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## **CITY AS A SOMEWHERE AND A NOWHERE: PAUL AUSTER'S THE NEW YORK TRILOGY**

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The paper is concerned with Paul Auster's tripartite novel *The New York Trilogy* (1987), analysing the role of the city in its characters' intentions, actions, and achievements. As each of the three constituent novels – *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room* – focuses on a detective quest in/throughout a highly urban environment (mostly but not exclusively New York City), the aim is to point out that the role of the urban space in them is strikingly ambivalent: it functions as a remedial source of *orientation*, but also as a defeating *labyrinth* of streets, buildings, and flats; thoughts and emotions; options, decisions, and solutions. After closely presenting these two aspects in each novel, the paper will attempt to reach a conclusion on which of the two city roles is dominant, that is, whether the city as a general notion in the trilogy guides the characters *somewhere* or *nowhere*.

**Key words:** Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, city, somewhere, nowhere.

### **1. Introduction**

*The New York Trilogy* (1987) is one of detective fiction works Paul Auster is widely known for. At the same time, this tripartite novel shares a specific feature with Auster's other fiction: it is an *unconventional* detective novel. The trilogy belongs to the genre Bennett Kravitz (2013: 45) refers to as *the anti-detective* (while other theoreticians prefer terms like *metaphysical detective* or *postmodern detective*), whose key characteristic is "the impossibility of discovering 'whodunit'". In other words, "the anti-detective is never able to unravel the conundrum, get to the bottom of the mystery, and/or establish who is responsible for the crime or crimes committed" (Kravitz, 2013: 45). The anti-detective, as Kravitz (2013: 46) remarks, violates the detective fiction premises posited by Tzvetan Todorov, such as the existence of two stories (crime and investigation), the first of which must end before the second begins, passive investigators, clues leading to a solution. In the anti-detective story "there is a flow between commission and investigation of the

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crime, if indeed a crime has been committed at all" (Kravitz, 2013: 46). The crime and investigation do not need to happen in chronological order, investigators are far from passive – "they must act to survive", and clues lead to no solution (Kravitz, 2013: 46-47).

When we talk about Auster's sequence and connection of events, they are well depicted in Dragana Nikolić's (1998) thesis on Paul Auster's non-traditional, anti-Aristotelian narrative: "[w]ith no causal order to link them together, the fragments are ruled by laws of random events and unpredictable chance". Moreover, we are immersed in an Austerian world of alleged/unknown crimes, sometimes false/assumed detectives whose skill is questionable, doubling and overlapping of characters and identities, linguistic ambiguities and illogicalities, multiple-level quests, problematic leads, and last but not least, indefinite conclusions.

Auster's indefinite endings could be viewed in the light of Theodore Martin's (2012) stance on the contemporary detective fiction and its shifting of the reader's focus from the endpoint to a wait for an ending. "Responding to the essentially closed or completed form of the [classic] detective narrative, various high modernist and postmodernist rewritings of detective fiction are marked by one central transformation: even the patina of closure disappears" (Martin, 2012: 167). Instead of offering at least the appearance of an ending (no matter how disappointing), "modernist and postmodernist detective fiction [...] leav[es] readers with the most unsatisfying end there is: a solution that never appears at all" (Martin, 2012: 167-168).

As for the omnipresent instability of characters, there is, however, a hero Toby Olson (1985)<sup>1</sup> defines as "the only truly constant character" in all three parts of the novel: *New York City*. In *City of Glass*, the protagonist named Quinn, a writer mistaken for a private detective, is hired to find a certain Peter Stillman, a former prisoner who arrives in New York. Quinn's lengthy and exhaustible quest, which functions as both physical and mental, interpersonal as well as personal, takes place within the city that subtly and ambiguously assumes *glass* features. In *Ghosts*, there is another detective assignment, this time carried out by a professional. Although the task performed by a man called Blue entirely consists of constant monitoring of a man called Black who lives in the flat opposite to Blue's, the two flats, occasional

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<sup>1</sup> Olson's statement refers only to the trilogy's first part (*City of Glass*), but obviously could be applied to the remaining two parts as well (*Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* had not been published yet at the time when Olson's article was written).

walks of the two men, and all other events, which again have parallel metaphorical/psychological contexts, are in New York. *The Locked Room*, in which an unnamed narrator is desperately looking for a missing childhood friend named Fanshawe, also has New York as its setting. In truth, one of the episodes shifts to Paris and the last scene happens in Boston, but urban surroundings as such remain the dominant background of the search.

