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Three Postmodern Detectives Teetering on the Brink of Madness in Paul Auster´s *New York Trilogy*

A Comparison of the Detectives from a Postmodernist and an Autobiographical Perspective

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Abstract

- As the title suggests, this essay is a postmodern and autobiographical analysis of the three detectives in Paul Auster´s widely acclaimed 1987 novel *The New York Trilogy*. The focus of this study is centred on a comparison between the three detectives, but also on tracking when and why the detectives devolve into madness. Moreover, it links their descent into madness to the postmodern condition. In postmodernity with its' incredulity toward Metanarratives' lives are shaped by chance rather than by causality. In addition, the traditional reliable tools of analysis and reason widely associated with the well-known literary detectives in the era of enlightenment, such as Sherlock Holmes or Dupin, are of little use. All of this is also aggravated by an unforgiving and painful never-ending postmodern present that leaves the detectives with little chance to catch their breath, recover their balance or sanity while being overwhelmed by their disruptive postmodern objects. Consequently, the three detectives are essentially all humiliated and stripped bare of their professional and personal identities with catastrophic results. Hence, if the three detectives start out with a reasonable confidence in their own abilities, their investigations lead them with no exceptions to a point where they are unable to distinguish reality from their postmodern paranoia and madness. And in the meantime, no crime is resolved and no social order restored. The autobiographical back drop of the three detectives and protagonists in the three novellas is the author´s own life in the late seventies and early eighties. In that sense the three protagonists all illustrate the parallel lives the author could have had, if chance and trivial every day decisions had not turned Auster´s life around, at certain critical junctures during the darkest moments of his life in connection with the painful divorce from his first wife.

Keywords: postmodernity, chance, identity, solitude and the metaphysical detective story

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1. Introduction

The traditional detective story often follows a highly predictable pattern, which is summarized by Norma Rowen as 'the relatively straightforward business of identifying a guilty person, bringing him or her to justice and restoring social order' (224). However, in Paul Auster´s the New York *Trilogy* (1987) (the book will onwards be referred to as the *Trilogy),* this business becomes infinitely more ambiguous, since the author gradually puts his protagonists in the three novellas of the *Trilogy* on an inward quest rather than to solve any crime or to restore order. Quite contrary to the traditional plot of crime fiction in which order is restored or a lost status quo is reinstated, the worlds that these 'detectives' inhabit turn increasingly chaotic. Moreover, this is often as a direct result of the protagonists´ own investigations. In addition, the detectives themselves gradually become more worn out and dishevelled in the process.

There is in fact no crime committed by any suspect in any of the three novellas. The real danger or threat in the *Trilogy* is posed by the detectives´ introspection, paranoia and obsessiveness rather than by any outside force that needs to be put under control. Hence, it is the detectives themselves and their inability to balance their own unruly emotions with the need for being rational in a postmodern world that constitute the real threat here. In Auster´s detective mystery, the focus has largely shifted from the object or suspect to the detectives themselves. Thus, the three novellas are not really about identifying the villain, the murderer or solving a crime, but rather about the gradual loss of sanity and inner balance of their protagonists. They lose themselves in the intricate labyrinth of New York City, but moreover also in the labyrinth of intertextuality and confusing signs of a fragmented world. In the *Trilogy* Auster merely uses the frame of the detective story to tell a much more complex story.

An early example of crime fiction is Shakespeare´s *Macbeth*. At the very outset of the play there is a mysterious encounter with the protagonist and three witches. For a fleeting moment Macbeth crosses over to another dimension or into the unknown. During that brief exchange with the witches they share three predictions with Macbeth; that he will become the Thane of Cawdor, moreover that he will become the king of Scotland and finally that Banquo will not ever be king, but that his kin will become kings. These predictions change the life of Macbeth forever. In retrospect, this interaction with the witches will set him on path to corruption and madness. What did

this brief meeting trigger in Macbeth? Did he open a door he rather should have left closed? Did he understand that he had the potential to become the king of Scotland, but failed to realize what prize he would have to pay to reach this objective?

Madness is also an overarching and central theme in Auster´s *Trilogy*. The three detectives in the trilogy all cross a line into the abyss and lose themselves in their attempts to understand their subject of investigation. This object in their detective quests varies widely between Peter Stillman in *City of Glass*, Black in *Ghosts* or Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*. However, what they all have in common is that they turn out to be extremely difficult to grasp. In their frustrating quests to get under the skin of their "suspect", the three detectives gradually turn their eyes from their object and start to examine themselves with catastrophic results. Difficult existential questions, such as who is who, what is what and, more importantly, who am I, simply become too much to handle for the detectives' frail mental and postmodern condition.

The objective of this essay is to apply a postmodernist and an autobiographical approach to the three detectives in Paul Auster´s *Trilogy* while examining their differences, but also their similarities. To that end the dispositions, characters and behaviours of Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass*, Blue in *Ghosts* and the narrator without name in *The Locked Room* are scrutinised. The essay tests the assertion that the impacts of the postmodern condition and of isolation lead the detectives to devolve into madness. In doing so the essay simultaneously seeks to identify when and why their detective quests go overboard and how the obsessive conduct of their respective investigations contribute to their mental breakdowns. Finally, there are references to how these postmodern detectives differentiate from major fictional detectives and their investigative methods, especially to those ones of the era of enlightenment with their focus on reason and analysis.

2.Postmodern Theory, Previous Research and Beyond.

In order to discuss the *Trilogy* from a postmodernist and autobiographical perspective it will be helpful to provide background especially on postmodernism. Furthermore, certain key concepts will be identified, which will be used in this essay in order to analyse the three novellas in the *Trilogy*. Postmodernism is often considered to have emerged from the sense of disillusionment with the events of the Second World War, particularly those of the holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

These events are also, as we will see, in a sense the point of departure for what Jean Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) refers to as the end of grand narratives or meta narratives. 'Simplifying to the extreme (Lyotard) define(s) postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives' (Jameson xxiv) in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. For Lyotard, the incredulity towards metanarratives stems above all from technical progress especially in the context of devices, which will evolve to become personal computers and turn information into a commodity. It is conceivable according to Lyotard that 'the nation- states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor' (Lyotard 5). This conclusion of Lyotard was surprisingly visionary in the late seventies, many decades ahead of the coining of the phrase 'fake news'.

The narratives that Lyotard referred to when speaking of the end of grand narratives or metanarratives were above all fruits of modernity, a modernity that more specifically nurtured the narrative of the era of enlightenment as an age of reason. However, they also, of course, include other metanarratives such as Christianity and Marxism. Together these metanarratives have provided a wide array of objective and universal explanations of the functioning of the world. Hence, the end of these metanarratives also signifies the end of believing in an unstoppable progress through reason, but also by means of using science or technology. The claim in Lyotard´s postmodern condition is that '[s]uch narratives follow a "teleological" movement towards a time of equality and justice: after the last judgement, the revolution or the scientific conquest of nature, injustice, unreason and evil will end' (Bennett and Royle 282).

Furthermore, Lyotard claims that we should be skeptical towards these crumbling models of explanations of our world and existence and instead refer to micronarratives, which are local and regional and cannot be applied universally to everyone as the metanarratives. Thus, these metanarratives or grand narratives have lost their power of 'legitimation'. 'Legitimation is now plural, local or contingent. No Supreme authority- Marx, Hegel or God- can sit in judgement' (Bennett and Royle 282). Hence, for postmodernists just like for modernists, the concept of truth is subjective and individual rather than objective and universal, which, we will see, is also an important conclusion for all three detectives in the *Trilogy.* Time and time again, they struggle with the fact that the old methods of reason and analysis, which were

invaluable tools for solving crime in the world of enlightenment, are no longer applicable in the postmodern world.

If we go back to Lyotard´s claim that the postmodern era is marked by 'incredulity toward metanarratives', which means that metanarratives are no longer useful tools to explain the world we live in, we now come to a second theoretical concept. This concept becomes crucial to analyse Paul Auster´s *Trilogy.* What is referred to here is the postmodern questioning of authority and established truths. Thus, the incredulity leads to *challenging* and *questioning* of established truths or models of explanations, which have been central to our western European world and culture. If postmodernists challenge and question the existing metanarratives of Marxism, the enlightenment or Christianity, the three detectives in the *Trilogy* all question for different reasons the very fundamentals of their existence and identities in their confusing and fragmented postmodern world.

If the events of the holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were attacks on the belief in reason and progress of the western world and western humanity, these events were followed by powerful counter currents. Thus, there were transformative movements such as decolonization, the civil rights movement, the women´s right movement, the gay liberation movement, the beat generation and the uprising and protest movement of students in Europe and the US in the late sixties. They were all reactions to authority, western values but also to the very notion that the era of enlightenment had been an age of reason, there was a growing sense that reason had been abused to justify different kinds of oppression and had lost its value as a universal metanarrative. For instance, the application of reason had been used as a pretext to carry out unspeakable crimes, such as the execution of the holocaust based on questionable scientific research of eugenics in Nazi Germany (Bennett and Royle 281). Moreover, it could be argued that the Stalinist terror had been justified through 'the form of a rational or 'scientific' development of Marx´s thinking' (Bennett and Royle 281). Furthermore, expert science and able application of reason and analysis had led up to the creation of the atom bomb that enabled the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Despite the best of intentions, the use of these 'weapons of defence' led to catastrophic results and brought to the forefront a sense of arrogance on behalf of the West. It goes without saying that it was widely questioned whether the atom bomb could have been used by the US against another Western European nation such as Germany for instance.

