solitude*, the protagonist breathes against the walls of the igloo he had built as a shelter, hastening his own death. In the alley, Quinn hides for an indefinite period of time, sometimes protected by the 'walls' of a garbage bin, fused into the city. This confinement within New York is an urban, postmodern revisitation of the theme of isolation in the forest of Thoreau's *Walden*, obsessively read in *Ghosts*. However, it is even more similar to the hypnotic contemplation of the wall by Bartleby, with whom Quinn shares many common traits. Quinn's space retracts like Bartleby's, from the island of Manhattan to the small windowless room, before withdrawing from the world and the text at all. The scrivener's anti-writing corresponds to Quinn's inability to solve the Stillman case. Like the Scrivener, Quinn also reduces his needs for sleep and food to a minimum, and spends his last days alone, in a room, mysteriously fed, and devoted to strange thoughts and writing exercises. Both write naked or semi-naked, in a prelude to the final identification of Quinn with Peter Stillman-child, as if he were at the same time the new subject and object of Stillman-father's project. 'Language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, records not only the fall of man, but the fall of language' (Auster, 1987: 43): Peter's captivity is carried out in the name of this need to invent a new language, pure, divine, and untouched by the vices of communication. Peter is imprisoned within the walls of invented words. However, albeit unintentionally, Stillman draws here a parallel between the perpetual inadequacy of language and the fragmentation of the postmodern universe: 'For our 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' (ibid.: 77).

The trilogy seems to contain the blueprint for an illegible, chaotic writing. Its entire construction promises a future resolution that is always postponed. Everywhere, we see the degradation of objects, a general process of crumbling down, against which coincidences, true and false identities, doubles, symmetries, mirror games, and textual structures are used. In the alley, Quinn discovers the true nature of solitude, when he realizes that he is compromising his identity, as reflected by the ultimate degradation of his new living space: '[...] he began to understand the true nature of solitude. He had nothing to fall back on anymore but himself. And of all things he discovered during the days he was there, this was the one he did not doubt: that he was falling' (ibid.: 117). The surveillance of

Stillmans' building is so exclusive, so claustrophobic, that Quinn not only fails to realize his own deterioration but also ignores, after two months have passed, the news of the suicide of Stillman-father. Unconsciously, Quinn starts moving towards the story of the search for the lost paradise, with its universal language. In this context, the reductive immersion in the alley represents the need to die in order to be born again, purified, and gain access to the primary innocence of Adam.

When he tries to return home, Quinn realizes that he won't be able to resume his former life. The last memories of his past happiness were lost with the apartment: the desk where he used to write and the drawings made by his son, a thin reflection of the Austers' home. In *The Music of Chance*, Nashe's wandering journey is also triggered by the dismantling of his house, the unifying centre of the subject. Escaping a new drift, Quinn locks himself in the smallest, most inaccessible room of the Stillmans' house, reduced to a series of white rooms, and ignores those opening to the outside: '[...] a series of bare, empty rooms. In a small room at the back, impeccably clean as all the other rooms were, the red notebook was lying on the floor' (Auster, 1987: 132). There, in the space where everything started, Quinn reaches an omniscient capacity of reflection and memory – he even remembers the moment he was born – as if he had penetrated his own identity, he no longer recognizes. Quinn becomes a kind of spectator of his own life, recording everything he sees, aware that he has reached the bottom of the abyss and that the spiral is about to be reversed. The space-time circle begins to close: solitude, darkness, and words are again reunited in the room. Free from his clothes, Quinn assumes the posture of a child about to emerge from the womb. Quinn actually lives inside himself, in the most obscure corner of his brain, where time becomes relative, as represented by the dark unknown room where one day is reduced to brief instants of light, until the ultimate darkness arrives:

[...] he was inside now, and no matter what room he chose to camp in, the sky would remain hidden, inaccessible even at the farthest limit of sight [...] He wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into the air, into the walls, into the city, even if the light never came back again. (Auster, 1987: 127, 131)

The true labyrinth lies inside Quinn, in the rooms of his mind, where he wanders in an infinite drift, unable to build the definitive all-encompassing text. Quinn does not achieve a cosmic solution. Fragmented and chaotic, the world remains, at the end of his quest, exactly as it was at the beginning. Quinn's contact with pure prelapsarian language was partial, momentary, and inconclusive. His own fate, like that of so many of Auster's characters, remains a mystery, and the reader is abandoned halfway through the narrative, that quits searching for the omitted, the imprecise and the undecipherable.