In addition to being dominant, urban background is also strikingly ambivalent, as the role of the city in *The New York Trilogy* is evidently two-pronged. On the one hand, the city serves as a source of *orientation* to the protagonists, but on the other, it functions as a physical and psychological *labyrinth* in which they are threatened with losing the objects of their search.

If we look into the historical changes in the form of the labyrinth, we find three stages: the one-way labyrinth (ancient times, medieval church labyrinths), which does not require the walker to make any choices, but leads him to the centre; the maze (late Middle Ages / early Renaissance), which offers a number of paths to choose from in order to reach the centre or the exit; and the postmodern labyrinth or a rhizome, which is seen as a "a network in which all points can be connected with one another [and] [...] has no center but provides an almost unlimited multiplicity of alternative paths" (Veel, 2003: 154). As Veel (2003: 161) remarks, "[o]riginally the relation [between the city and the labyrinth] seems to have been based more explicitly on a resemblance in graphic structure, but in modern times the labyrinth refers to the experience of moving in the city". "Thus the perspective of the walker rather than the viewer determines the labyrinthine character of the city" (Veel, 2003: 161). Undoubtedly, in both its physical and psychological form, Auster's labyrinth is the decentred one, the most confusing of the three, the one in which anti-detective investigators are active rather than passive and which "can be regarded [as] a reflection of communication networks, modern urban experience, the complexity of economic organization, and circulation of capital, none of which operates on a clear hierarchical system with a fixed center" (Veel, 2003: 155).

In this paper, we will analyse the three parts of the novel in an attempt to reveal the two clashing aspects of the city and its contrasting roles in the characters' intentions, actions, and achievements. However, the orientation-labyrinth opposition gives birth to another pair of notions – *somewhere* and *nowhere*. As a matter of fact, if the city plays the role of a guide then the result has to be arriving *somewhere* – a place (or mental space) indefinite and vague but still bordered by optimism. On the

other hand, if the urban network functions as the postmodern rhizome, the chaotic walk may only end *nowhere* – a tangled situation or thought whose every attempt to disentangle itself only ties another knot in the web of streets, or builds a new level of insoluble confusion. During our analysis, we will examine urban implications of *somewhere* and *nowhere* without unnecessarily shaping them into these very terms. However, their complex terminology will occupy the last sub-section of the paper. Our goal will thus be to answer the question logically arising from the two-sided aspect of the city: which of the two sides (orientating or labyrinthine), if any, wins? In other words, does the city still guide the protagonists *somewhere* or actually *nowhere*?

**2. He would arrive early [...] and sit there [...] watching the glass door of the hotel. (*City of Glass*, 58)**

Apart from the fact that he used to have a wife and a son, and a few other details, we know little about the life of Daniel Quinn. However, what we are thoroughly informed of at the very beginning of the book is his close bond with New York, manifested in the long walks he enjoys taking:

More than anything else [...] what he liked to do was walk. Nearly every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, he would leave his apartment to walk through the city – never really going anywhere, but simply going wherever his legs happened to take him. (Auster, 2011: 3)

The futility and aimlessness of Quinn's favourite activity testify from the start of the novel not only to the protagonist's main habits and hobbies, but also to the city's importance in the narrative. Nathalie Cochoy (2011: 42) claims that "[by the hero's walking through the city] the American city novel [...] succeeds in conveying an experience, and more precisely an experience of the most ordinary, yet maybe the most valuable moments of life". However, the futility and aimlessness may only be a surface quality since, as Cochoy (2011: 44) suggests, "the motif of urban walking, in American novels, cannot be reduced to some aimless *flânerie* or to some despaired meandering or deciphering of signs, but [...] it invents a new way of writing the city". As Steven E. Alford (1995: 617) says, "[t]he idea that space is significant is not new". Recalling the old phrases that identify the book with the world/nature, Alford (1995: 617) emphasises a long history of the connection between ploughing and writing, the earth and discovery/significance. Naturally, these equivalents, which all

