City of Mirroring Glass
Paul Auster's Obscured Detective

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Abstract

This article explores Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* (1985) in the context of the detective fiction genre. Against the backdrop of his protagonists' fractured subjectivity and the fluctuating and alienating environment of the postmodern city, *City of Glass* deconstructs the detective fiction genre and the associated principles of investigating and solving crimes. Through a careful analysis of different elements, the novel subverts and borrows from the classical whodunit; it more generally explores the function and the place of the detective figure in postmodern fiction. In his work, Auster calls into question the very fundaments on which traditional detective fiction rests. This radical disjunction between classic detective figures and Auster's writer–detective mirrors the fundamental shift from modernism to postmodernism and the resulting disintegration of traditional forms of reasoning and narrative modes. The terminology suggested to capture the multitude of Auster's reworking of crime fiction, as is one of the key claims of this article, requires critical reassessment. Rather than following the general trend of using "metaphysical", "postmodern", and "anti–detective" fiction synonymously, this article suggests that each term points to a distinct aspect of Auster's original engagement with crime fiction.

Keywords: metaphysical/ postmodern/anti–detective fiction, Paul Auster, New York Trilogy, City of Glass

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษานวนิยายของพอล ออสเตอร์ เรื่อง City of Glass (1985) ในบริบทของนวนิยายแนวสืบสวนสอบสวน นวนิยายเรื่องนี้ได้รื้อถอนนวนิยายแนวสืบสวนสอบสวนและหลักการสืบสวนและคลี่คลายคดี โดยผ่านอัตวิสัยที่แตกสลายของตัวละครเอกและสภาพแวดล้อมที่แปรเปลี่ยนและเปล่าเปลี่ยวของสังคมเมืองยุคหลังสมัยใหม่ บทความนี้ศึกษาหน้าที่ของนักสืบในนวนิยายหลังสมัยใหม่โดยวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบที่ได้หยิบยืมและรื้อถอนจากนวนิยายแนวสืบสวนสอบสวนแบบดั้งเดิม ในงานของออสเตอร์เขาได้ตั้งคำถามเกี่ยวกับองค์ประกอบพื้นฐานของนวนิยายดังกล่าว แนวคิดเรื่องการรื้อถอนระหว่างนักสืบแบบดั้งเดิมและนักสืบที่เป็นนักเขียนของออสเตอร์ สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการเปลี่ยนจากโมเดิร์นนิสิ่มไปสู่โพสโมเดิร์นนิสิ่มและการล่มสลายของการให้เหตุผลและขนบการเล่าเรื่อง ข้อวิพากษ์หลักของบทความนี้คือ คำนิยามที่ใช้อธิบายวิธีการเขียนของออสเตอร์นั้นควรนำกลับมาประเมินวิเคราะห์อีกครั้ง บทความนี้เสนอว่า คำว่า นวนิยายแนวอภิปรัชญา นวนิยายหลังสมัยใหม่ และนวนิยายสืบสวนสอบสวนนอกขนบซึ่งใช้เสมือนเป็นคำที่ใช้แทนกันได้ แต่ละคำแสดงให้เห็นถึงลักษณะเฉพาะของงานเขียนของออสเตอร์

คำสำคัญ: นวนิยายแนวอภิปรัชญา นวนิยายหลังสมัยใหม่ นวนิยายสืบสวนสอบสวนนอกขนบพอล ออสเตอร์ New York Trilogy, City of Glass

Introduction

There seems to be a peculiar affinity between postmodern writers and mystery novels–something of a love–hate relationship. Illustrious figures such as Vladimir Nabokov, Umberto Eco, Jorge Luis Borges, and Paul Auster have transformed the mystery novel into a playground for experimental and avant–garde techniques, wreaking havoc with its rules and formulas. They have created an entirely new genre, both celebrating and subverting the traditional precepts of crime fiction. (See Gioia, 2011)

City of Glass (published in 1985), the opening novel of Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, is an example of this. Today, he is considered one of America's leading novelists. It is hard to imagine that in the early 1980s, Auster's book manuscript was rejected by 17 publishers. In the 1970s, he produced numerous translations, plays, and several volumes of poetry, and by 1978, had written a conventional detective novel called *Squeeze Play* which was published in 1982. But *City of Glass* made his name a leading postmodern writer.

City of Glass does not readily fit any genre. It challenges traditional notions of character and plot, and offers an innovative, multifaceted insight into how human beings perceive and engage their environment, particularly the modern city. But one cannot readily classify it. Is it a city novel? Is it detective fiction? Or is it a form of literary schizophrenia? Whatever its classification may be, it is certainly extremely complex. This article will show how Auster takes the traditional elements of detective fiction–the basics of crime, criminal, victim, investigator, and the mystery to unravel–and redefines them in this book.