The beginning of *Ghosts* shows similarities with the opening of *City of Glass*. After the sentimental failure with ex-future Mrs. Blue, detective Blue returns home to assess the situation. Staring at the wall and the image of Gold,

Blue recalls his tragic unsolved case and defines a plan, aware that the moment has come to turn the page, just as Quinn did, after witnessing the marks of the passage of time. In both stories, meditation about the interior space (the room and its walls) follows a moment of dramatic intensity (awareness of solitude and lost happiness), preceding an irrational decision, that marks the beginning of the process that will lead to the protagonist's annihilation. By accepting White's proposal (much like Quinn when accepting Stillman's), Blue becomes a prisoner of the case and the room:

And yet White is the one who set the case in motion – thrusting Blue into an empty room, as it were, and then turning off the light and locking the door. Ever since, Blue has been groping about in the darkness, feeling blindly for the light switch, a prisoner of the case itself. (Auster, 1987: 169)

Blue is twice confined by White, whose actions are as dark as the name of the character to be observed. *Moby-Dick*, the White Whale, and the black-white wall of *Bartleby* are other intertextual instances where light and darkness, good and evil blend. Cosmos and chaos coexist in the same space, just as White and Black reside in the same character. In this way, Blue's room is also a white and a black space. Black, White's counter-colour, is in reality its equivalent in terms of absolute value, as they stand at both ends of the spectrum, as negation or synthesis of colours. Blue fills empty reports: no matter how much he blackens the white page with words, he inscribes nothing on it but absence. Blue states from the beginning that words are transparent (invisible) to him; thus, re-reading his notes, he is surprised to discover that, instead of inscribing facts into reality, his writing has made them disappear. When there is nothing but white or black on the page, the narrative cannot exist.

Blue cannot separate the room where he was locked from the case itself, since, in fact, one depends upon the other. Forays to the outside become ever more insignificant, and eventually Blue seems to take interest in buildings only, to the point of caressing their stone fronts. His case is simply to stand in a room observing a man in another room and observing himself at the same time. But it is also a step towards self-erasure, towards the growing awareness that he is only living half a life, made up of words about someone else's life. Blue feels like a character in a book with no action:

But if the book were an interesting one, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. He could get caught up in the story, so to speak, and little by little begin to forget himself. But this book offers him nothing. There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book. (Auster, 1987: 169)

The metalinguistic device is obvious here, as is Blue's awareness of the writing/reading of the story and of his own status as a fictional character. Black appears as the presumable author of the book, in a self-irony to Paul Auster's occupation,

with a proleptic reference to his being the actual mastermind of the case: 'As for Black, the so-called writer of this book, Blue can no longer trust what he sees. It is possible that there really is such a man – who does nothing, who merely sits in his room and writes?' (Auster, 1987: 169). Blue understands that he is becoming a ghost by way of solitude and writing, which evokes Nathaniel Hawthorne, who spent twelve years locked in a room in order to write. But Black also worries about the solipsistic existence of the writer: 'Writing is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he's there, he's not really there. / Another ghost. / Exactly' (ibid.: 175).

The synopsis of *Wakefield* not only anticipates some of the central motifs in *The Locked Room*, but also illustrates several passages of *Ghosts* and *City of Glass*. Wakefield withdraws into a room, initially as a prank, and he ends up forgetting his identity and disappearing from the world, leaving his wife a widow and becoming a living ghost. Wakefield consciously observes his own death (like Blue) from the room, the setting for his process of self-erasure. Entering his old house, twenty years later, Wakefield resumes his lost identity. Although Auster's postmodern re-writing denies its protagonist such a conclusion, Nathaniel Hawthorne achieves an enigmatic final identification between the closed spaces of the house and the tomb, whose door Wakefield is about to cross. This raises a very postmodern doubt about the story's apparent happy-ending: 'Stay, Wakefield! Would you go to the sole home that is left you? Then step into your grave! The door opens' (Hawthorne, 1966: 298).