However, it would be wrong to assume that the postmodernists want to do away with reason. Another important French thinker and philosopher and contemporary of Lyotard, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) instead calls for 'a new enlightenment' in order 'to explore the value and importance of ways of thinking that cannot be reduced to an opposition between the rational and irrational' (Bennett and Royle 281). Thus, reconciling opposites and contradictions becomes an important postmodernist trait.

It could also be worth noticing in this context that if one questioned the existing metanarratives as an individual, be it as Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement or as Jack Kerouac and the beat writers in American literature or the individual protesters in the student revolts in France or the US at the late sixties, one consequently became a marginalized outsider. It is therefore significant that the three detectives we will examine in the *Trilogy* are to some extent all impacted by living or risking to live outside the norm.

However, as it will established in Auster's novellas, there is one powerful meta narrative, which is alive and well in the three detectives in their postmodern landscape of New York City in the late forties, late seventies and early eighties. It is the Judeo-Christian belief in the absolute value of family and procreation. In his praised debut work the *Invention of Solitude*, Auster quotes words from a letter of Van Gogh: 'Like everyone else, I feel the need of family and friendship, affection and friendly intercourse. I am not made of stone or iron, like a hydrant or a lamp post' (*Solitude* 27-28). These words carefully selected from the letter of a struggling artist could be seen as the credo of Paul Auster. *The Invention of Solitude*, the first autobiographical work of Auster published in 1982, is largely about his mostly absent father Sam Auster, who, as we will see, looms large over the three detectives in the *Trilogy.*

Sam Auster incarnates the modern world and to some extent the American dream with his humble beginnings, big house, material success and significant possessions of real estate. In contrast, Paul Auster, his son, is very much a child of the Postmodern world, despite his prestigious diplomas from an Ivy League University. In his early stumbling efforts to become a writer, living hand to mouth, he is on a permanent inward quest to nowhere. However, what father and son have in common is that they both need to be anchored in love and affection from a significant other and so do the three detectives in the *Trilogy*. The Eastern concept of living alone as eremite and sage in poverty, chastity and obedience or the mere prospect of doing so, does not sit

well with any of our three detectives in the *Trilogy*. They all need their significant other or their wives and children to thrive.

Let us now look more closely at key postmodern concepts, which will be central to gain a better understanding of the fragile mental health of the three detectives. Let us start here by considering the main characteristics of the metaphysical detective story as identified by Merivale and Sweeney (2011): 'These include according to the authors, among other things, the 'defeated sleuth', 'the world, city or text as a labyrinth' (…) *mise en abyme, '*the ambiguity (…) or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence', 'the missing person (and) double 'and 'the absence' (…) or self- defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation' (8). We will now proceed to examine some of these concepts in more detail.

The Defeated Sleuth

The Antihero or Sleuth in crime fiction is generally characterized by independence of thought and integrity. Moreover, they don't bow to authority. So why do the Sleuths in the metaphysical detective story end up being defeated? Stephen Bernstein in his essay 'The Question is the Story Itself' points to the built-in problems and challenges of postmodern subjectivity where according to Fredric Jameson' the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold, and to organize its past and future into coherent experience' (qtd. in Bernstein 137). Hence, according to Bernstein the three detectives in the *Trilogy* 'devolve into fragmentation and madness precisely because they can make no holistic response (whether as a model of past, present, or future) to a reality that has no coherent structure' (137).

Furthermore, in *Understanding Paul Auster* (2010), James Peacock points to the atrocities of The Second World War mentioned above, including the holocaust, the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and in addition points to the cold war climate that renders it difficult for authors (and postmodern detectives) to work towards neat and rational explanations. In this world the subject has lost control over the object. The good intentions of the peaceful use of atomic power have paved the road to a hell of atomic bombs spinning out of control. Similarly, ravaging climate change is fuelled by emissions from the rational invention of the automobile. Consequently, the postmodern detective cannot fully comprehend or successfully analyse his postmodern objects or suspects in the same way his predecessors were able to do in the age of

reason. Moreover, antidetective fiction challenges the idea that there is an individual or institution, which can present one definite version of the truth in the complex postmodern world filled with unexplained actions and intricacies. In addition, different media outlets present different interpretations of the same event, which makes it difficult to detect one particular final description of what actually occurred. Furthermore, by facing contradictory versions of the same event it has become increasingly difficult for the postmodern detective to remain as detached as Sherlock Holmes or M. Dupin (Peacock 44-46). Hence, the postmodern detective is literally 'torn apart between the upsurge of feelings and the necessity for rationality' (Peacock 46).

The world, city or text as a labyrinth/intertextuality

Detective fiction is closely associated with the urban expansion of the nineteenth century. As Walter Benjamin remarks," (t)he original content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual´s traces in the big -city crowd" (qtd. in Bernstein 138). Stephen Bernstein notes that the postmodern New York described by Paul Auster especially in *City of Glass* resembles what Fredric Jameson refers to as" postmodern hyperspace", which is a site that demonstrates 'the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects' (qtd in Bernstein 138). Thus, according to Bernstein, it becomes impossible to get a grip on a meaningful totality of urban or global contexts (138).

The title of the first novella *City of Glass* in the *Trilogy* also leads us to the American word for mirror, namely looking glass with references to endless reflections, which brings us to another postmodernist technique used in the *Trilogy*, namely intertextuality. According to Odacioğlu et al., 'intertextuality' means that all texts refer to other texts and derive meaning from an understanding of the discursive environment in which those prior texts are produced' (482). This is a conclusion that stems from Linda Hutcheon´s book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* in which Hutcheon pushes the argument to the extreme and questions whether any text in the postmodern world for this reason can truly be considered to be original (126). As we will see later in this essay the *Trilogy* constitutes a significant labyrinth of intertextuality with a large number of references to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods (*1854*),* Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe: A Tale* (1828) and many other works. The *Trilogy* is in this

sense a game of mirrors in which all three detectives in the book gradually loose themselves.

Mise en Abyme

Mise en abyme is defined by Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist fiction* (1994) as 'a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary… narrative world... (and which) *reproduces* or *duplicates* the primary representation as a whole' (124).

Ambiguity/Undecidability

Undecidability signifies being unable to decide between two different competing interpretations or options. The postmodern world lacks absolute values for central concepts such as God, Truth, Reason or the Law. These tenets are in the aftermath of the end of the metanarratives no longer possible to clearly define and therefore become possible to question or challenge. What was considered ambiguous in the middle of the twentieth century is now seen in terms of undecidability. Undecidability undercuts the concept of unity. The postmodernist critics welcome the opposite of unity, which are multiplicity, heterogeneity and difference, which renders any final meaning of a literary text impossible (Bennett and Royle 280).

'The missing person (and) double' and 'the absence'

The concept of the double is pervasive in the *Trilogy* and will require explanations from psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was an important source of inspiration among the postmodernist thinkers. Insights to the theories of Otto Rand and Sigmund Freud are therefore immensely helpful to gain a better understanding of this theoretical framework, which greatly influenced and left its distinctive mark on the postmodernists. According to Ilana Shiloh, Paul Auster´s protagonists in general, including those of the *Trilogy*, are characterized by absence, fragmentation, fluidity and invisibility. Shiloh traces the origins of these features to the absence of a father figure in Paul Auster´s life.

Shiloh explains Auster´s protagonists' inner quest partly through Freud´s theories. Freud divided the subject into three main categories, hence, the id, the ego and the super ego. In order to develop the ego, which serves as a mediator between the id´s quest for gratifications and the strict demands of reality, the ego of a boy goes through a

series of identifications primarily with the father. As the person grows up, the child or the subject will seek other suitable objects to mirror itself in, such as teachers and other individuals representing authority. It is initially through reflecting itself in the father figure that the male subject sees what it should be and gradually starts to develop a conscience and the ability to practice moral censorship. If these reflections cannot occur as they should the consequences will be two-fold; A. The ego will lack energy since it has no energy of its own and is therefore always forced to draw its energy from the id. B. Structurally the ego will also be lacking substance, since it will be unable to generate images from an external object and will, hence, not have the capacity to develop itself through repeated identifications.

As Auster´s father was largely absent, this process could therefore not be accomplished in an ideal manner. Thus, this is according to Shiloh why Auster is depicting his protagonists in terms of lack and fragmentation and why their identities are fluid and of a shifting nature. The absence of a father figure in his childhood has created a feeling of being incomplete, which he projects onto his protagonists. This will also help us understand why the three detectives´ shifting identities in the *Trilogy*, identities which moreover are subject to constant questioning, is such a central struggle and theme in the *Trilogy*. Hence, absence, lack and a strong urge for inner fulfilment will be keys to understand the three detectives´ delicate mental health (*Postmodern Quest* 10-13). In this context it is also useful to look at the origin of this view of the double as a lack (or a sense of feeling incomplete) inside a human being, which derives from Greek mythology. In Plato´s Symposium human beings were originally whole; hence, they were hermaphroditic creatures, perfectly complete and self- sufficient with no need to mate. However, as a punishment for their pride for wanting to aspire to divinity, Zeus split humans in two and since then they are doomed to look for their missing halves. As we will establish with Auster´s detectives they are only able to feel complete, whole and in balance either when they are with women they desire sexually or when then are able to successfully project the image of their crush, love interest or loved one (*Double* 31).