"In Paul Auster's remarkable 'City of Glass,'" Toby Olson wrote in the *New York Times*, "the ostensible mystery drives from the

book's odd and often strangely humorous working of the detective novel genre." (Olson, 1985) The three novels of the *New York Trilogy* only rather loosely apply the basic elements of a traditional detective story, and make a fundamental inquiry into the form and function of literature. The novel examines the relationship of a text to reality, asking whether an author can impart meaning to the world through writing about it, and whether writing is a way to engage the world or escape from it. His treatment of metafiction or intertextuality has more in common with writers like Borges, Calvino, Nabokov, or Kafka than with Agatha Christie or Raymond Chandler. Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory suggest that labelling Auster a 'detective writer' is not only ironic but also misleading. Auster repeatedly violates the conventions of detective fiction "by suggesting that events in the world are fundamentally mysterious, [and] that people have to learn to accept ambiguity." (McCaffery and Gregory, 1992, pp. 21'22)

The place of detective fiction in Auster's *City of Glass* has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention and debate. (Barone, 1995; Holzapfel, 1996; Rowen, 1991; Russell, 1990; Tani, 1984; Wedlock, 2012) Critics traditionally describe this kind of detective novel as "metaphysical" or "postmodern" and refer to it as an "anti-detective" story, meaning that this kind of story violates the canon of traditional detective fiction. (Merivale, 2010, p. 308) The metaphysical detective story is characterized by a tendency to question the identity of the detective, the characters, or even the reader through a series of paradoxes that need to be unravelled in order to solve the crime or find the missing person. Postmodern detective fiction shares many of these same elements, but often revolves around the permanent loss of stable identities and essentialist meanings.

While there is considerable conceptual overlap among these terms, they represent three distinct approaches to detective fiction. But new terms might be required to differentiate the various tendencies that

converge in Auster's work, because he has combined these different styles together, creating an entirely new literary form, thus rendering definite, singular label inadequate. Elements that belong to the "metaphysical", "postmodern", or "anti−detective" style are all at work simultaneously in *City of Glass*. There are both continuities and radical ruptures, and the traditional elements of crime fiction are both deconstructed and reworked. These seemingly conflicting elements in Auster's work represent not so much opposition as a dialectics resisting a synthesis, inspiring ongoing examination and reflection in readers and critics alike.

What this article hopes to do is offer a more nuanced set of terms than those typically used to describe Auster's work in order to improve our understanding of his work, and, more generally, the ambiguous relationship between detective fiction and postmodern literature.

In classic crime fiction, the protagonist seeks stable meaning. That is, he tries to identify and expose the reality underlying a crime or some other worldly situation. But in Auster's novel, this is rendered impossible by the postmodern conditions in which the characters live. The urban environment, with its overlapping, fluctuating, colliding, and confusing elements, challenges the identity of the individual in general and the detective in particular. The detective, the seeker of truth, cannot make sense of a world that is inherently meaningless and unreal. This is not, however, exclusively the result of the postmodern condition. Auster, parodying elements of the classic whodunit, returns to the central characteristic of all metaphysical detective fiction since Poe: the detective "confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity" (Merivale and Sweeney, 1999, p. 2) making the typical postmodern enquiry into the nature of being, knowledge, and literature.

The article's structure revolves around a systematic enquiry of the three central terms that have been suggested to label Auster's work. In order to evaluate the potentials and limitations of each term, the first part of the article provides an overview of the intersecting plotlines of *City of Glass* and the convergences of its multiple characters. In an attempt to establish similarities and differences between the classic detective and Auster's protagonist(s), the following section outlines central aspects of scholarly debates concerning the typologies of classic detective fiction and the figure of the modernist detective. Against this backdrop, the article proceeds by reconstructing the development of metaphysical detective fiction from Edgar Allen Poe to its postmodernist incarnation. The following sections investigate the ways Auster employs different postmodern literary features to challenge central aspects of the classical detective genre, raising the question whether the subsequent destabilization of meaning justifies labelling *City of Glass* "anti-detective" fiction.

The Maze of *City of Glass*

City of Glass revolves around a series of cases of taken and mistaken identities, placing a complex web of characters within the maze of the postmodern metropolis. Paul Auster takes us into a house of mirrors, a labyrinth of lives real and imagined, a kaleidoscope that subtly shifts the scenes while the reader turns the pages following one strand of the story, until suddenly a totally new landscape has emerged and there is a story within the story, and one is no longer sure which carries which. Paul Auster himself enters at a point as one (or rather two),of the characters. (See fig. 1)