The space of creation of a work of art can be simultaneously the space of its author's self-destruction. Black dies at the hands of Blue, but everything had been planned in advance: 'You've written your suicide note, and that's the end of it. Exactly' (ibid.: 194). This is the reason why Black states that he wishes to finish the book of a lifetime (the book of life) soon. Blue appears in the room in order to bring death to Black, counterpointing the moment when Anna Blume appears in Sam Farr's room to save the author and his work. The circle closes over Blue and Black when it becomes clear that the journey of looking and writing about looking has never left the space of the two rooms. A closed labyrinth-like circuit takes shape, without an apparent logical reason, destroying the canonical detective story and its narrative instances, with a deceiving prime mover (White), a subject (Blue), and an object (Black). As in *City of Glass*, the 'whodunit' has given way to the 'who-am-I?'. But in reality, there was no external manipulation, as White was nothing but a ghost. The true author is Black, who lived through the eyes of Blue, through his routine path, his weekly writing. Blue had always shown confidence in the words he used in his reports, those great windows standing between him and the world, until he starts questioning the process: 'It's as though his words, instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the world, have induced them to disappear' (Auster, 1987: 147). Blue's reports did not express reality but only what he thought reality was, illustrating the postmodern doubt about the relation between the world and the signs that translate it, the product of a post-Eden language, the great enigma of *City of Glass*.

Black is an existential parasite, a vampire of Blue's vital energy. Without knowing it, Blue also inhabits Black's room with his gaz. The lethal power of the room does not spare even its spectral inhabitant. The process of Blue's fragmentation unfolds over four simultaneous spaces, mirroring each other: the room and the mind of Black, and the room and the mind of Blue. Thus, by entering Black's room, Blue entered himself and someone else at the same time. He has put together too many beings in the same space, conjuring an imploding blackout. The double reinforces the story's structural unity, through the psychological identification with the opponent, but also fragments the subject into more than one being, eliminating the canonical notion of a singular identity. If White is Black's double, he is also his visible and luminous face, hiding the character's dark and secret side.

After the shocking revelation in Black's room, Blue spends several days locked in his own room, strolling within its four walls, looking at the pictures, as in a gallery of all the ghosts that have accompanied him throughout the story. Therefore, ex-future Mrs. Blue, a living non-spectral entity – that Blue rejected in order to enter the mystery of *Ghosts* – is just 'a certain blank spot on the wall' (ibid.: 190), since this is a story by, about, and for ghosts only. As Blue approaches the window and the world outside, the drama also approaches its final scene. The starting signal is given by Black, by the mere fact that he is no longer inside the room, but outside, in the street. The window demarcates the space between dream and reality, separating the fictional from the real world, as in Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fenêtres*. In the last moment, when Blue gets out of the room, he also gets out of the story, prompting the epilogue: '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' (Auster, 1987: 196). The enigma has not been solved; Blue simply abandons the room and the book, and the reader is left without a clue about his fate or Black's motivations, since the postmodern novel creates enigmas but does not try to solve them. The final dialogue is a dark duplication of the initial dialogue with White, which dictates the closing of the case, in Black's room.