The motif of der Doppelganger or the double has been dealt with by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) extensively, but also by Otto Rank (1884-1939). The double is conceived by Rank (and by Freud) as an ambivalent and bi-functional psychic mechanism, which is initially formed in the early narcissistic stage. It will serve as a buffer against the destruction of the ego. At a later stage it is, however, converted to a

forerunner of death (*Postmodern Quest* 70). The function of the double is pertinently recapped by Erich Stern´s review of Rank´s study: 'The hero´s consciousness of his guilt causes him to transfer the responsibility for certain deeds of the self to another self, the double; his tremendous fear of death leads to a transference to the double. In order to escape this fear of death, the person resorts to suicide which, however, he carries out on his double' (qtd.in *Postmodern Quest* 70).

Hence, through the theories of Freud, Plato and Rank above, we are able to distinguish two types of doubles. The first double, who in fact originates from a split off self, which occurs through the splitting of the self within an individual and causes feelings of a lack (or of being incomplete) within that individual. The other double is the double as an image of excess, where the self is replicated and becomes a rich area of projection (*Double* 28-29). As we will see, both these interpretations of the double will be relevant to analyse our protagonists and their gradual decline of mental well-being throughout the *Trilogy*.

Finally, the myth of the double is also pertinent to our understanding of the suspect or missing person. All the way back to the fictional genius detectives, such as Dupin or Sherlock Holmes, it has been vital for the detective to identify with his or her suspect. The literary detective and the criminal or suspect may by no means resemble each other physically. However, the success of the investigation will depend on the detective´s ability to make a leap onto the criminal´s mind, where 'the difference between the investigator and the perpetrator is gradually obliterated' (*Double* 5). Given Auster´s detectives´ fluid identities marked by absence and lack, this process of identifying with their suspects or the missing person will be particularly taxing on their mental health.

Chance/ Randomness

Chance is a concept that is among others introduced by Derrida in his essay 'My Chances, Mes Chances'. The fact that he uses the French word for chance interchangeably with the English word chance in the title of this essay is an important fact to take note of. The French word *chance* means luck, but could also refer to opportunity or possibility. Hence, Derrida is introducing in his essay an ambiguous concept and also often refers to the opposite of chance in his writings, which would be 'pas the chance'. This concept 'pas the chance'. would roughly mean missed occasion or opportunity. Hence, the duality of the word 'chance' is critical. In his essay Derrida

introduces two different interpretations of chance 'the belief that anything that happens is accidental and the belief that no coincidence is gratuitous' (qtd. in *Postmodern quest* 2). This is also in line with how Auster uses the concept of chance in his writing. According to Brendan Martin, Auster uses this postmodernist trait 'the chance factor' 'by connotating the possibility of unexpected and random incidents which may happen at any particular time regardless of individual circumstances or location and any following situation due to the original action' (qtd. in Odacioğlu et al. 482). Thus, in Auster´s postmodern world concepts such as coincidence, randomness and the unexpected are strangely wedded with the concepts of destiny or fate to shape his characters' lives.

Simulation

It would be useful to explore a couple of other postmodern concepts, which play a central role in the *Trilogy,* i.e. simulation, identity and decentring. In western philosophy the dichotomy between the original and the real has been central going all the way back to Plato and his powerful allegory of *the cave*, where a group of chained individuals are watching shadows projected on to the wall of a cave by puppeteers. Thus, they falsely believe that they are interacting with the real world fully. They live in this illusion while in reality they are only able to catch pale reflections of the outside world and its events on the wall of the cave fuelled by the fire behind them. Thus, these are merely reflections of the real life which is going on outside their limited existence in the cave. This belief gave rise to a hierarchy between the real and the copy. In Plato´s interpretation we could only perceive a vague and pale copy with our senses of something real, which occurred elsewhere beyond our reach.

As we already know, the postmodernists challenged and questioned hierarchies, authorities and established truths. The postmodern Philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) often referred in this context to the many signs, symbols and images communicated to us in the omnipresent advertising, which surrounds us everywhere in our postmodern world. Moreover, this advertising is often misleading and can make us believe that a particular brand of car or hamburger has an inherent value that far exceeds the 'sad and surprisingly expensive artifact that you have just bought' (Bennett and Royle 283). Hence, the difference between the real and something (for instance a sign) that replaces the real with its representation, thus, 'a copy without origin' or what Baudrillard referred to as Simulacrum (Bennett and Royle 327). Furthermore,

Baudrillard introduced yet another way of thinking about these concepts. Baudrillard distinguishes between what Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) calls the signifier and the signified, hence, between the word (on the page or any other material thing that signifies) and the idea or concept that the word represents. We all understand that there is a difference between the representation of a car on a billboard and the actual car or the hamburger we see in commercial and the actual hamburger we can order in a fast food restaurant. However, simulation makes such distinction impossible. Therefore, the actual object blends with the idealized concept of the object brought to us in endless commercials. Thus, if major companies are able to sell in their brands, such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's, this will affect our experience of consuming their products and it will be difficult to distinguish between the actual artifact and the many seducing images we have been fed through an endless series of commercials (Bennett and Royle 283-284). The notion of distinction between an idea of an object, the signified and the actual object, the signifier, as we will see, becomes crucial to the detective in *City of Glass* in his quest for the lost tongue of Adam.

Identity

An identity is largely determined by factors such as gender, class, race and sexual orientation. To stay inside the boundaries of the norm for your particular group is often encouraged or rewarded. A male heterosexual subject would therefore, for instance, undoubtedly often fuss about not wearing garments that would make him look' too gay'. However, the postmodern notion of identity has gradually become less rigid. According to the postmodern thinker Judith Butler, "identity can become a site of contest and revision" (qtd. in Barry 147). She also takes this argument one step further and claims that all identities are '*a kind of imitation for which there is no original*' (qtd. in Barry 147). Hence, in the postmodern world we are constantly changing between different roles and positions, picking and choosing from an endless number of options of whom to become (Barry 147). Thus, the postmodern identity is fluid with a potential to constantly reshaping and recreating oneself. In *City of Glass* we will see how the main protagonist, Quinn, pushes this to extreme and how he gradually loses himself in the process.

Decentring

As stated earlier Postmodernists challenge that there should be one truth or one particular interpretation of reality that should be seen as superior and consequently reign supremely. Thus, the Postmodernists challenge the notion of final meanings, the ethnocentric (if 'the West' is challenged after the atrocities of World War II, it has not really been replaced by another category such as for instance 'Islam' or 'the East' in our increasingly polarized world) and the phallocentric (privileges, significance and power of the phallus and therefore masculinity). Hence, the postmodern world is multipolar without one definitive centre (Bennett and Royle 287).

Analysis

3.1 City of Glass

The plot is set in motion by a key concept in postmodernity, namely 'chance' on the very first page of the *Trilogy.* 'It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of the night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not' (*Trilogy* 3). Hence, the action begins with a random phone call placed to an author of mystery novels, Daniel Quinn, and `the someone he is not` is Paul Auster of Auster´s Detective Agency, thus, the real -life author Paul Auster of the *Trilogy*, who intriguingly and unexpectedly appears as a fictional character at the very beginning of *City of Glass*.

As background, it is also noteworthy that Paul Auster (the one out of the book) did in fact receive two random phone calls in the spring of 1980 by a man asking for Pinkerton Detective Agency. Apparently, Paul Auster (the one out of the book) contemplated, after putting the caller straight, what would have happened if he had taken on the case. However, unlike Paul Auster, our protagonist, Quinn, gets a third chance. He then steps up to the challenge of moving from writing crime fiction to actually taking on a case as a real detective impersonating Paul Auster of Auster´s Detective Agency (Peacock 48-49). Thus, suddenly and without prior warning or notice, Quinn subsequently enters into a life defining and transformative adventure and '(m)uch later, when he (Quinn) was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance' (*Trilogy* 3). Hence, in the fragmented world of postmodernity, events are shaped by chance rather than by causality. Consequently, questions are put whether all is 'predetermined' (*Trilogy* 3) or if things occur completely at random or if in fact these contradictions can live side by

side in this schizophrenic era of postmodernity. This is, as we have already been able to establish, the claim of both Auster and Derrida.

However, in order to better understand the rapid decline of the mental well-being of the author and would be detective, Quinn, which is so central to *City of Glass*, we have to move back even further. We need to move to a distant past before the three random phone calls on the first page of the novella, which do trigger the whole chain events in *City of Glass*. In this context it would be useful to examine the opposite of chance, namely what Derrida referred to as 'pas de chance'. Hence in order to better grasp the state of mind of our protagonist, Quinn, it becomes necessary to examine what precedes the opening scene of the novella. This is due to the fact that the events that prompt the unravelling of Quinn´s mental health have actually started long before these three random calls take place 'in the dead of the night' (*Trilogy* 3) in Quinn´s 'small New York apartment' (*Trilogy* 3).

If Postmodernity rose as a battered phoenix out of the ashes and atrocities of the Second World War, our protagonist in the *City of Glass*, Quinn, rises out the ruins of a life he once had. A few years earlier, his wife and children were brutally killed in a merciless car accident. From that pivotal moment onwards, Quinn abandons his career and 'raison d'être' as a poet and literary critic. Instead he now becomes a recluse and loner and begins to write mystery novels under the pseudonym 'William Wilson' (This is interestingly the name of a character whom Edgar Allan Poe created and who in Poe´s story has to face his own alter ego) about the detective Max Work. Quinn's gradual seclusion in his new life in the aftermath of this tragic accident has clearly taken a toll on his mental well-being: 'He (Quinn) had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work' (*Trilogy* 9). Hence, Quinn, the widower, incarnates here in a sense the postmodern condition, surviving only by turning to the extreme resort of leading a life, where fiction and reality blend seamlessly through the fictional character, Max Work. Being Max Work enables Quinn to take on the many challenges of his new life as a lonely lost soul because '(w)hereas Quinn tended to feel out of place in his own skin, Work was aggressive, quick- tongued, at home in whatever spot he happened to find himself' (*Trilogy* 9).