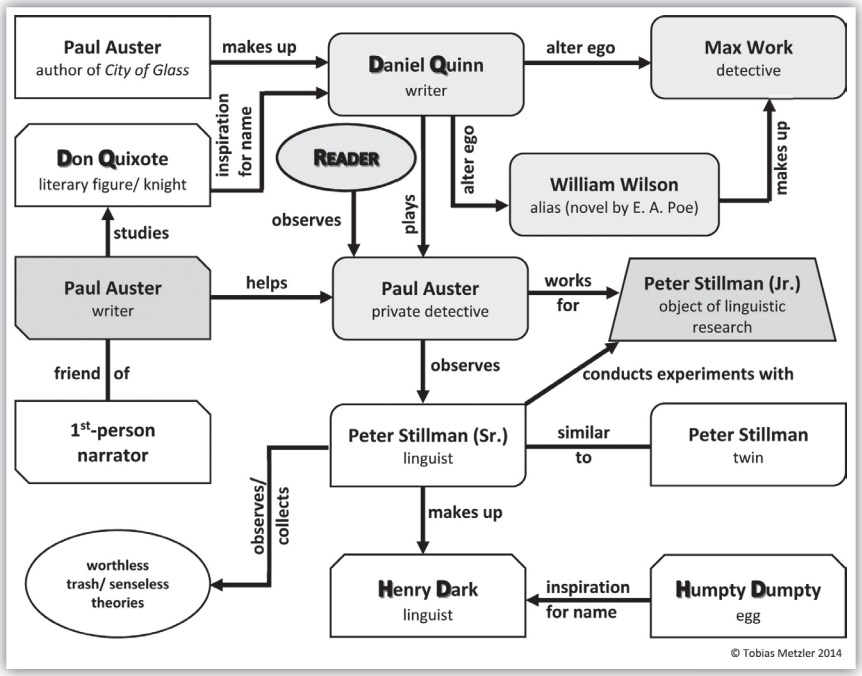

Figure 1: Character map of *City of Glass.*

In the novel, Daniel Quinn, a 35−year−old author of detective stories, having lost both wife and son, has sought refuge in a life of seclusion under the pseudonym William Wilson, a reference to Poe's classic short story. Quinn also keeps his real name secret from both agent and publisher, calling himself instead Max Work, the name of the protagonist in his novels. Writing detective stories serves as "a refuge from the metaphysical chaos that he finds around him." (Rowen, 1991, p. 226) He takes long, meandering walks in the city in the hopes of getting lost, or having the feeling of losing himself, since his whole existence has become a search for obliteration. This precarious balance is upset late one night by a phone call from a stranger asking for "Paul

Auster" of the "Auster Detective Agency." While the caller obviously has the wrong number, Quinn's curiosity is aroused, and after repeatedly receiving mistaken calls, decides to impersonate the detective. At anelegant New York apartment, he meets his new "client," Peter Stillman, a young man, and his beautiful, slightly older wife Virginia. From the young man's account, and his wife's subsequent explanation, he pieces together Peter's bizarre story. From the ages of two to eleven, his father locked Peter in a dark room, in total isolation. His father was a distinguished scholar who, after his wife's death, was driven insane by his obsession with the story of the Tower of Babel. The imprisonment of his son replicates the often−tried experiment of rearing infants in isolation in the hopes of rediscovering the original language of man. The boy, discovered after an accidental fire in the apartment, was sent to are habilitation facility. His father, Stillman Sr., was put in an insane asylum, but is about to be released, and the couple is afraid that he will try to kill his son. Quinn in the assumed role of Paul Auster the detective, agrees to find and tail the elder Stillman. He manages to locate Prof. Stillman and keeps him under surveillance for several weeks.

As Quinn follows his seemingly purposeless and random walks through New York, Stillman Sr. picks up all kinds of junk and renames it in an attempt to give each object an essential meaning, consistent with his project of rediscovering the original language of man. Quinn's surveillance becomes obsessive, and he purchases a red notebook to record the minutiae of Stillman's wanderings through the city. After several days of observation, Quinn notices that the path Stillman has traced through the city each day actually traces letter of the alphabet (see fig. 2).

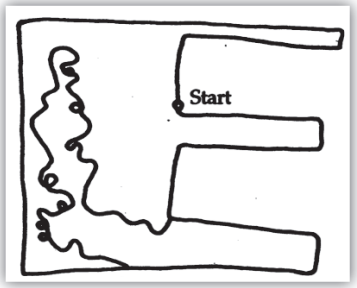

Figure 2: Quinn's transcription of Stillman's walks

As part of his initial research on the case, Quinn goes to the library and reads Prof. Stillman's dissertation. Its first section postulates America as a second Garden of Eden, and the second discusses the problem of language in its fallen state, as shown in John Milton's *Paradise Lost.* It also discusses the work of a scholar named Henry Dark (a fictional figure invented by Stillman as it turns out), who, in a tract entitled *The New Babel,* contended that if humans could find the *Ur–language,* they might be able to undo the Biblical fall.

Daniel Quinn the writer becomes obsessed with his new role as a detective, and desiring to speak to Prof. Stillman, approaches him under a series of assumed names. Already impersonating Paul Auster the detective, Quinn borrows the identity of the fictional Henry Dark and that of his son Peter Stillman in order to prompt the old man to speak. In their conversations, Prof. Stillman offers some explanation of his work. Quinn eventually loses the trail of the elder Stillman. In order to protect his client, he takes up residence in an alley across the street from the younger Stillman's apartment. He lives in the garbage cans and spends his savings. After several months, Quinn finds out that Prof. Stillman has committed suicide by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. It is mentioned that he apparently died before he hit the water.

Quinn feels he has lost everything, in the sense that he is left only with an urban chaos that seems beyond redemption. (Lehan, 1998, p. 282) He collapses from lack of sleep, and when he recovers, tries to return to his apartment and his former life, only to find that someone else now lives in his apartment, and his belongings and all traces of his identity have been removed.

Finally, he goes back to the Stillman's apartment to discover that it is in fact, empty. He moves into the tiny room where Peter was imprisoned as a child. Food is mysteriously provided. All he does now is write in his red notebook. His writing is his only activity, and he is conscious of his own evanescence as the days become shorter and shorter and the room gets darker and darker. The narrator is then revealed at the end of the story, and it turns out that "Paul Auster," the writer (it remains unclear whether he is one and the same person with the author of *City of Glass*), has discovered Quinn in the apartment, has been bringing food up, and has been writing the novel we are reading based on Quinn's notes in the red notebook. Several strands are left to be picked up at the close of the trilogy.

Typologies of Detective Fiction

Despite the fact that most of the characters disappear inexplicably and the detective himself dissolves, some critics have maintained that *City of Glass*is indeed "a detective novel". (Bertens, 1997, p. 201) Auster has borrowed a number of elements from the American hard-boiled school, both appropriating and deconstructing the detective fiction genre.