The inner space is always decisive for the development of action. As in the preceding narratives of *The New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room* revolves around a succession of interior settings. The first step into the story is taken when the narrator enters Fanshawe's apartment, an austere space dominated by writing: 'It was a small railroad flat with four rooms, sparsely furnished, with one room set aside for books and a work table' (ibid.: 201). Fanshawe is the narrator's alter-ego, he lives inside his mind, and this is the story of a journey across the mental space:

It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am. [...] He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself. (Auster, 1987: 199)

The connection between Auster and Hawthorne is even more evident in this story: the homonymous hero of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828 in Hawthorne, 1996) is an intellectual who withdraws from the world and plunges into solitude. The fact that Auster names his heroine Sophie, like Hawthorne's wife, plays a preponderant role in Fanshawe's self-destructive fascination by the author, whose tendency towards isolation, also in his private life, is widely known. Hawthorne clearly looked at his hero as a noble and unpolluted side of himself, like the narrator of *The Locked Room*, often confused with his childhood friend. However, this Fanshawe's initial biography is completely taken from Paul Auster's own biography. Therefore, both the narrator and the object of his quest represent the author, that is to say, we are looking at the writer's search for his own identity. The narrator does not even have a name; he is simply the man who tells the story of the locked room, and he exists solely as a narrative entity. Like his eccentric predecessors of *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, Fanshawe developed an attraction for secret closed spaces (the tomb and the box are prominent motifs in his biography), that escalated into an implacable and ritualized privacy, barely different from death. Another passage from *Wakefield* illustrates the consequences of this characteristic that dominates the work of Auster and Hawthorne:

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (Hawthorne, 1966: 298)

Stillman, Black, and Fanshawe are, all three of them, Wakefields who abandon their daily routines in order to pursue insane quests. Ironically, those characters who also leave their own lives in order to search for them (Quinn, Blue, the narrator) are themselves dispossessed of their identities during their search. While the narrator's mind is dominated by the ubiquitous Fanshawe, Sophie's is gradually emptied of his presence. Sophie sees her missing husband as a temporary gift, irretrievably lost, now substituted by the son about to be born. Sophie apprehends that transition in physical-spatial terms, as if she were a space-room that was emptied in order to be refilled with a new content-inhabitant. The narrator plays with the word 'room' and with Sophie's pregnancy: 'as though there was no more room inside her for Fanshawe. These were the words she used to describe the feeling – no more room inside her' (Auster, 1987: 203). This calls into mind the sequence 'Room and tomb, tomb and womb, womb and room' from *The Invention of Solitude* (Auster, 1988 [1982]: 159–60), about the universal mysteries of life and death.

The narrator enters the room of Fanshawe's childhood alone and that experience turns out to be equally painful. Rooms are the most intimate of spaces, haunted by the memory of those who inhabited them. Fanshawe is locked in the room that is the narrator's mind, and the narrator will also access

Fanshawe's mind and room, thus exploring the interior of the man who already knows and inhabits his own interior. This scene is similar to the one in *Ghosts*, when Blue enters Black's space: 'I settled down behind the desk. It was a terrible thing to be sitting in that room, and I didn't know how long I would be able to take it. [...] I had stepped into the museum of my own past, and what I found there nearly crushed me' (Auster, 1987: 257). The narrator experiences a violent emotional reaction, caused by the memories revealed in the peculiar atmosphere of the room. If we understand the house as a metaphor for its inhabitant, the room in the top floor becomes the space of thought, memories, and the subconscious, where secrets are hidden.

The last space haunted by Fanshawe is unlocked the day before the narrator's break-up with Sophie and self-destructive expedition to Paris: after the suitcases, the office, and the childhood room, now the closet with Fanshawe's belongings is unveiled, releasing the ghost once again. The characters discuss the spectral presence that haunts their lives, as if the boxes and the closet contained the man: 'Now, as Sophie opened the door of the closet and looked inside, her mood suddenly changed. "Enough of this," she said, squatting down in the closet. [...] 'Enough of Fanshawe and his boxes' (ibid.: 284). Sophie opens the doors of memory, one of the many locked rooms where Fanshawe's spirit still resides. Inadvertently, she also mentions 'his boxes', evoking the magic box of Fanshawe's childhood and his super-human powers. 'Enough of this' and 'All of it': we do not know whether Sophie is talking about the objects or about Fanshawe himself, in a deliberate metonymy of container and content.