It is also this self-confident hard-boiled and 'Max Work like' detective with all his swagger, who we meet early on in the novel when Quinn is confided his 'case'. According to John Scaggs, Paul Auster in *City of Glass*' … subverts the conventions of

detective fiction in general, and hard-boiled fiction in particular…' (Scaggs 141). Thus, early on in the novella we can in fact for a brief moment be deceived to believe that *City of Glass* will turn out to be a conventional hard-boiled crime fiction story. There are obvious similarities and parallels between *City of Glass´*s protagonist Daniel Quinn and Raymond Chandler´s detective Philippe Marlowe. Just as Marlowe, Quinn lives alone in a rented apartment with few possessions, pushing himself forward in a life where 'he no longer had any friends' (*Trilogy* 5). Furthermore, as a lone wolf detective Quinn navigates the dark underworld of New York City in the early eighties, which is, as we will be able to establish later on, a distinctly gloomier place than Marlowe's Los Angeles of the 1950´s. The whole setting in the beginning of the novella also reminds us of Chandler´s writing: 'It was night. Quinn lay in bed smoking a cigarette, listening to the rain beat against the window' (*Trilogy* 5-6). In addition, Quinn meets a 'Femme Fatale', who seems to emerge from a novel of Chandler, when visiting his prospective clients in their vast Upper East Side apartment. He describes her (Virginia Stillman) as having 'hips a touch wide, or else voluptuous, depending on your point of view; dark hair, dark eyes, and a look in those eyes that was at once self-contained and vaguely seductive. She wore a black dress and very red lipstick' (*Trilogy* 13). Quinn can´t help but wondering 'what she looked like without any clothes on' (*Trilogy* 14). However, he does not stay in character as a hard-boiled detective for very long. The detached and playful attitude of his fictional character, Max Work that Quinn displays during this meeting with the voluptuous Virginia Stillman early on in the novella quickly evaporates as he gets absorbed by his case. Already in the meeting with Stillman Jr, whom he will be hired to protect, Quinn is confronted both with bouts of insanity and an identity crisis, which give us early hints of where this story really is going. This is readily demonstrated in Stillman Jr´s rambling and schizophrenic introduction of himself to Quinn: 'I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Peter Rabbit. In the winter I am Mr. White, in the summer I am Mr. Green. Think what you like of this. I say it of my own free will…' (*Trilogy* 18). Even for a would-be detective as Quinn, it is easy to understand that Stillman Jr, now in his mid-twenties, has been through a trauma of gigantic proportions.

Driven by a sense of mission in his new-found role impersonating Paul Auster, but also by loyalty to his new employers, Quinn (or Max Work?) now goes to great lengths in carrying out detective work to protect this young man and to try to understand his 'suspect' Peter Stillman Sr. Hence, Peter Stillman Sr is the suspect, father and mad

linguist, who possibly could pose a threat to Stillman Jr after having been locked away in an asylum for thirteen years. This mad linguist, Stillman Sr, has in fact served a sentence for having conducted a cruel experiment on his son Stillman Jr, locking him up in a dark room for nine years from the age of two to eleven. The purpose of this singular experiment was to make his son forget his native tongue English and instead start to speak the lost tongue of Adam, the language of God. However, in the end the only concrete result of this radical endeavour was quite obviously that his son, Stillman Jr went mad. Consequently, it now becomes Quinn's task to watch the father (Stillman Sr) and 'find out what he´s up to' (*Trilogy* 29). However, Quinn is poorly equipped for this task, since he is only an author of mystery novels and has 'never met a private detective' and 'never spoken to a criminal' (*Trilogy* 7). Furthermore, '(w)hatever, he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films and newspapers.' (*Trilogy* 7). Or, as Quinn puts it in his intertextual credo as a highly introverted writer of mystery novels, '(w)hat interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories' (*Trilogy* 7). However, this is also where the frustration sets in for all three detectives in *Trilogy*. There are too many signs or possible underlaying patterns pointing in too many different directions, pointing in their turn at yet another endless set of signs or potential leads. Moreover, this is happening in their fragmented and semi fictional worlds, rendering their available tools of reason and analysis infinitely inadequate for the task at hand. Quinn, for instance:

> 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. (*Trilogy* 67)

According to Ilana Shiloh, the blue eyed and untested Quinn we meet early on in the novella *City of Glass* 'starts out believing in the fundamental rationality of human behaviour and in the mind´s ability to understand this behaviour' (*Postmodern Quest* 37). Thus, Quinn´s approach early on in his detective quest is not a very different approach from the 'genius' detectives of Poe´s Dupin or Doyle´s Sherlock Holmes. However, with Quinn´s suspect Peter Stillman Sr being far from rational, this puts him on a road to frustration and makes him question himself. The first difficulty he

encounters is very fundamental in its nature: Does he actually find the right suspect? We are soon to find our would-be detective, Quinn, diligently waiting for Peter Stillman Sr at Grand Central Station. As mentioned earlier Stillman Sr is now returning to New York after having been locked away for more than a decade. However, Quinn is then all of a sudden confronted with two Peter Stillmans: 'Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's' (*Trilogy* 55-56). The two Stillmans are as distinctly different as the two neighbourhoods in Manhattan where the novella is set, namely Morningside Heights and the Upper East Side, just a few blocks from the Frick Collection. If the first Stillman wears 'a long, brown overcoat that had gone to seed' (*Trilogy* 55), the second Stillman, however, was 'dressed in an expensive blue suit; his shoes were shined; his white hair was combed; and in his eyes there was the shrewd look of a man of the world' (*Trilogy* 56). Not surprisingly, Quinn, being an outsider and lost soul himself, decides to follow the first Stillman, the dishevelled one, and then ends up in his own neighbourhood, namely, Morningside Heights, where Stillman Sr will reside in 'a small fleabag for down- and-outs, the Hotel Harmony' (*Trilogy* 57). Hence, once again, we are confronted with how 'chance' and 'pas de chance' can lead human beings to completely different outcomes and lives.

Why is it then so difficult for our would-be detective, Quinn, to grasp his suspect? For starters the Masterminds or genius detectives, such as Dupin or Sherlock Holmes, could grasp their objects and their surrounding realities completely and effortlessly. As noted in the theory section, this has become less self-evident for the postmodern detective, whose object or suspect easily triumphs over him. What Quinn, nevertheless, has in common with these legendary genius detectives is that he is willing to go to great lengths to emulate his suspect. However, the fundamental difference is that Dupin, Sherlock Holmes or Poirot were able to stay in control while identifying themselves with their objects. They were by no means overwhelmed by their suspects and their actions. Their detective quests seemed like a game or walk in the park with a highly predictable outcome. In the end their ability to make use of analysis and reason would vanquish over any insurmountable challenge put in front of them. However, none of this applies to Quinn´s halting detective quest. In our postmodern world our fragmented and decentred objects and their skewed realties are less evident to come to terms with. As Baudrillard puts it: 'Reality no longer has the time to take on the

appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream. Schizophrenic vertigo of these serial signs, for which no counterfeit, no sublimation is possible' (qtd. in C. Baker and al. 163). Quinn indeed suffers from 'schizophrenic vertigo' when he grapples to understand and read his suspect. But if he ultimately fails, it is certainly not for lack of trying, since being a writer Quinn is equipped with both imagination and creativity. Hence, Quinn follows dutifully the meandering walks of the dishevelled Stillman Sr in Morningside Heights and tries very hard to read his erratic behaviour. These meandering walks could, of course, be seen as our detective entering into labyrinth. In that sense, we are not certain whether Professor Stillman is walking arbitrarily through the run-down streets of Morningside Heights or whether as in labyrinths, there are underlying patterns to be detected. However, in postmodernity, there are no definitive answers, but only more questions. Hence, once again, we are not certain whether Quinn's conclusions are accurate. Since there were two Stillmans at Grand Central Station, we are not even sure that this dishevelled individual Quinn has identified is the suspect he has been assigned to tail. This is also evident from Quinn´s remarks of deep resignation when being confronted with two Stillmans: 'There was no way to know: not this, not anything' (*Trilogy* 56).