Auster emphasised this distinction in a 1992 interview:

> "I have nothing against detective fiction, and I refer to it [...] but I was employing these detective conventions only as a means to an end, as a way to get somewhere else entirely. If a true follower of detective fiction ever tried to read one of those books, I'm sure he would be bitterly disappointed. [...] *mystery novels always give answers; my work is about asking questions.*" (McCaffery and Gregory, 1992, p. 22, emphasis added)

This distinction between offering answers and raising questions indicates a major disjunction between classic detective fiction in the modernist tradition and Auster's postmodern departure from it. As Chris Tosh puts it, what sets *City of Glass* most notably apart from its precursors is that the novel displays a whole array "of issues and textual strategies we've come to associate with postmodern logic." (1994, p. 46) Yet, as Ramon Espoo (2014) has shown, Auster's *New York Trilogy* rather than representing a pure example of postmodern fiction, in fact oscillates between the epistemologies of both modernism and postmodernism.

Before reconstructing the trajectory of metaphysical detective fiction, its links to detective fiction proper and its connections to the postmodern elements in Auster's work, it is necessary to explore the typology of the genre. Critics have suggested a variety of definitions for "detective" fiction. John G. Cawelti identifies three central components of the genre. First, there must be a mystery. That is to say, certain facts are concealed from both reader and protagonist until the end. Second, the detective story must be structured around the protagonist's inquiry into that mystery, and third, at the end of the

story the concealed facts must be revealed. (1976, p. 132) Tsvetan Topolev's oft−cited "Typology of Detective Fiction" (1977) makes a similar point about the structured nature of detective fiction. Topolev suggests that a duality of the story of crime and the story of investigation constitutes the structure of the whodunit. These stories are clearly distinguished, as the former concludes before the latter begins, but are related in that the former comprises the facts of the case, and the latter the detective's uncovering of those facts. (Todorov, 1977, pp. 4445) Detective fiction is, therefore, a fundamentally epistemological quest. "Part of the strong appeal of detective fiction," Madeleine Sorapure informs us, is that "readers can identify with the detective and achieve interpretive victory alongside him, or closely on his heels." (1995, p. 71)

Auster's protagonist, Quinn, comes out of the classic modernist detective fiction. But Quinn's futile attempts to make sense of a senseless world subverts the goal of a traditional detective story. The appeal of detective fiction for Quinn is the promise of rational deduction producing meaningful answers.

> "What he liked about these books was their sense of plenitude and economy. In a good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant [...]. Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end." (Auster, 2006, p. 8)

Furthermore, the role of the detective to establish order amidst disorder, to discover meaning amidst mysteries,explains Quinn's affinity for detective fiction.

> "The detective is one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable." (Auster, 2006, p. 8)

This link between writer and detective is important, making the author the true master, responsible as he is for "the correctness of the detective's interpretation, "and therefore, "it is the author who functions in detective fiction as the exemplary figure." (Sorapure, 1995, p. 71) Writer and detective share the same responsibility, namely to seek the underlying cause of the case. The writer, moreover, searches for the "underlying cause or essence of reality itself." (Wedlock, 2012, p. 2)

The detective's ability to decode the world depends on his maintaining a singular, stable identity. It is this very stability that Auster repeatedly dismantles in his fiction. The classic detective knows who he is and the nature of his task. Given these certainties, he untangles the uncertainties of the world. But singularity and stability, the essential components of classic detection, are unsustainable in Auster's postmodern setting.

Quinn finds himself in a case which does not even seem to be a real case in which there are "no clues, no leads, no moves to be made." (Auster, 2006, p. 90) At the end, Quinn has to admit that he "had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew he knew nothing," (Auster, 2006, p. 102) that the world does not match the logic of the detective fiction he admires, and what is even more disturbing, that he is unable to gain access to that core self he assumes exists. Consequently, the sense of security in his own identity is badly shaken and he loses the

certainty that something like the core self actually exists at all. As the narrator of *The Locked Room*, the final book in the trilogy, puts it, "Every life is inexplicable [...] the essential thing resists telling." (Auster, 2006, p. 242)

From Poe to Postmodernism

In order to circumvent the ideological baggage of the term "postmodern," critics have suggested the term "metaphysical" as an alternative to describe this unique style of detective fiction employed by Auster and other contemporary writers. (Merivale, 2010). Originally, the term "metaphysical" detective fiction emerged to describe the works of Edgar Allen Poe. In "The Murder in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844), Poe created the prototypes for "metaphysical detective fiction." In these stories, Poe established the principle paradoxes of the metaphysical detective story: "something hidden in plain sight,""the locked room," and "the least likely suspect," which influenced generations of crime fiction writers. (Merivale, 2010, pp. 309−310)Poe's paradoxes appear in a variety of now−classic detective fiction, including Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892), Agatha Christie's *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *The ABC Murders* (1936), Chesterton's Pater Brown stories, and Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* [*The Name of the Rose*] (1980/83). "Identity paradoxes," which originated with Poe's 1839 story "William Wilson," have had an enormous impact on American hard−boiled detective fiction and also resurface in Auster's works. Hence, the fragmentation of individual identity, so central to Auster's work, actually stretches back to the origins of the detective fiction genre. It also employs the classic paradox of "something hidden in plain sight" when Quinn wanders the streets of Manhattan tailing Stillman and discovers the semiotic meaning of the trajectory on the

cityscape. Stillman's experiments in search of the original language, and the very title of the last volume of Auster's *New York Trilogy*, playfully refer to the paradox of the locked room. Finally, the numerous cases of mistaken identity scattered throughout the *New York Trilogy* carry the paradox of "the least likely suspect" to an absurd conclusion.