Remembering his adolescence spent in Fanshawe's company, the narrator realizes that the dramas lived by Fanshawe were always more painful because they happened inside him: 'By the time he was thirteen or fourteen, Fanshawe became a kind of internal exile, going through the notions of dutiful behaviour, but cut off from his surroundings, contemptuous of the life he was forced to live' (Auster, 1987: 216). In the epilogue of *The Locked Room*, the protagonist is confined to a space of literal and figurative seclusion, paralleling the nature of his teenage dramas. Fanshawe's actions revealed a whole new world to the fascinated narrator-child, an image of the process of growth and self-discovery. Although the narrator could have found that potential inside himself, without Fanshawe's intervention, one must bear in mind that Fanshawe inhabits the interior of the narrator, dominating him all through the story.

In his biographical digression, the narrator mentions that the final strengthening of the relationship between the young Fanshawe and his dying father occurred in the privileged space of the room. In this space of intimacy, where the father waits for death, both recognize their forgotten emotional bonds. At the moment of his father's death, Fanshawe is lying on a freshly dug tomb, experiencing maximum isolation, looking at the sky, at the antipodes of the life-generating womb, the other universal closed space. The tomb is as remote as the box inside which Fanshawe used to hide as a child, to access experiences and travels he shared with no one. The same happens here, while accessing

the experience of death, alone and oblivious of the presence of the narrator. Fanshawe simultaneously fulfils the zen ideal of pure detachment, of perfect indifference, and the American dream of absolute individualism, affirming his identity, sheltered from the world. Despite being a writer, Fanshawe does not seek to publish, his writing remains personal, an expression of his individualism, invulnerable to social pressures, more authentic than those who pursue success. In contrast, the narrator abandons his literary dreams to write articles, follows a path opposite to that of Fanshawe, and accepts compromises that Fanshawe refused.

The narrator also owns a space of solitary writing, apparently unshared, but actually haunted by Fanshawe, an invisible presence both in the biography about to be written and in the letter that suddenly invades the space the narrator thought was his own: 'The fact that I did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe, that he was inside me day and night for all those months, was unknown to me at the time' (ibid.: 242). In Paris, the narrator finds out that Fanshawe had worked as a ghost writer for a Russian filmmaker's wife, but, in reality, the whole trilogy is one vast system of ghost writing. Stillman invents the ghost Henry Dark to articulate his ideas about the rediscovered paradise. Blue, in turn, makes reports for White, where he transforms Black's life into writing, but, since White and Black are the same person, the recipient reads his own life described by another. In *The Locked Room*, rumours say the anonymous narrator is the true author of *Neverland* and Fanshawe is just a pseudonymous. Similarly, Quinn's red notebook, a text abandoned by a man that has disappeared, originates, according to the narrator, a major part of *City of Glass*. As if in a gestation that goes unnoticed, Fanshawe is inside every space inhabited by the narrator because he is inside himself, and this prevents him from achieving a visionary isolation similar to that of the box, of the tomb, or of the room. Incapable of prospering within the limits of the existence he has inherited, the narrator stagnates, as if his talent was now the exclusive property of Fanshawe, although his marriage and status allow him the freedom to pursue his own literary projects. Once again in the trilogy, a character becomes conscious of being trapped in a book written by someone else. The threat of psychological disintegration by subjection to Fanshawe is greater than the threat verbalized by Fanshawe himself that he would kill the narrator in case he tried to find him.

After accessing the secret that Fanshawe still lives, the narrator himself becomes a conscious locked room. The postponed biography and its protagonist become inhibiting presences. 'I was truly lost, floundering desperately inside myself' (Auster, 1987: 244), observes the narrator, as if he was immersed into Peter Stillman's dark room. As in the entire trilogy, the closed room inside us is always the hardest to explore. By trying to write Fanshawe's biography, the narrator does not create a cosmogony – as in the Harlem census – but a chaology. Fanshawe had his tomb in youth, which brought him, and him alone, closer to the indecipherable mystery of death. The narrator now has his own tomb too, which does not lead him to any revelation at all: 'I was digging a grave, after all, and there were times when I began to wonder if I was not digging my own'

(Auster, 1987: 250). The pages of the book build a wall of death, another tomb, the loneliest of spaces, the ultimate room.