In the ensuing days, trained at two prestigious academic institutions, namely Harvard and Columbia University, Professor Stillman, Quinn's suspect, now dedicates himself with utmost seriousness to examine and collect specimens of discarded junk and various broken objects on the sidewalks of Manhattan. Stillman Sr then gently puts these objects in his bag and records his findings with great interest in a notebook. Meanwhile, Quinn seeks signs in his observations of his presumed suspect. Are Quinn´s conclusions that he can in fact spell out the Tower of Babel from these meandering walks of Stillman Sr in Morningside Heights even correct? Or are they in fact merely desperate efforts by a traumatized individual to hang on with his nails to whatever remains of his sad and increasingly confusing existence? Is Quinn trying to find meaning in a meaningless world with his 'constant search for meaningful patterns and answers where in fact there may be none' (Peacock 58)? Unable to make any progress through tailing his suspect, Quinn then breaks his initial agreement with Victoria Stillman and approaches Stillman Sr. However, Quinn´s conversations with Stillman Sr are not very helpful either, especially since these conversations are barely coherent with their many references to Stillman´s obscure research, codes and hidden messages. In

addition, they don´t lend themselves easily to rational analysis, as easily proven by the exchange below during the second meeting between Stillman and Quinn:

> ‘Do I know you?’ he (Stillman Sr) asked.
> ‘I don´t think so, ‘said Quinn. ‘My name is Henry Dark.’
> ‘Ah,’ Stillman nodded. ‘A man who begins with the essential. I like that.’
> ‘I´m not one to beat around the bush,’ said Quinn.
> ‘The bush? What bush might that be?’
> ‘The burning bush, of course.’
> ‘Ah, yes. The burning bush, Of course.’
> (*Trilogy* 79)

Each time Quinn approaches Stillman, he does so under a new fabricated identity. One time he introduces himself as Daniel Quinn (instead of the detective Paul Auster that he is supposed to impersonate), the next time, referred to in the citation above, he presents himself as Henry Dark (a character invented by Peter Stillman Sr with reference to Humpty Dumpty, the philosopher of language in his research). Finally, Quinn introduces himself as Stillman Sr´s son Peter Stillman Jr. Hence, as described by Judith Butler earlier, Quinn keeps reshaping and recreating his identity until he loses himself in a postmodern schizophrenic labyrinth of different identities. Nevertheless, Stillman Sr plays along with Quinn and never seems to recognize the young man from one encounter to the next. Stillman Sr even embraces his overly versatile counterpart in his remarks ’But people change, don´t they? One minute we´re one thing, and then another another’ (*Trilogy* 84). Finally, Stillman Sr even gives him paternal advice, asking Quinn not to lie, when Quinn introduces himself as his son, Peter Stillman Jr.

During their first encounter Stillman Sr also explains to Quinn what his interest is about in broken objects. It is self-evident that these broken things could serve as a metaphor for all that needs fixing in New York during that critical time in the late seventies and early eighties when the entire city was on its knees and almost went bankrupt. Moreover, it was a time when its streets were rampant with crime and drugs. But, furthermore, the streets of New York City were also overflowing at that time with’ broken people, the broken things, (and) the broken thoughts’ (*Trilogy* 78) of shattered existences like Stillman Sr and Quinn himself. People, who were scraping along in the ruins of their own lives. Hence, this land of brokenness is the perfect place for someone,

such as Stillman Sr. A professor and scholar, he wants to find an appropriate name for a broken umbrella, which seems to be a particularly attractive object or specimen for him to dissect. Thus, we are back to Plato and Baudrillard and the dichotomy between the idea or concept of a word like, for instance, umbrella and the naked spokes of an umbrella. Is what remains of the umbrella after the cloth has been removed, which no longer can offer protection against neither showers nor torrential downpours, still an umbrella? As Peter Stillman Sr wisely puts it in a rare moment of clarity, 'And if we cannot even name a common, everyday object that we hold in our hands, how can we expect to speak of the things that truly concern us' (*Trilogy 77*-78)? Furthermore, Stillman Sr is a man on a mission and his mission is 'the reunion of things and words' (Peacock 58), which is only part of an even larger mission to retrace the lost tongue of Adam or the prelapsarian language. It is obvious that it becomes difficult for the determined and highly motivated Quinn to make head or tail of all of this 'Top secret' information (*Trilogy* 78), which is thinly disguised in Stillman Sr´s rambling and 'his complete estrangement from reality' (Peacock 58).

In addition, as Quinn gets increasingly obsessed with his case, he never allows himself to take a break with his ambitious detective quest. If initially he seems pleasantly occupied by occasional thoughts of the seductive creature of his employer and secret crush, Virginia Stillman, his thoughts then become completely absorbed by his case. According to Jameson, as stated earlier, in postmodernity we live in a continuous present, in other words 'in a series of moments in time with little sense of past or future' (C. Baker et al.174). Thus, once Quinn is entirely obsessed with his case, there is no way for him to evade his defeat or increasing frustration in meeting up with his friends for a drink, or spending time with a loved one. Quinn can´t even like most of us seek comfort in happy moments of his past or look forward to future events, because all there is, is a stretched out mainly painful present. This never-ending present is similar to the one depicted in Jean Paul Sartre´s play *No Exit.* But, if in Sartre´s play 'hell is the others', Quinn's hell is what he hides inside himself, the dark and heart wrenching secret of how a random accident numbed him for good and bereft his life of any meaning. Thus, the loss of his family that left him alone, unable to share his grief or joy with another human being. Therefore, he keeps pushing himself relentlessly forward in his solitary detective quest into a labyrinth with no way out until he no longer can distinguish reality from the overwhelming feelings of paranoia, obsessiveness and confusion so closely associated with postmodernity.

The moment when Quinn loses himself completely is nevertheless personal. It is not like with Macbeth, where the protagonist catches a glimpse of power, control and glory and acts on it with greed and an immense hunger for influence. It is rather a moment where Quinn gets a glimpse of the marital bliss of the fictional Paul Auster that he himself once had, before this family of his became victims of a deadly tragic traffic accident. The real-life author Paul Auster 'claims that *City of Glass* is a "love letter" to his wife, Siri, and Quinn a model of "what would have happened to me if I hadn´t met her" (qtd. in Peacock 59). Hence, the fictional Daniel Quinn is in many ways a thinly disguised fictional self of the author at a time in his life when Auster had hit rock bottom. Thus, when Quinn, the private detective in *City of Glass*, meets the fictional author and fortunate family father Paul Auster, it is at some level an earlier incarnation of himself (Paul Auster, the one out of the book), who becomes jealous of the fortunate fictional Auster. Thus, Quinn is in fact incarnating the lost, miserable soul Auster once was after separating from his first wife and their son, Daniel in the late seventies. Quinn therefore thinks that '…he too would have liked to have this wife and this child, to sit around all day spouting drivel about old books, to be surrounded by yoyos and ham omelettes and fountain pens' (*Trilogy* 101-102).

The yoyo mentioned in the citation above could also be seen as a metaphor to what *City of Glass* is ultimately about: the loss of selfhood and identity and loss of the vulnerable link to reality itself for a disoriented, lonely and miserable human being. New York in the seventies and eighties was often portrayed in works of arts in terms of sudden upward mobility of modernity, for instance, in some of its signature movies such as *Saturday Night Fever, Wall Street* and *Working Girl*, where mobility was often connected to the protagonist crossing a bridge or tunnel into the promised land of Manhattan. However, the *City of Glass* we get to know in Auster´s novel is not a city or story, where the protagonist´s life moves from rags to riches but rather quite the opposite. Hence, City *of Glass* is certainly not about succeeding and realising the American dream. The story is rather the story of postmodern decentring. It is about a lost soul already living as an outcast and outsider without belonging to any significant, recognizable collective, class or occupational group. An outcast who, in addition, will now move even further out on the very outer fringes of the margins of life, as a result of his 'case'. The yoyo is a metaphor for this last painful transformation. This yoyo which the fictional Paul Auster´s son Daniel has found in the street is as expected as damaged as most other objects, which are laying around on the streets of New York of this

novella. This yoyo can only descend and is finally ‘dangling at the end of its line’ (*Trilogy* 101). This is reflected in a brief exchange between Quinn and the fictional Paul Auster´s son Daniel: ‘A great philosopher once said,’ muttered Quinn, ‘that the way up and the way down are one and the same.’ ‘But you didn´t make it go up,’ said the boy. ‘It only went down’ (*Trilogy* 101). This is a moment that foreshadows what will come next. What happens following this meeting with the fictional Paul Auster and his wife Siri is namely a fairly quick downward spiral where the protagonist, Quinn, gradually behaves more and more erratically, loses everything, including his rented apartment, his money and all prospects of regaining a normal life again. First Quinn, through his last desperate efforts to solve the’ case’, loses control, becomes a bum and lives in garbage bin. Finally, though, we find him naked on the floor of Stillmans´ vacated spacious apartment on the Upper East Side, utterly unable to distinguish reality from imagination. Baudrillard´s schizophrenic vertigo has now taken its full toll on our protagonist. It is there that the wish Quinn has carried with him from the very beginning of the book comes to fulfilment: His urge lose himself, to vanish and disappear. And all that is left after he mysteriously disappears, is the red notebook telling his story. This is the only tangible outcome of his ‘case’. The non-solution of this anti detective novel of Quinn going insane.

3.2 Ghosts

Before approaching the second novella, it will be useful to further examine the autobiographical context of the *Trilogy*, which in fact became Auster´s first real work of prose under his own name. In doing so, we will in particular examine how Auster´s father looms large over Auster in the three novellas of the *Trilogy* as pointed out by Ilana Shiloh in *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest* (2002). Auster´s largely autobiographical work *The Invention of Solitude (*1982) is mostly about the complex relationship Auster had to his deceased father. He describes in this book his father as ‘a block of impenetrable space, opaque to the world and to his inner being, finding life tolerable only by staying on the surface of himself’ (*Solitude* 7,15). However, Sam Auster, as portrayed in the *Invention of Solitude*, was at the same time also an extremely conscientious, hardworking and deeply altruistic man. A man, but also a caring father, who was always willing to forgive rent payments when his less fortunate tenants in New Jersey fell behind and distribute his son´s outgrown sweaters to their children. This earnest willingness of his to do good (and at times be taken advantage of) is also

widespread in the characters of the Trilogy, who are deeply loyal to their futile detective quests while at the same time being relentlessly unforgiving in their high demands on themselves.