The metaphysical detective genre has always been characterized by an ambiguous interplay of its uses and abuses of the conventions of the classic whodunit. Auster's *City of Glass*, therefore, contains substantial affinities to prototypical metaphysical detective fiction. It needs to be stressed, however, that the term "metaphysical" is rather broad and not uniquely postmodern. The central distinction between the classic detective who arrives at a solution to a crime and the more recent metaphysical sleuth finding himself "confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity" (Merivale and Sweeney, 1999, p. 2), may be most obvious in the writings of authors associated with postmodern literature such as Borges, Recolor Auster, but its roots stretch back to a time when even the very term *modernité* had not yet been coined.

The following additional characteristics of the metaphysical detective story have been suggested by Merivale and Sweeney:

> "(1) the defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence; (5) the missing person, the "man of the crowd," the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation." (1999, p. 8)

All these elements can be found in Auster's *City of Glass*. Michael Holquist elaborates further on the elements of the genre, suggesting that "the new metaphysical detective story ... is non−teleological, [and]is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered..." He adds that "instead of familiarity," metaphysical detective stories offer "strangeness...[and] instead of reassurance, they disturb." (1971, p. 153)

Auster's work in particular has been recognized for its investigation of unsolved and unsolvable mysteries. As Alison Russell notes, rather than locating a missing person or solving a murder, Auster's detective becomes "a pilgrim searching for correspondence between signifiers and signifieds" while also undertaking "a quest for his own identity." (1990, pp. 72−73) In *City of Glass*, however, the quester can never arrive at his desired destination, for in this world signifiers are not attached to signifieds, and the distinction between self and other no longer holds. Language or its interpretation, and identity are not, however, the only 'insoluble mysteries' with which *City of Glass* confronts us. Auster's novel also speculates on the nature of space, exploring the connections between the production of social space and identity formation identified by the social theorist, Henri Lefebvre (1991).

The *New York Trilogy* has been referred to as an "anti−detective novel". As in the case of metaphysical detective fiction, this term is often used synonymously with 'postmodern'. William Spanos coined the term in 1972, explaining that:

> "...the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination is the anti−detective story (and its anti−psychoanalytical analogue), the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to 'detect' and/or to

> psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis)." (1972, p. 154)

Stefano Tani asserts that writers of anti−detective fiction exploit and deconstruct the genre "into a meaningless mechanism without purpose: they parody positivistic detection." (1984, p. 34) In *City of Glass* we encounter this aspect in a very direct way. As discussed above, Auster's detective(s) no longer represent(s) the order establishing centre of the novel. Anti−detective fiction is characterized by the "absence of finality" of a solution. It not only transgresses the classic whodunit but also breaks up its very structures. (Tani, 1984, p. 40) It is no longer the solving of the case but the solving of the detective's self that stands at the centre, highlighting once again the oscillating relationship between detective and author. As Todd Natti (2005) puts it, "By knowing himself, the detective is aware of the author's vision of the detective." Auster begins the investigation of this relationship at an early stage of *City of Glass*, as Quinn reflects on the term "private eye."

> "The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter 'i,' standing for 'investigator,' it was 'I' in the upper case, the tiny life−bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him." (Auster, 2006, p. 8)

Metaphysical detective fiction, while characteristic of the genre from the outset, contains many elements also characteristic of "anti−detective fiction". The two terms are not, however, interchangeable.

Numerous works of metaphysical detective fiction engage fundamental questions of identity and aspects of ontology. But the challenge to commonly held notions of being–by exploring multiple identities, as in several of Poe's short stories, or invoking a transcendental dimension as an integral part of reality, as in Chesterton's Pater Brown stories–need not prevent a solution of the case. Metaphysical detective fiction may undermine the concept of the coherent nature of the omniscient sleuth, but it does not abandon it entirely. Anti–detective fiction, however, manifests its postmodern scepticism by dismantling the positivist–deductive solution of a case, subverting the characteristically modern principles of progression and rationality. But it should be said that anti–detective fiction, while deconstructivist, is not exclusively postmodern. Moreover, the term "anti–detective" suggests that parodying aspects of the classic whodunit are meant to undermine the genre. But such an interpretation would reduce postmodernism simply to "anti–modernist". A cursory exploration into the complexities of postmodernism reveals that such a reduction would be inaccurate.

To call Auster's *City of Glass* simply 'postmodern' is like calling Hammett's and Chandler's *The Black Mask* stories 'hardboiled'. The postmodern features of Auster's fiction have been studied extensively. (Eckhard, 2011; Espejo, 2014; Martin, 2008; Shiloh, 2002) A complex intertextual web spans the entire novel and Auster's author–detective–author character destabilizes ontological boundaries.

A typical feature of postmodern literature in *City of Glass* is the fact that Quinn often imitates Max Work, his fictional detective, or imagines what Max Work would do in a given situation, thus blurring the line between fiction and reality, suggesting that fiction is more "real" than everyday reality. Moreover, Auster repeatedly evokes tropes of the typical hard–boiled detective story in order to ironically deconstruct them. Quinn encounters situations which, in the classic genre, would

evoke all the private eye's confidence and dash, but Quinn always fails to rise to the occasion, as his encounter with Virginia Stillman illustrates. She is modelled on the traditional *femme fatale* and at first Quinn describes her in Chandler–esque fashion.