convey the idea that the world is the source of knowledge, have their postmodern form in the relation between contemporary urban space and life/meaning/text. "[W]anderings [in Paul Auster's fiction], as [the characters] lose themselves or shadow one another in the cosmopolitan city, embody the art of transforming the uncertainties of language into infinite possibilities" (Cochoy, 2011: 51). To a man who for some reason "no longer ha[s] any friends" (Auster, 2011: 5), New York becomes the only companion. Moreover, the city seems to be more loyal than any other friend would be – always available, eager to keep company, ready to listen, reluctant to reproach, constantly by his side, living inside him as much as he himself is dwelling inside the city.

In her essay "Bodies-Cities", Elizabeth Grosz (1992: 241, 244) understands *body* as a certain integration of physical and psychosocial sides of a human subject, that is, as a "sociocultural artifact", while *city* refers to all living and non-living, material and non-material, concrete and abstract elements of an urban entity. According to Grosz (1992: 248, author's emphasis), the relationship between the body and the city is "a two-way linkage that could be defined as an *interface*, perhaps even a cobuilding". In fact, Grosz (1992: 248) is "suggesting [...] a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings". In this light, the permanent linkage between Quinn and his city, reaching its extremes during his frequent walks, may be identified as an *interface*. Moreover, the relationship could be rightfully described as Michel Foucault (1984) depicts the connection between the private space (i.e. private life) and public space – *sacred*.

Quinn's unconditional love of New York may be one of the main reasons why he eagerly engages in a detective assignment, although he knows no more about crime and investigation than he has read in books and newspapers, or seen in films. His willingness to assume the identity of a detective called Paul Auster could first be interpreted as a simple wish to amuse himself and play with the unexpected opportunity. Still, there is no doubt that even at this initial point he must be aware of the fact that playing in this case means not only getting to know mystery in the flesh, but also acting (both as a detective on duty and as an actor) *in the city*. In other words, whatever the detective job may be, a close connection with the urban world as such, as well as with people weaving urban nets, must have been intuitively

predicted. Elaborate morning preparations for "his appointment" (Auster, 2011: 12), reveal how much significance he attaches to it. At the same time, a state of "trance" (Auster, 2011: 12) he reaches at these moments indicate an enormous degree of enthusiasm.

Quinn behaves as a real private eye, resolute to track down a certain Peter Stillman Senior. Even though he has a cause higher than city enjoyment once he hears the young man's poignant story about being locked up by his father (and identifying the youth with his own son whose death he could not prevent), the city space he knows fairly well remains his closest companion and becomes his fellow detective. As such, New York is expected (by readers as well as the protagonist himself) to offer quick answers to an intelligent man like Quinn, and understood as penetrable, readable, unable to keep secrets about its places, people, and events for too long. It is a *city made of glass* through which one is supposed to see everything they need to see, if not a bit more even. All the time prior to and after meeting the supposed object of his quest, the investigation relies on the logic of the urban space and its literal and figurative signals. At the same time, in order to penetrate other people's inner life he is trying to visualise the city from their point of view. Other people's city experience is the sphere of the unknown and yet "walking in the city is not so much an opening onto the unknown as a return to the known, now endowed with some new, unfamiliar quality" (Cochoy, 2011: 43). For instance, as soon as he finishes the informative talk with Peter Stillman the son and catches a taxi, he starts interpreting the young man's mind through an effortful attempt to understand city space in Stillman's way. This is where we connect the City of Glass with Quinn's first impression of Peter's appearance suggesting that he is "almost transparent, as though one could see through to the blue veins behind the skin of his face" (Auster, 2011: 15):

As the car rattled through the park towards the West Side, Quinn looked out the window and wondered if these were the same trees that Peter Stillman saw when he walked out into the air and the light. He wondered if Peter saw the same things he did, or whether the world was a different place for him. And if a tree was not a tree, he wondered what it really was. (Auster, 2011: 36)

That people of New York fit into the transparency of the city is also indicated by the method Quinn uses to recognise Stillman the father while only provided with an old photograph of his:

He remembered having read somewhere that the eyes were the one feature of the face that never changed. From childhood to old age they remained the same, and a man [...] could theoretically look into the eyes of a boy in a photograph and recognize the same person as an old man. Quinn had his doubts, but this was all he had to go on, his only *bridge* to the present (Auster, 2011: 54, emphasis added).