There is already a scene in *City of Glass* where Auster´s father figure suddenly seems to appear. It is when Quinn tries to adapt his pace to Stillman Sr when tailing him during one of his endless walks in Morningside Heights. For Daniel Quinn, the author, walking briskly through the streets of Manhattan has been a way of 'flooding himself with externals, (and) by drowning himself out of himself, he had managed to exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair' (*Trilogy* 61). However, as he is impersonating Paul Auster, the detective, he is forced to adapt to Stillman Sr´s painfully slow pace of meandering through the streets of Manhattan and as a result, Quinn is no longer able to flush himself with externals. Instead he is now trying to remain in character as Paul Auster, which to Quinn means 'to be … a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts…(as) if his own inner life had been made inaccessible…´ (*Trilogy* 61). Hence, in order to deal with intense emotional distress, Quinn is trying, as Freud suggested a child would try to do, to identify himself with a man like Auster´s father, Sam Auster, a man who is not in touch with his inner life and his own many unruly and irrational feelings.

Furthermore, finding his voice as a writer for Paul Auster (the one out of the book) coincides uncannily with the passing of his father, Sam Auster as retold by him in great detail in *Winter Journal* (2012). Thus, it is actually during the same night when Paul Auster, after having suffered from a writer´s block for more than a year and after having attended a dance performance in downtown Manhattan, starts to write again and gains a second wind as a writer that Auster´s father passes (*Winter Journal* 220-224). In *Winter Journal* Auster refers to that transforming experience in second person of attending that dance performance in a school gym in Manhattan as an '*epiphanic moment of clarity that pushed you (*Paul Auster*) through a crack in the universe'* (220). Needless to say, if the eeriness of finding 'the bridge to everything you (Paul Auster) have written in the years since then', in that very same night as his father passed, will continue to haunt him, since '(j)ust as you (Paul Auster) were coming back to life, your father´s life was coming to an end' (*Winter Journal* 224). It was, nevertheless, that passing of his 'opaque' father, which allowed him due to a significant inheritance after Sam Auster, to dedicate two or three years to writing, without worrying about paying the bills (Mc Caffery and Gregory 24). If Paul Auster's largely absent father makes a

vague guest appearance in one scene of *City of Glass, Ghosts* is about a protagonist just like him. Hence, an industrious man of modernity, however, now set unexpectedly on what becomes a catastrophic and uncomfortable inward quest to nowhere. As Ilana Shiloh puts it 'If Quinn started out as a fully rounded character aspiring to reach "salutary emptiness," Blue (the main protagonist of *Ghosts)* undergoes an inverse process' (*Postmodern Quest* 60). Hence, he (Blue) is a flat character, who becomes fully rounded (and insane) through introspection.

The Novella starts like *City of Glass* through a random event when White enters Blue´s empty office and commissions him to follow a man named Black. Our detective in *Ghosts,* Blue, then passes through similar stages as Quinn, as he observes his 'suspect' Black, while simultaneously his mental health deteriorates. Among the protagonists in the *Trilogy,* Blue is in fact the only one who is a real detective. There are references to classical detectives, but Blue gradually realizes that 'he can no longer depend on the old procedures. Clues, legwork, investigative routine- none of this is going to matter anymore' (*Trilogy* 147). Once again, this detective´s conventional methods prove to be utterly inadequate for the task ahead of him. In addition, his assignment to observe a largely sedentary Black writing in his notebook in the building across the street, on the other side of Orange Street in Brooklyn Heights, grows increasingly tedious and dull. 'He´s (Blue) not used to sitting around like this, and with the darkness closing in on him now, it´s beginning to get on his nerves. He likes to be up and about, moving from one place to another, doing things' (*Trilogy* 139). As Blue used to tell his former boss Brown whenever he was handed an overly sedentary task 'I´m not the Sherlock Holmes type…' (*Trilogy* 139). However, as Blue now is forced to stay chained in his cave-like place 'with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next' (*Trilogy* 143), he turns his gaze inwards instead. 'For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself' (*Trilogy* 144). This new and completely fresh experience of directing his gaze inwards is deeply unsettling for Blue, who 'has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself' (*Trilogy* 143). If focusing on what is going on inside of himself is moving into unchartered territory for this man of action, so used to staying on the surface, it becomes compounded by the fact that this is happening in a

postmodern never-ending present. Nevertheless, as he drafts his first report he anticipates no difficulties:

> His method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there. (*Trilogy* 146)

However, this case is infinitely less clear cut than his earlier ones, and '(w)ith so little else to report…' about his suspect across the street, 'excursions into the make-believe… loom (…) as a perverse temptation' (*Trilogy* 147). Hence, he clings on to a world of modernity and at the same time holds on desperately to his habit of staying on the surface, where there is, opposed to the undecidability of postmodernity, one objective truth. However, Blue is all the same, time and time again tempted down an unbeaten path of letting himself be carried away by his imagination and by his increasingly vivid inner life. However, he ends up sticking to his old trusted guns and '…painstakingly composes the report in the old style' (*Trilogy* 147). Afterwards, though, he feels immensely dissatisfied and troubled by the result and doubts his own ability to read his suspect as he tells himself: 'He´s there, but it´s impossible to see him. And even when I do see him it´s as though the lights are out' (*Trilogy* 148). As he mails the report, he tells himself 'I may not be the smartest person in the world… but I'm doing my best, I'm doing my best' (*Trilogy* 148). Hence, being stripped of his confidence in relying on his well proven professional tools, including his ability to draft reports and come to grips with this case as detective is as painful to Blue, as it would have been to most of us. In the aftermath of the end of grand narratives, a shift of focus occurred from the collective (such as churches, trade unions and political parties) to the individual. Thus, it cannot by any means be overstated what it means for Blue to lose confidence in his ability to detect and to endure, like the other two protagonists 'a form of humiliation, of degradation' (Mallia 9) and withstand a 'whole process…(which)… is one of stripping away to some barer condition' (Mallia 8). This is especially true, since he is the only real detective in the *Trilogy*. Thus, it is his professional identity which is at stake. Being truly committed to his profession as an avid reader of 'True Detective' and having an immense pride in reflecting back on old cases, he is clearly rattled by his inability to

land on his feet with this new ‘case’. However, given that very little is taking place with Black, his suspect, who continues to write quietly in his notebook on the other side of Orange street, Blue´s mind starts wandering and attempts desperately to seek meaning in the mundane every day activities of this suspect. Therefore, ‘Blue keeps looking for some pattern to emerge, for some clue to drop in his path that will lead him to Black´s secret’ (*Trilogy* 152). Thus, this is similar to Quinn, who with increasing obsessiveness tries to read in meaning and apply reason and analysis to Peter Stillman Sr’ s random walks, ultimately spelling out the Tower of Babel in Stillman’s wanderings in Morningside Heights. Despite being extremely closely absorbed by his ‘suspect’ or ‘double’; Black, Blue can nevertheless feel that he is unable to fall into step with him. As this happens, he starts to desperately question everything: ‘There are times when he feels totally removed from Black, cut off from him in a way that is so stark and absolute that he begins to lose the sense of who he is. Loneliness envelops him, shuts him in, and with it comes a terror worse than anything he has ever known’ (*Trilogy* 156). Hence, this is the excess double as described by Rand. If Blue is now in his sudden, but then never-ending isolation, imposed by his case, forced to explore an undiscovered dark territory inside himself, this unchartered dark territory is now what he projects onto his suspect Black, and consequently it is also that what is mirrored back at him and it clearly shakes him out of his wits. Moreover, in his efforts to get a grip on his case at all costs, he stays chained in his ‘cave’ in Brooklyn Heights.

However, as he tries to make sense of his double´s inaction, he neglects the only relationship that carries meaning in his life, namely the one to the future Ms Blue. It is difficult to make sense of why this is happening, since this relationship to Ms Blue is so central to him. But, since Blue is stuck in limbo over this case, he might feel unworthy to be close to her, especially given his earlier reflections on their relationship: ‘He doesn’t want to seem weak…. (t)he man must always be the stronger one’ (*Trilogy* 138). Thus, he puts off calling her and as he finally meets her again, she is with another man. As she lashes out at him ‘he realizes that he has thrown away his life’ (*Trilogy* 165) by giving up on the only person that mattered to him. As stated before the meta narrative of love and procreation are as central to Sam Auster as to Paul Auster. Hence, for a character built on Sam Auster, the loss of the future Ms Blue signals the beginning of the end and his life starts to unravel. Attending baseball games, going to the cinema, hanging out in a bar and having casual sex with ‘a blowsy tart named Violet’, contacting Black through various disguises could only offer him temporary solace.

When he finally assaults the person, he is commissioned to watch, Blue has crossed the thin line into insanity. Unlike Macbeth, though, this assault is not to gain advantage or to get rid of an adversary, but rather a desperate and misdirected act of an isolated and deeply confused human being. The myth of the double is an excellent tool to gain better understanding of this process when Blue gradually loses himself. However, it goes beyond the excess double mentioned earlier where Black becomes a shadow and a rich area of projections for negative feelings for Blue, which in fact originate inside himself. In addition, there is the epitome of lack that kicks in with full force when Ms Blue is no longer in his life to keep the postmodern paranoia and anguish within him in check and as a consequence Blue´s mind spins out of control. It could be argued that the Ghosts of the story, the writers and philosophers, such as Henry David Thoreau with the precious lesson of self-sufficiency in *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* that 'one need not be alone when one is alone' (Peacock 71) could have offered solace. Hence, '(t)he idea of living a solitary life, of living with a kind of monastic intensity- and all the dangers that entails. Walden Pond in the heart of the city' (Mallia 9). However, in the end Walden´s insight that you can in fact '…live like an Indian among us' (Mallia 9) turns out to be as useful as the conventional detective methods Blue applies to his case.