> "The woman was thirty, perhaps thirty–five; average height at best; 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." (Auster, 2006, p. 13)

This evocation of the classic whodunit is fleeting. Quinn–very unlike Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade in similar situations–is immediately thrown off when a woman opens the door. As the caller was a man, Quinn did not expect to meet a woman. And in the subsequent conversation, things develop so rapidly that he finds himself in a reactive rather than proactive role.

> "...even in those first moments, he had lost ground, was starting to fall behind himself. Later, when he had time to reflect on these events, he would manage to piece together his encounter with the woman. But that was the work of memory, and remembered things, he knew, had a tendency to subvert the things remembered. As a consequence, he could never be sure of any of it." (Auster, 2006, p. 13)

Quinn in these scenes appears to be more anti–detective than detective, and certainly no reincarnation of Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade. The critic Lee Horsley sees all the "modernist anxieties,"–the fear of losing agency, and of violating the self and fragmenting identity–at work in Chandler's private eye (2009, p. 39), but these anxieties are

no longer controlled in Auster's fiction. It is impossible for Quinn to mimic the confidence of a Sam Spade because stability, narrative authority, and the reliability of reason, are all lost.

In the apt phrase of Steven E. Alford, Auster's work moves "from the modernist, alienated fiction of the other, exemplified in Hammett and others of the hard−boiled school, to a postmodern fiction of difference." (1995, p. 29) The lone detective battling a corrupt world is replaced by the fractured individual unable to encapsulate meaning through binary categories. Auster's text echoes Derrida's dictum that a transcendental signified does not exist and that consequently language can never convey absolute meaning. (1978, p. 280)

Contributing to the postmodern feel of Auster's novels is the fact that the "distinction among author, narrator, and character is increasingly blurred," and that even the "textual boundary of each volume of the trilogy disintegrates, as characters in one book dream of characters in another and reappear in different disguises." (Russell, 1990, p. 72) Another stark contrast between the two literary forms is, as mentioned before, the fact that the metaphysical detective story is not concerned to reach a final solution answering all questions. In *City of Glass* no case is closed, nor is any crime actually committed. (See Holzapfel, 1996, pp. 29−30)

While it would exceed the space of this article to provide an exhaustive overview of the complexities of postmodernism and its influence on contemporary fiction, it may be useful to review the building blocks of postmodern literature relevant to Auster's novel.

The relationship between author and text is central to the postmodern reworkings of detective fiction. By adopting the self−reflexive element, postmodern literature makes the question concerning purpose and role of the detective/ author the true mystery of the text. This

triggers a chain in which clues in the case can only raise new questions, rather than lead toward a solution. (Natti, 2005) *City of Glass* reflects this complex relationship of author and text in a number of ways. For example, the appearance of writers as characters, as in Hammett's *The Dain Curse* or Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, is a common element in detective fiction. In the case of Auster's *New York Trilogy* the relationship between writing and detection, however, is underscored through the central realization of his characters that neither the real world nor the fictional one makes any sense (Priestman, 1990, p. 178, quoted after Scaggs, 2005, p. 73) The detective–as–writer alternates with the writer–as–detective or becomes a detective–as–author and a detective–as–reader. (Merivale, 2010, p. 311) Sorapure states that author–characters "who take on the role of detective are forced to radically revise their understanding of authorship and detection." (1995, p. 73) *City of Glass* has many author figures: Quinn, Stillman Sr., the 'real' Auster, and his alter ego that acts as narrator. Each of these characters plays detective and tries to comply with the convention of detective stories, that is trying to find some sort of answer, but they all discover that the world they inhabit yields no answers.

In such a world, the individuals are thrown back upon themselves, facing tormenting questions of identity. The voice on the other end of the line at the beginning of the novel asking for "*someone he was not*" (Auster, 2006, p. 3, emphasis added) suggests that identity is the central question of the book, and without identity, objectivity evaporates. There is a scene at Grand Central where Quinn, in search of the elder Stillman, must decide whom to follow: the man he thinks is Stillman or another man whose "face was the exact twin of Stillman's." (Auster, 2006, p. 55) The scene is emblematic of this juxtaposition of multiple identities and the challenge to the notion of reason. Armed only with an old photograph, Quinn is unable to establish which of

the two is the 'true' Stillman, so his decision whom to follow is purely subjective. Here we encounter another element central to postmodern fiction, its refusal to "posit a unifying system" and the absence of a solution or any sense of finality. (Tani, 1984, pp. 39–40)

City of Glass also engages the matter of identity on a metafictional level in the form of the question concerning the authorial voice. By posing the question 'who is the author?' Auster constantly reminds his reader to keep the author in mind. Todd Natti (2005) interprets Auster's inclusion of himself in the novel as a reminder of the fictional nature of the story. Moreover, he argued that unlike earlier detective novels primarily concerned with solving the case, metaphysical detective fiction in general and Auster's *City of Glass* in particular, encourages the reader to reflect on the exigency of the work.