The eyes as a permanent mirror-like indicator of identity, and hopefully of a person's psyche, may not be the most reliable tool in a detective quest, but Quinn utilises them to *bridge* (like opposite parts of the city) two sides of human appearance, two periods of life, and two states of mind – anonymity and recognition, youth/innocence and old age/guilt, ignorance and knowledge.

Quinn's initial superiority in relation to his task and object is made obvious in the contrast between Quinn's usually fast walks and Stillman's irritatingly slow steps. Finding it hard (while in fact doing something too easy) to follow the man as "the rhythm of his body was being disrupted" (Auster, 2011: 58), Quinn feels like a "hare in pursuit of [a] tortoise" (Auster, 2011: 58). Even when Stillman's everyday routes turn out endlessly unfathomable, the shapes of his movements Quinn draws in a red notebook formulate a phrase reading "The Tower of Babel" (Auster, 2011: 70) – a fresh lead.

Finally, using the advantage of New York's greatness and crowdedness, he approaches Stillman as a stranger, relying on people's tendency to confide in persons they see for the first time. Even though Stillman states that he is "not in the habit of talking to strangers" (Auster, 2011: 73), Quinn's satisfaction at the correlation between Stillman's words and his own knowledge, his feeling that his anonymity remains intact even after the third encounter with Stillman, as well as his personal joy caused by such a good performance of his, are more than evident in his tone: "Incredibly, Stillman did not recognize him" (Auster, 2011: 83). This last sentence only underpins Quinn's earlier sense that no one has noticed him following Stillman, strengthened by a city-like image of himself "blending into the traffic of the street" (Auster, 2011: 60).

However, while seemingly progressing towards a promising end, the investigation turns into an unending sequence of useless or unused clues, senseless dedication to the case and self-sacrifice, increasingly distant solution. At a deeper level, this suggests that, while doing his own favourite city activity and dealing with someone else's family trouble, he is consciously choosing for himself a new punishment in exchange for the old one – the loss of his own family. Despite his

almost superhuman efforts, the glass-like transparency of the city, simultaneously with being emphasised, becomes more and more questionable. That this questionability is hinted fairly early in the novel can be seen on Quinn's first day of following Stillman, when he tails him all until he enters a Broadway hotel. At this point Quinn remains "outside the glass-panelled door" (Auster, 2011: 57), from where he is only able to see the Professor check in and nothing else. Then, the initial trust in Stillman the son seriously dwindles as he decides to re-visit his client and his wife, and finds himself unable to enter the building, at the same time incapable of "remember[ing] which windows [are] theirs" (Auster, 2011: 113). The letters he composes soon become "[no] letters at all. He [saw] them only because he [...] wanted to see them" (Auster, 2011: 71). Furthermore, the feeling that he has managed to fool Stillman upon their encounters by introducing himself differently each time, is seriously weakened by the fact that he "could not decide whether [Stillman's indifference] was a good sign or bad" (Auster, 2011: 83), whether "Stillman was pretending" (Auster, 2011: 83) or whether he "really did not recognize him" (Auster, 2011: 84). Even when after losing Stillman he enters the hotel through the glass door, Quinn only manages to buy a five-dollar piece of information that "Stillman checked out last night" (Auster, 2011: 88). Instead of assembling the letters of the case dispersed over the familiar urban scene, "[h]e arrive[s] in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words" (Auster, 2011: 72). In lieu of becoming known like most parts of the city, Stillman has been lost in no other way but by taking Quinn's place – by disappearing into the city and becoming one of the urban crowd:

Stillman was gone now. The old man had become part of the city. He was a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks. Quinn could walk through the streets every day for the rest of his life, and still he would not find him. Everything had been reduced to chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities. There were no clues, no leads, no moves to be made. (Auster, 2011: 91)

Even after indifferently receiving an unverified piece of information that Stillman Senior has committed suicide and after moving into the Stillmans' abandoned home, the wire-mesh window of a small room he occupies is only able to let in increasing darkness.