3.3 The Locked Room

In the third and final part of the *Trilogy* the plot is once again set in motion by a random communication. This time what will eventually evolve into a detective quest in *The Locked Loom,* is initiated through a letter. It is a letter that stirs up conflicting and violent emotions and shock in our protagonist. The protagonist this time is only referred to as 'the narrator' and the letter is from the wife of a childhood friend, with whom the nameless narrator has lost contact many years ago, but whose presence is nevertheless still felt in his life. The very first lines of this novella indicate how very profound the influence of this friend, Fanshawe, was on the narrator´s life: 'It seems to me (the narrator) 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' (*Trilogy* 199).

Once again in this third novella of the *Trilogy*, we are confronted with 'chance' and 'pas de chance' of postmodernity. The 'chance' is that our protagonist through this letter, is given a rare opportunity to fill several voids in his life. In taking on this unexpected task of finding a publisher for the unpublished and unknown writings of Fanshawe, his childhood friend, our narrator soon fills in the shoes of Fanshawe. In

rapid succession our narrator becomes the lover of Fanshawe's wife Sophie, Fanshawe's literary executor, but finally also in some sense the substitute father for Fanshawe´s child. It goes without saying that this 'chance' turns out to be an immense blessing for our protagonist. At the time when he meets Sophie, our nameless narrator engages in mediocre literary criticism. He rejects his contributions in this area as 'little short of hack work' (*Trilogy* 207) compared to Fanshawe´s rich and talented writing. In addition, he finds Sophie so attractive that he quickly concludes that his childhood friend has to be dead, since '(n)o man would have left his woman of his own free will- especially not when she was about to have his own child' (*Trilogy* 201).

The 'pas de chance' is, however, that Fanshawe is not dead as our protagonist, the narrator, will soon find out, as he receives a second letter, but this time from the person who suddenly and inexplicably one day just walked out from his life, namely from Fanshawe himself. The message transmitted by his childhood friend is in essence good news: Fanshawe gives the narrator his blessings for all that has happened. That is to say that his childhood friend, the narrator, has in no time, stepped into the shoes of Fanshawe and basically taken over the wife and child that Fanshawe left behind. Furthermore, he has also started the daring enterprise to have Fanshawe's vast literary legacy successfully published. The letter asks Fanshawe's childhood friend 'to go on thinking of me (Fanshawe) as dead' (*Trilogy* 237). Moreover, it encourages the narrator to marry Sophie and become a father for her and Fanshawe´s only child. Nevertheless, it also contains threats pertaining to conducting a possible potential search and rescue mission of Fanshawe with the menacing words 'if by some miracle you manage to track me down, I will kill you' (*Trilogy* 237).

By now far into the third novella, we are already familiar with Auster´s protagonists in the *Trilogy*. We know that they are just like Quinn in *City of Glass* and Blue in *Ghosts* defined by lack and absence and feel incomplete without a strong and sensual female presence in their lives. Sophie, who is 'beautiful, with dark intelligent eyes, almost fierce in their steadiness' (*Trilogy* 201) certainly, has more than it takes to fill the painful void in our protagonist. Hence, for him, the narrator, to get involved with Sophie and in addition being granted the gift of a family of his own by the same inexplicable blessing and chance, is not something he is likely to walk away from. In addition, his postmodern condition, as an outsider with little or no collective identity to fall back upon, makes him gravitate even heavier towards his new-found girlfriend. Thus, the return of our narrator to his solitary life, 'the hackwork' as a literary critic and

the claustrophobic fate of once again alone be confined permanently to a ‘cramped’ and ‘dark’ (*Trilogy* 201) apartment are by no means attractive options to him. Through Sophie, he has found a much-needed connection to the outside world, since

> ‘(m)y (the narrator´s) true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was unlocatable. This was the tiny hole between self and not- self, and for the first time in my life I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world.’ (*Trilogy* 232)

Hence, the narrator has found a woman able to define him both as a man and as a human being, a woman, who, in addition, has also allowed him to finally take on playing the lead role of his own life.

This is, nevertheless, also where the blessing becomes a curse, since from the moment the narrator receives the letter from Fanshawe, he is faced with two options: living what he now knows is a lie and an ongoing deception of the person he loves the most or going back to a life that was no life at all. For our narrator and protagonist, these options are grim and menacing because ‘(t)he thought that Sophie might want him (Fanshawe) back was too much for me, and I (the narrator) did not have the courage to risk finding out’ (*Trilogy* 239). Hence, our narrator resigns to doing what he deems needed, but not necessarily right ‘I locked up the secret inside me and learned to hold my tongue’ (*Trilogy* 239). This is by far the most interesting reference to *The Locked Room*, the title of the novella, the vain attempt to lock a secret inside oneself that then slowly poisons your soul and entire being. However, it is by no means the only reference to a locked room in the *Trilogy*. Thus, we need to go no further than to the physical spaces of the dark room where Peter Stillman Sr locked in his son, Peter Stillman Jr for nine years in *City of Glass* or to the apartment where Blue is hiding during his stakeout for more than a year to observe Black in *Ghosts* to understand that this metaphor of a locked room is omnipresent in the *Trilogy.* The widespread references to a locked room in the *Trilogy* are, of course, references to the endless variations of locked room mysteries in crime fiction, where a crime has been committed in a hermetically closed room. Auster´s ultimate twist on this well-known and recurrent theme in crime fiction is to leave the detective, the narrator, unable to enter the door to where Fanshawe hides from the world on 9 Columbus Square in Boston. Hence, this is essentially a postmodern twist, where the author lets the subject lose control over his

object completely, when the subject fails to close his investigation due to the fact that he is locked out of the room, where his object and missing person hides.

Once again, the border between the subject and object is obliterated through the use of the myth of the double in its many variations and forms. At the most fundamental level, it is difficult from the perspective of traditional crime fiction to understand who is the possible perpetrator of committing a transgression in *The Locked Room*. Is the protagonist, the nameless narrator of *The Locked Room*, in fact a detective or a villain? This becomes especially difficult to figure out, since he eventually in the course of his quest becomes convinced to kill his double and the object of his investigation, Fanshawe, who has disappeared mysteriously. Did Fanshawe moreover give up on his basic duties and obligations and committed a transgression, when he walked out on his pregnant wife and designated his childhood friend as an executor for his unpublished literary works and as a possible future companion to his abandoned wife? And more importantly, who is controlling who, and who is ultimately the subject and the object in *The Locked Room*?

The narrator, the presumed detective in the novella, is by no means a detective. Nevertheless, he uses the methods of a dedicated detective in trying to find Fanshawe, but just like Quinn in *City of Glass* and Blue in *Ghosts*, he is defeated and humiliated. This defeat is largely linked to the myth of the double, whose significance is more taxing and rattling on our protagonist than in the other two novellas of the *Trilogy*. From an early age, the narrator and Fanshawe were inseparable friends, like two peas in a pod. Early on, his influence was also already quite pronounced, 'If Fanshawe wore his belt buckle on the side of his pants, then I (the narrator) would move my belt into the same position' (*Trilogy* 209). However, Fanshawe is also aloof and detached just like Paul Auster´s father Sam Auster: '(h)e was there for you, and yet at the same time he was inaccessible' (Trilogy 210). This propels the narrator´s desire to gain access to the 'secret core' or 'mysterious centre of hiddenness' of Fanshawe, who early on appeared as 'a child who had been touched by the gods' (*Trilogy* 210, 214). Moreover, Fanshawe resembles the narrator physically as a twin. In addition, he is from his teenage vantagepoint a hero and altruist that he (the narrator) is eager, but unable 'to measure up to' (*Trilogy* 212). This time the dynamic far exceeds that of the excess double in *Ghosts.* Hence, it also goes far beyond Fanshawe being an object and shadow for negative projections, such as was the case with Black in *Ghosts* or identifying with Fanshawe as a missing person. The narrator does not only want to take over Fanshawe´s wife, family

and literary (but unpublished) legacy. The narrator wants much more than that. If Quinn in *City of Glass* sought 'self -annihilation' (*Postmodern Quest* 46), because he was unable to move beyond the inexplicable tragedy that robbed his life of its meaning, the narrator finds in Fanshawe as suggested by Freud, a male figure other than his father to identify with. However, since he is unable to measure up to Fanshawe as an author or as a man worthy of Sophie´s love, the identification of the narrator with this golden boy goes to the extreme. He wants to be Fanshawe and take over his identity. It goes even further, he (the narrator) wants to 'usurp (…) his best friend´s existence and narrative voice' and that is also the reason why he is afraid that he might come back ('*Double* '164). In Sophie and her young child and in the collected works of Fanshawe and by trying to become Fanshawe´s biographer, he has discovered quite unexpectedly a road to success and marital bliss. If he later on, when the poison and the insanity have taken over his being and mind completely, becomes willing to kill Fanshawe, it is in order to greedily take over as much as he can of Fanshawe´s previous existence. His impulses are in that sense not that distant from those of Macbeth. Hence, the narrator has been blinded and corrupted by a glimpse of what can become his kingdom. In order to make sure that Fanshawe will not return to reclaim what is his, he needs to kill Fanshawe.