In Paris, the narrator tries to fill the rooms still empty in the house of memory in order to finish building the written work. But he becomes increasingly aware of his growing inner darkness and self-incarceration. The process of duplication reaches its peak at this point. Simultaneously, and without the narrator knowing it, Fanshawe too is enclosed in darkness, under the recurring name of Henry Dark, waiting for his own self-imposed end. Alone in the hotel room, the narrator experiences the Kafkian final metamorphosis:

Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning. From the moment his letter arrived, I had been struggling to imagine him, to see him as he might have been – but my mind had always conjured a blank. At best, there was one impoverished image: the door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in that room, condemned to a mythical solitude – living perhaps, breathing perhaps, dreaming God knows what. This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull. (Auster, 1987: 292–3)

At this crucial moment, the narrator accesses the central topic (and title) of the story that imprisons him as a character, when he enters the last room and finds himself in Fanshawe. Like Blue, when he entered the room of his double, Black – the image of inner chaos and of the unknown self –, and found his own writings. While writing is a way of disclosing one's identity, the double represents the unknown within one's identity. The pilgrimage along the rooms of memory is always tortured by strangers who occupy them, intruders that speak on behalf of the subject. In the following moment, Paul Auster interferes in the narrative and offers the key to that duplication and circularity when he states that *The Locked Room*, *City of Glass*, and *Ghosts* all tell the same story, with different and increasing levels of comprehension. The recurring scenery of the postmodern metropolis, heir to Kafka, Beckett, Borges, and Jabès, is as labyrinthine as the human mind, reflecting a psychological complexity that has its roots in Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Dickinson.

Finally, the narrator heads for Fanshawe's microcosmic locked room. But is this an actual encounter in a house in Boston or just a final duel inside his mind? Is the narrator in front of the door that hides Fanshawe or is he inside his own subconscious? The quest of *The Locked Room* is but the description of a spiralling movement centred on the narrator, who penetrates a labyrinth-like abandoned mansion, opening door after door, in a fictional representation of self-discovery. When Fanshawe's room, the core of a suffering consciousness, is reached, and despite the door that separates them, the two interlocutors are so close to each other that it seems to the narrator that Fanshawe's words are actually coming from his own head, which is where Fanshawe in fact is.

The destructive seclusion of Fanshawe, also experienced by his double, represents an antithesis to the solitude of cosmogonic writing. Fanshawe has

been living for two years in this house in Boston, the final stage of his journey, in complete isolation, as Henry Dark, the sinister character from Peter Stillman's book, since darkness has already taken over him. Fanshawe recognizes that the house is too big for a single person and that he has never tried to explore the upper floors, in a parallel with the human mind, still widely unexplored. Fanshawe has entered the most obscure rooms in his mind and, because of that, he decided not to go any further. The narrator travelled with him, and, after living on the edge of darkness, decides to abandon the quest and kill Fanshawe, locking him in a room forever closed.

CONCLUSION

All through *The New York Trilogy*, and despite the insistence, the final door remains closed, as it seems impossible to reach the truth about ourselves, as there will always be one last closed room in our subconscious. We cannot open the door that isolates – and at the same time preserves – that room, or allow it into a book written in a room with windows to the outside. Books written in those supernatural and sinister inner rooms never reach the eyes of the public. What did Fanshawe do or write during his long seclusion? What did Black write? What did Quinn write in the red notebook, with the pen he bought from a deaf mute, an inhabitant of silence? In contrast with Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, or Phillip Marlowe, Auster's detectives never reach a solution. The drifting mind, in constant meditation, triggers the narrative, which is codified in likewise drifting signs, which produce other signs in their movement towards an established goal. When that goal remains unattained (or unattainable), we are left with the inconclusive endings and the everlasting mysteries of *The New York Trilogy*.

The power of literary representation reflects the cosmogonic power of the writer, who, in postmodernism, writes and subverts narrative conventions at the same time. As pointed out by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, writers like Paul Auster abolish preexisting meta-narratives, challenge the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of words, and generate a whole alternative written universe.

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