In truth, as we have mentioned, this does not happen totally unannounced. If we go back again to Quinn's first day of detective quest, we will see that, despite



heading for a concrete city address, he still has no answer to the question "where exactly [he is] going" (Auster, 2011: 12). Nor does he think of any after weeks and months of search. In his days before the quest, Quinn has a steady but harmless feeling that New York is "a labyrinth" (Auster, 2011: 3), which now shows dangerously correct and frustratingly unchangeable:

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 neighbourhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. (Auster, 2011: 3-4)

Moreover, Quinn feels "[l]ost, not only in the city, but within himself as well" (Auster, 2011: 4). His repeated sense of disorientation confirms not only another identification with the city (self equals city, losing one's way in the city means being lost within oneself), but also a need both to track down somebody or something in the city (later Stillman/his intentions) and to find oneself within one's own emotionally destroyed being. Therefore, walking (purposeful or purposeless) is also an attempt of Paul Auster the assumed detective to find Daniel Quinn – a wrongly dialled and randomly chosen human soul. Before plunging in the quest, Quinn manages to find his barest self while being lost in New York's labyrinth – he finds a self void of obligation to think. Yet, this location turns out to be "nowhere" (Auster, 2011: 4). In this respect, if city logic is the one he relies on while following Stillman, no doubt he fails because "New York [is] the nowhere he ha[s] built around himself" (Auster, 2011: 4) – negation produced by the human mind. Even when he goes back to his flat he finds no home, as someone else has moved in during his absence. Finally, if "all he ever asked of things [is] [...] to be nowhere" (Auster, 2011: 4), then any meaningful end of the quest directed by his will is impossible *per se*. Repeating Lefebvre's words that "our contact with space qua space is always secondhand; it is always a representation" (Alford, 1995: 622), Alford (1995: 622-623) says that "[t]he space of *The New York Trilogy* is intimately involved in the signficatory acts of the self-constitution, acts that somehow involve the intersection of self and language". "The significance of space [...] emerges not from the one who moves through space, the pedestrian, but from the one who observes [...], the person with the red notebook" (Alford, 1995: 626). The city, it becomes clear, may serve as a guide only to the extent to which a man is ready to be guided, or to get somewhere at all.

In his thesis on Auster's trilogy as a postmodern detective fiction, Matthias Kugler (1999: 38) emphasises Quinn's lost state following the failure of his investigation: "Quinn is no more than a white spot in the universe, no longer distinguishable from any other spot". As Kugler (1999: 38) implies, this loss of authenticity and identity is not only highlighted by the look of the place where his case started and which becomes his own last known home – the Stillmans' flat whose rooms are now empty and all alike. To further exhibit its indisputable importance in the narrative, the city works at this point as well. The personal loss is thus mirrored in the last image of the city "in which the landscape threatens to white out, to be reduced to a blank: 'The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end' " (Kugler, 1999: 38). Not only, therefore, is the city incapable of serving as a guide, but it eventually seems to physically reflect, or even identify with Quinn's *blankness*, turning into impermeable *whiteness* – apparently endless, unchangeably soundless, visually almost city-less.

### **3. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror [...] (*Ghosts*, 146)**

Unlike Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of *Ghosts* named Blue is a professional private detective, who does not seem reluctant to avoid walking if a case requires it. However, just as he welcomes the fact that having only to watch a man in a flat opposite his temporary home "will eliminate the legwork" (Auster, 2011: 138), we are also informed that the city in which he has been living and working "is New York, the time is the present [the late 1940s], and neither one will ever change" (Auster, 2011: 137). This statement tells us that Blue is inextricably and permanently linked to his city. New York, here as well, plays a vital role on the narrative stage. While placed in the heart of the city ("The address is unimportant. But let's say Brooklyn Heights [...]") (Auster, 2011: 138)) but excluded from tiring street walking, Blue's case, although "a little strange" (Auster, 2011: 137), seems to be a perfect combination for this man.