Intertextuality is another postmodern feature used repeatedly by Auster as he frequently alludes to his literary forbears. In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn's pen name is William Wilson, which is the title of an 1839 story by Edgar Allan Poe about a case of double identity. Arguably the most striking example of intertextuality in the novel involves Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. In different ways, Auster weaves *Don Quixote* into the texture of *City of Glass*. The fact that the protagonist, Daniel Quinn, shares the initials with the knight is hardly coincidental. (see fig. 1) The link between the fictional character and the author of fiction is the central element here. When Quinn finds Paul Auster the writer, Auster is fully absorbed by his work on an article concerning the authorship of *Don Quixote*. Like Cervantes, Auster (the author of *City of Glass*), tries to convince the readers that his book has been written neither by himself nor by Quinn, but by a third unnamed author. Hence, we are presented with the author's search for his own self, which calls into question his authority as the author who is at the same time a character. Once again, we are reminded that

the real mystery in *City of Glass* is one of confused identities and realities.

Metanarratives and Meaninglessness

The postmodern challenge in Auster's work is further underscored by another prominent feature of the novel, the vanishing of a basis for the production of meaning. For Auster, chance is an integral part of reality, a realization many of his characters are unable to accept. In typically postmodern fashion, Auster's fiction rejects both causality and rationality. (Peacock, 2010, pp. 111-112)

The opening lines of *City of Glass* emphasize the central role of chance in the novel:

> "It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences.

Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell." (Auster, 2006, p. 3)

Quinn's desire to construct reality through an orderly narrative is irreconcilable with the predominant role of chance exemplified in the story. If reality is mere chance, the detective's attempts to uncover greater meaning through observation must fail. The disparate elements

of a case are no longer pieces forming a bigger picture, but remain disparate elements. Anna Wedlock has shown that the collapse of narrative authority and the subsequent end of the metanarrative is an essential element of postmodernism. (2012, p. 2)

According to Jean–François Lyotard, post–Enlightenment modernity is sustained by meta–narratives in so far as they impose "a false sense of 'totality' and 'universality' on a set of disparate things, actions and events." (quoted in Nicol, 2009, p. 11)

Hence, the figure of the classic detective (both in the genre's British golden age segment and in the American hard–boiled school), is essentially a modernist figure. The modernist perspective asserts that everyday reality–though fragmented and confusing–is real and consequently can be understood. David Pinder argues that the figure of the detective "embodies a realist epistemological claim about the potential of knowing the city and of 'mastering' a labyrinthine urban reality." (2001, p. 6) Postmodernity, by contrast, is marked by the irretrievable loss of meaning and the disappearance of a clear distinction between real and unreal.

In all three parts of the *New York Trilogy*, therefore, we are confronted with the antithesis of the classic whodunit. William G. Little's writes:

> "While the goal of detection is to uncover the whole story, in Auster's work nothing, especially not nothing, is grasped in its 'all.' No case is closed. Appropriating only to subvert, the teleological notion of progress toward 'a de–sired end,' each tale entails a search for meaning–a tail job–marked by repeated bewilderment, perpetual crossing (out) and re–tracing, interminable wandering." (1997, p. 133)

Quinn's efforts to solve the case by way of classic detection fail to reach a conclusion. He is unable to make the ultimate, climactic discovery.

> "Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine."(Auster, 2006, p. 102)

In Auster's novel, the circular structure of the traditional detective story has broken down entirely. Setting out to look for clues, Quinn becomes increasingly cut off from his own world. The wrong number, John Scaggs argues, is one of many chance events in the novel which rational investigation cannot solve or explain. No knowledge can account for chance or "causeless" events, so the discovery and rational ordering of events, the detective's traditional role, is not applicable. This culminates in Quinn's failure to "solve" the case, and the narrator's own failure as a detective as well, as Quinn, despite the detailed clues contained in the red notebook, simply disappears into the postmodern urban labyrinth. (2005, p. 142)

Urban Maze

This link between the loss of rational meaning and the labyrinthine environment is another central feature of Auster's postmodernist reworkings of detective fiction. The novel's setting highlights this ambivalent affinity and disjunction between modernism and postmodernism. David Lehman and others have shown that the detective fiction genre has always been preoccupied with space in general and the city in particular. (Lehman, 1999), ranging from Poe's

Inspector Dupin to Chandler's Marlowe. The modernist detective "sees and deciphers the signifiers of that labyrinth of populated spaces and buildings which forms the modern metropolis." (Willett, 1996, p. 3)

While he subverts the notions of identity and language that form the basis of the traditional detective's logic, Auster also undermines the conventional notions of urban space as a rationally ordered (or orderable) environment. The urban alienation of modernist detective fiction is carried to an extreme in the postmodern city. Amidst the urban maze, which mirrors the labyrinth of his own mind, the detective Quinn himself becomes the missing person. Writing his reflections on Baudelaire into his red notebook, he concludes, "Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself. […] Anywhere out of the world." (Auster, 2006, p. 108) Quinn's dislocation takes place on different levels simultaneously. The "alienated city" turns into a "space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves." (Jameson, 1992, p. 51). Consequently, the attempt of Auster's detective to "seek spatial solutions, or a rationally ordered social space in which he may still have a place," to escape the menacing "loss of both a coherent identity and a determinate language," is doomed to fail. (Swope, 2002) Neither the figure of the detective nor the urban space in *City of Glass* follow the paradigm of classic detective fiction or that of modernist rationality.