There is also intertextuality involved just like with Thoreau and *Walden* in *Ghosts*. The name Fanshawe is a name of a character out of Nathaniel Hawthorne's first novel that deals with 'the romantic rivalry between two young intellectuals' and the author was so unsatisfied with the result that he wanted 'to destroy every copy he (Hawthorne) could get his hands on' (Peacock 75). Hence, romance, destruction and disappearance go hand in hand in Auster´s *The Locked Room,* which nevertheless has a much darker dimension than Hawthorne's chivalric and innocent story of *Fanshawe.* Fanshawe´s and the narrator´s story as inseparable childhood friends does also have an explicit sexual undertone. As they hang out together in Manhattan in their mid-teens 'to take risks, to haunt the edges of things' (Trilogy 215), they pay a visit a prostitute with whom they both have sex. As the narrator listens to Fanshawe´s laboured breathing as his friend is having intercourse with the prostitute on the other side of a flimsy curtain in a gloomy small brownstone apartment on the Upper West Side, he can only think of one thing: 'that my dick was about to go into the same place that Fanshawe´s was now' (*Trilog*y 216). However, as it then happens, the narrator gets distracted by seeing Fanshawe's shoes on the other side of the curtain. If this incident from Fanshawe's and the narrator's teens is ambiguous, undecided and even innocent in all its sordidness, the

incident that pushes the narrator and then would be detective over the abyss into madness, is also the end of all innocence in *The Locked Room*. Just like Quinn and Blue, 'the narrator is researching his friend's life in the hope of finding coherence and a source of motivation' ('*Double'* 164). The narrator´s detective quest into Fanshawe´s life becomes once again a labyrinth where he (the narrator) is desperately seeking patterns and 'hunt(s) for clues' (*Trilogy* 282). Hence, just like Quinn and Blue, he stretches himself to the limit and beyond in 'piecing together the story of a man´s life, (…) gathering information, collecting names, places, dates, establishing a chronology of events' (*Trilogy* 268). This quest also takes the narrator to Fanshawe´s mother to go through a vast number of letters from Fanshawe. If he (the narrator), in all his obsessiveness to find and confront Fanshawe, suffers from declining mental health, it is the events there in Fanshawe´s mother´s home that really push him straight into the abyss. The tipping point to madness is when '(t)he narrator and Mrs. Fanshawe end up drunkenly, violently, having sex, fully aware that she is fantasizing about "fucking her own son" (*Trilogy* 266) and the narrator about killing Fanshawe' (Peacock 80). With this act the narrator felt that 'I had entered my own darkness' (*Trilogy* 266).

In order to analyse the events that kill whatever little that remains of the narrator´s innocence and make him enter his own darkness, we need to go beyond the myth of the double and explore Freud´s theories of the Oedipus's myth. At the time of his (the narrator´s) visit to Fanshawe´s childhood home he has married Sophie and Mrs Fanshawe now pushes the narrator even further into the illusion that he has been able to take over and usurp Fanshawe´s identity. She does so in emphasizing their physical resemblance in telling the narrator '(y)ou even look like him…when you were both small I would sometimes confuse you from a distance. I couldn´t even tell which one of you was mine' (*Trilogy* 261). However, she also lets the narrator know that Fanshawe 'wasn´t half the boy you were', since '(h)e was cold inside' (*Trilogy* 261). Hence, what happens now is that the narrator becomes a simulacrum to her son, married to his son´s wife, but who is also even better than the original. And it is with this simulacrum that she is having sex in her own intoxicated hyperreality. Thus, it is the Oedipus myth at work, and '(a)s I (the narrator) came into her the second time-the two of us covered with sweat, groaning like creatures in a nightmare-I finally understood this. I wanted to kill Fanshawe. I wanted Fanshawe to be dead… I was going to track him down and kill him' (*Trilogy* 267). Thus, in having sex with Fanshawe´s mother, the narrator at some level also has sex with his own mother. Moreover, if he now wants to kill Fanshawe it is

also in a remote sense his own father he wants to kill, since he has always tried to measure up to him as a role model of what a man should be. If Fanshawe had been someone impossible to measure up to, he now becomes the person, the narrator without name wants to eliminate in the 'Oedipal triangle in which Fanshawe is cast in the role of the father' (*Postmodern quest* 93). However, as Ilana Shiloh points out 'the realization of the Oedipal fantasy, even in partial terms (the possession of the mother), conduces to the disintegration of the ego…(and)… thus precipitates the dissolution of the narrator´s self' (*Postmodern quest* 93-94). In addition, it also ruins the chances 'of redemption or of a second chance (which would) imply freedom from guilt, and the narrator finds himself enmeshed in a web of lies and deceit' (*Postmodern quest* 94). Subsequently, things completely unravel when the narrator's quest, now with the fully-fledged intention to kill Fanshawe, brings him to France, where he suffers a complete mental meltdown.

4. Conclusion

Creativity and madness are deeply intertwined in the three protagonists of the *Trilogy*. In the course of their ambitious detective quests they all display immense resourcefulness, a highly demanding and unforgiving work ethic, as well as a truly enviable ability to tap into a deep and almost unlimited pool of inventiveness. Quinn conducts extensive research about the lost tongue of Adam or the language of God, Blue holds out in his stakeout as 'an Indian among us' for more than a year and communicates with his suspect through various disguises and the nameless narrator seems to contact every person, who has ever been in touch with his missing person and friend, Fanshawe. The nameless narrator even travels to France to track down and interrogate the people, who were part of Fanshawe´s life during his lengthy stay there. Hence, the three detectives push themselves forward relentlessly in their various quests despite little or no encouragement from their employers, who in fact all seem essentially indifferent to their findings. Meanwhile, however, as a direct result of their 'cases', the detectives become downright overwhelmed by their 'suspects' or missing persons. Moreover, they all suffer humiliation and become stripped bare of their personal and professional identities to the point where they question themselves, lose their sanity and become unable to distinguish their realities from their postmodern paranoia and obsessions. Thus, the gradual mental decline of all three detectives is closely linked to

the postmodern condition and more specifically to central notions of postmodernity such as chance, identity and isolation.

The notions of ‘chance’ and ‘pas de chance’ are key concepts in Paul Auster´s writing, but also in postmodernity and its ‘incredulity toward grand narratives’. The lives of Auster´s characters are determined not by causality, as was the case in modernity, but by the whims of an at times highly unpredictable universe. We can, for instance, safely assume that it was a matter of small capricious decisions during minutes or even seconds that lead to the traffic accident that killed Quinn’s family in *City of Glass* and to Sophie´s unlikely decision to contact Fanshawe’s childhood friend, the nameless narrator, to become his literary executor in *The Locked Room*. Furthermore, the author´s own life is also a testament to ‘chance’ and ‘pas de chance’. What would have happened, for instance, if Paul Auster had not chosen to attend the pivotal dance performance in a school gym in Manhattan in 1979 that turned his life around? Would he still have become one of the most influential voices of American literature today? Or as the author himself puts it in an interview in 1989 ‘Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives… (and)…truth is stranger than fiction’ (Mc Caffery and Gregory 13-14).

The fact that coincidences, ‘chance’ and ‘pas de chance’, shape lives in postmodernity is a circumstance that defines the lives of all three detectives in the *Trilogy*. Quinn’s response to the bad hand he got dealt when a tragic traffic accident bereft him of his family, was to enter a semi fictional postmodern life, where he gradually lost himself in a vast labyrinth of an endless number of new and different identities, which were fictional identities that he needed to create for himself in order to cope and move forward. His sanity was, hence, crushed by post traumatic pain and a severe identity crisis in a never-ending postmodern present and due to the fact that his missing person, object and ‘suspect’ suddenly and inexplicably disappeared. Moreover, all of this was compounded by the fact that while there was an unforgiving postmodern focus on the individual, there was at the same time nothing to anchor him in his solitary and isolated life, such as family, friends, or at least a collective, professional context where he felt needed. To flee to the life and adventures of the fictional detective, Max Work, which he created under the pseudonym William Wilson, was effortless for Quinn. However, to incarnate Max Work and translate these achievements in a real New York of the early eighties turned out to be infinitely more difficult. Especially, when

that postmodern reality did not respond well to the tested tools of analysis and reason. Blue suffered similar setbacks and humiliations when his skills of action on the surface of modernity were of absolutely no use in handling his 'case' and his unexpected and imposed inner quest in Orange Street in Brooklyn Heights. Furthermore, when Blue mirrored himself in his suspect (and double), Black, what was reflected back at him in his isolation, became more than what he could take. Finally, the narrator without name suffered endless devastating defeats in trying to take over the identity of his double, Fanshawe, to secure his place with Fanshawe's former wife Sophie and in addition as a successful writer on the literary scene in New York. The mere thought of the possibility of losing Sophie evoked such paranoia and fear in our nameless narrator that he was literally willing to walk over corpses, which made him a very different detective than Quinn and Blue, who both could be held to higher moral standards.

The intertextuality and *mise en abyme* in the *Trilogy* through, for instance, the subplots created by the stories of Thoreau's *Walden* and Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* pointed towards possible exits from the postmodern madness and isolation through the acceptance of a solitary life in *Walden* or through the noble self-sacrifice for a friend in *Fanshawe*, but the comfort that these literary models could offer, were too limited to deal with the fear and dread of being left alone in a largely meaningless urban universe.

In the aftermath of the end of grand narratives in *the Trilogy*, there is only one remedy and beacon of hope left in Auster´s world of the *Trilogy*, namely to find a significant other, that is to say if you have the chance of finding one (like Paul Auster himself did when he was introduced to his Siri at the 92 nd Street Y in 1981). However, with that perspective already largely gone out the window, there was little left for our detectives but to resort to insanity and thus, at least temporarily, seek a safe refuge from a harsh solitary reality that had become too difficult, confusing and painful for them to take in. Nevertheless, in Auster´s slightly ambiguous endings of the three novellas of the *Trilogy*, in contrast with the very raw and definitive ending of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, we are left with a faint glimmer of hope that in a not so distant future, once again, the tables will possibly turn on our three detectives and fortunes might be reversed for them after their many defeats, humiliations and mental breakdowns.

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