Already from the opening of the story, Quinn seems out of place:

> "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but

> within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind...reducing himself to a seeing eye.... On his best walks he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things, to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself." (Auster, 2006, p. 4)

Increasingly, however, the city becomes "a projection of the mind, a mirror of epistemological uncertainty, and an image of alienation." (Varvogli, 2001, p. 31) The experience of urban instability is closely linked to the destabilizing of novelistic convention discussed above. Auster subverts the conventional role of the detective as urban writer–observer by turning detection "on itself so that the object of the detective's investigation becomes his own identity." (Brown, 2007, p. 50)

The encounter between Quinn and Stillman exemplifies this process of destabilization. In contrast to Quinn's initial walks through New York City in search of wholeness or nothingness, Stillman seeks the broken, fractured, chipped, smashed, squashed, pulverized, and putrid.

> "I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap. It suits my purpose admirably. I find the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things." (Auster, 2006, p. 77)

Auster's postmodern literary approach represents an attempt to shatter the detective as well as the endeavour of detection. Labelling the entire novel "anti–detective" fiction, however, seems to narrow the focus too much, excluding the fundamental questions it addresses. *City of Glass* can be interpreted as a detective novel. In a way, it is a work of detection, an attempt to trace the complex and contradictory strains of postmodernity.

Concluding Reflections

The above discussion has shown that Auster's work both engages and departs from classic detective fiction. His work is, therefore, better described by an array of terms than by a single label.

Auster's *New York Trilogy* is a striking example of postmodern scepticism about the constitutive power of metanarratives and the ability of language to convey reality. Emphasizing the peculiarities of detective fiction and bringing epistemological quandaries into the foreground, Auster creates an entirely new literary figure, described by Dennis Drabelle as "post–existential private–eye." (1986, p. 9)

Auster's "author–detective" reflects and refracts aspects of his literary predecessors. More importantly, the book questions fundamental elements of deduction and detection which form the logical basis of the classic whodunit and define the role of the detective. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that critics have described Auster's novels as "anti–detective" fiction. As the above discussion reveals, however, labelling them exclusively in this way seems too limited to capture the complex engagement, adaptations, subversion, and deconstruction of the classic whodunit. As Auster reminds us, his use of elements of the detective fiction genre is a means not an end in itself.

Against this backdrop, I would like to suggest that we view

Auster's trilogy as a complex attempt to reconfigure the literary detective in a way suitable for the postmodern condition. Through the character of Quinn, we are confronted with the ambiguities of living in our labyrinthine society and Auster's book illustrates the ways in which our lives are challenged, explored, and essentially redefined in the complex postmodern world. Moreover, Auster calls on his readers to reflect on fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology. His author–detective raises questions of identity, highlights the limits of Western logocentrism, and heightens our awareness of the complexities of postmodern alienation. Above all, the book emphasizes the multidimensional nature of reality, and the limits of human perception, calling into question the very basis of classic detective fiction.

Holquist's dictum that the tendencies which define modernism are the exact opposite of those of postmodernism (1971, pp. 147–148) may be challenged, but it is helpful in understanding the juxtaposition of detective fiction with its postmodern counterparts. The two seem almost antithetical. Whereas, classic detective fiction is concerned with the search for truth, postmodernism is concerned with the apparent absence and lack of truth in the world. William G. Little sums up this point as follows:

> "While Auster's texts appear to follow the redemptive–bound script of the traditional detective novel, they are nevertheless errant versions stressing that subjects and signs are never single, straightforward, or self–evident but rather are always duplicitous, always (at least) double and deceptive." (1997, p. 137)

This omnipresent ambiguity in Auster's work brings us back to the question of terminology. At the onset of this article, we referred to the postmodern detective story as a playground for experimental

tendencies and techniques. Picking up on this image, Auster presents us, in *City of Glass*, with a playful interweaving of literary and metafictional elements that revolve around the detective–reader–writer figures. He weaves threads of metaphysical detective fiction into the postmodern web of his 'detective novel'.

Labelling his writing exclusively "metaphysical detection" as Merivale and Sweeney suggest (1999, p. 4) is therefore problematic and, indeed, misleading if not outright inaccurate. While metaphysical detective fiction undoubtedly forms a bridge from the classic whodunit to late modernist and postmodernist detective fiction, such a label overlooks the fact that Auster's *City of Glass* subverts elements of the classic genre and at the same time, goes beyond core elements of metaphysical detective fiction. Even in its postmodern form in Borges' "Death and the Compass" (1942), for example, or in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, the detectives remain reader figures. Auster's Quinn, by contrast, turns to *writing* upon failing in the detective's pursuit of *reading*. Unable to decode the ambiguous clues of the case and the environment, writing becomes an alternative, though equally futile, attempt to establish meaning. This passage from reader to writer is the novel's most important postmodern element.

Auster's *City of Glass*is neither exclusively "metaphysical", although it explores basic questions of ontology, nor exclusively "postmodern", because it oscillates between modernist and postmodernist elements, nor is it, in a literal sense, "anti–detective" fiction, for it does not deconstruct the classic genre for its own sake but in order to raise fundamental questions about the task of the author, the reader, and the place of the work.

As Bran Nicol reminds us, Auster's novel "underlines the fact that postmodern detective fiction is not simply geared towards mounting

a critique of classic detective fiction, but is about our engagement with literature itself."(2009, p. 183). In its postmodern incarnation the genre so often "condemned as an inferior generic form of writing" turns into its opposite, a genre "which is naturally metafictional and which causes us [...] to meditate on the practices of writing and reading fiction." (Ibid.)

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