Despite his initial willingness to engage in what appears to be a job "easier than most" (Auster, 2011: 137), very soon Blue becomes "not so much [...] bored, but [...] thwarted" (Auster, 2011: 140). While almost constantly monitoring the man called Black, who spends most of his time writing and reading at his desk, on many occasions Blue can see him clearly, detect the title of the book he is reading, and even distinguish the red colour of the ink he is using. However, Blue's vigilance from

the very start has an air of *blankness*, as he is not able to read the writer's mind. Since understanding Black is beyond Blue's possibilities, Black assumes characteristics of an empty, meaningless person. In addition, his whole physical existence is called into question because the visual communication seemingly goes only in one direction – from Blue to Black. As someone who does not show signs of seeing Blue even when it is impossible to miss him, Black is a ghostlike figure – an image whose vagueness, here again, is intensified by the snow falling between their two windows:

Now and then Black pauses in his work and gazes out the window. At one point, Blue thinks that he is looking directly at him and ducks out of the way. But on closer inspection he realizes that it is merely a *blank* stare, signifying thought rather than seeing, a look that makes things invisible, that does not let them in. [...] Without being able to read what Black has written, everything is a *blank* so far. [...] Even the binoculars don't help much. The day remains dark, and through the endlessly falling snow, Black appears to be no more than a *shadow*. (Auster, 2011: 139, 140, 143, emphasis added)

The main problem occurs when Blue starts writing his first report. His method of writing a report has always been "to stick to outward facts [...] [and make] action hol[d] forth over interpretation. For example: The subject walked from Columbus Circle to Carnegie Hall" (Auster, 2011: 148). In this case, on the other hand, he finds it hard to list pure facts when in his notebook there is "such paucity of detail" (Auster, 2011: 149). He becomes aware that his usual procedures, which mostly include moving through the city and taking notes (the omnipresent correlation between space and language), will no longer be of any help. As Kravitz (2013: 49) says, in *Ghosts* there is "a conspiracy of language", beginning with the names of the characters – Black and White, on whose orders Black is being followed, seem to be one and the same person. "Blue tries to find solace in the certainty of language, but to no avail" (Kravitz, 2013: 49), as "[he] cannot rely on language to establish proof of anyone's or anything's existence, least of all his own" (Kravitz, 2013: 50). Moreover, even greater trouble than this seems to be his inability to think of another method appropriate for the situation. Perhaps not accidentally, the realisation that his own expertise fails him actually interrupts one of the moments of *scopophilia* – a term built around Jacques Lacan's (1978: 74-75) theory of the gaze which entails that the body is both the subject and the object, the observer and the observed. The subject is thus alienated from itself, denied its full subjectivity, and caused to experience itself as being seen (Lacan, 1978: 75):

He looks out across the street and sees Black sitting at his desk as usual. Black, too, is looking through the window at that moment, and it suddenly occurs to Blue that he can no longer depend on the old procedures. Clues, legwork, investigative routine – none of this is going to matter anymore. But then, when he tries to imagine what will replace these things, he gets *nowhere*. (Auster, 2011: 149, emphasis added)

Still, Black slowly starts spending more and more time outside his flat and the urban area he traverses becomes larger and larger. This gives Blue an opportunity to go back to his “old procedures” (Auster, 2011: 149) for a while, hoping to find out more about Black. Having realised how monotonous and purposeless this kind of sedentary job is, Blue is now delighted to walk again. Just like in Quinn’s case, Blue’s task of following Black looks more than simple, but his inability to grasp the aim of Black’s walks, or at least the one that would be of some importance to the case, forces his mind to drift to secondary things. For instance, he starts guessing what Black might be up to, recalling interesting detective stories, and last but not least, reflecting on his own past and present life. Indeed, Blue’s focus on himself rather than the man he is monitoring, helped by Black’s actions closely resembling Blue’s activities (either by Black copying Blue or vice versa) seems to define Black as Blue’s mirror-image – both at home and in the streets. While spying on Black writing at his desk, Blue has a feeling that “instead of merely watching another, he [...] is also watching himself” (Auster, 2011: 146); when he enters a bookshop after Black and begins browsing books like Black, he senses “that he has seen Black before” (Auster, 2011: 154); when Black meets a lady in a restaurant, their meal, just like their relationship, terminates quickly, which anticipates Blue’s own fate; when they finally meet face to face, Black and Blue, playing a hide and seek, seem to change places, with Black (who now clearly sees Blue and technically admits seeing him before) becoming a detective who complains about a boring case. At an earlier point, Blue is able to visualise and predict all Black’s actions with precision that seems impossible when describing someone other than oneself. A reversibility in vision between the subject and the object, within which the subject identifies with the object (Lacan, 1978: 75) clearly leads to a mirror-like existence of the two:

There are moments when he feels so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what Black is going to do, to know when he will stay in his room and when he will go out, he need merely look into himself. (Auster, 2011: 158)

Blue even allows himself so much as to take his own walks while Black stays in his flat carrying out the predicted. At these moments, we can feel how fond Blue is of his city and to what extent he uses it now as a brief and secret therapy, a gateway to freedom surrounding a pair of gateless mirror-image buildings. The power of the city now seems to be stealing the narrative show (which also becomes Blue's show), moving the narrative thread from the monotonous Black's flat to the colourful cityscape:

Small as it might be, this [walking up and down the block] fills him with happiness, and [...] he is glad to be alive in a way he has not felt in years. At one end there is a view of the river, the harbour, the Manhattan skyline, the bridges. Blue finds all this beautiful, and on some days he even allows himself to sit for several minutes on one of the benches and look out at the boats. (Auster, 2011: 160)

New York here appears to be Blue's source of orientation – if not directly a lighthouse within the case, then at least a reassuring signpost, a guarantee that surrounded by the warmth of the known urban landscape (which happens to his only family), he can deal with any kind of problem.

And yet, the freedom of New York can neither liberate him from his case, nor solve it. Every Black's walk or taxi ride, no matter how long or promising, uneventfully ends back in his Brooklyn street. Every Blue's city therapy terminates in the same place, in Black's nearest neighbourhood. Black remains an enigma simply because one cannot track down or penetrate one's mirror-image in the city. Such an alter ego can only be located where Blue has already looked at but found nothing tangible – in the window opposite, in the looking-glass, behind one's own eyes. As Blue finally breaks into Black's flat, he feels that “[t]o enter Black [...] [is] the equivalent of entering himself” (Auster, 2011: 192). However, even though he steals a pile of paper sheets in the dark, hoping to finally read what has been invisible, he reveals back home that these sheets are nothing but *his own* reports, “all spelled out in black and white, meaning nothing, saying nothing, as far from the truth of the case as silence would have been” (Auster, 2011: 191). Subsequently, in order to end the torturing case, he beats up Black, leaving him on the floor in an uncertain state between life and death. However, even after Blue's final (though obscure) departure, the unspoken truth remains within one of the two flats, assaulted and neglected like Black but possibly still alive (while Blue is “listening for the sound of Black's breath [...] [t]here seems to be something, but he can't tell if it's coming from Black or

himself" (Auster, 2011: 197)). At the same time, the truth stays inside Blue himself, invariably *intense* but essentially *silent*.

Markku Salmela's (2001) thesis on subtexts in *Ghosts* "recognises the essential role of the reader in meaning-making". In *Ghosts* "[t]here is no closure as far as the case is concerned; the reader does not receive an explanation from Blue or the narrator, and many of the questions the reader might have are never answered" (Salmela, 2001). However, even though the reader is expected to produce a meaning, Salmela's (2001) conclusion in this respect does not sound overly optimistic. Just as the nature of adjectives and adverbs in our own interpretation in the previous paragraph indicate ("uncertain, possibly, obscure", etc.), "*Ghosts* is a labyrinth for both the main character and the reader" (Salmela, 2001). What makes Black's silence so paradoxically loud, therefore, is not only the fact that it permeates Blue's mental powers leaving him clueless. It is also the feeling that the confusion established by the unuttered truth spreads so strongly and so permanently to *our* mind as well.

This time again, the city's inability to offer a solution is caused by the protagonist's personal problem – his failure to distinguish between his life and his case, his job and the writer's job, his fate and the other man's fate, his incapability of deciding if there is a case to be solved at all. If there *is* a case, then the silence and darkness of one's own inner world seem to be the most complicated of all detective cases. If there is *no* case, then Blue disappears so as to search for true cases, while this one – as *nothing* inside himself which is still *something* he can neither grasp nor abate, should only be learnt how to live with.

#### **4. Only the door was between us, and we were so close that I felt as if the words were being poured into my head. (The Locked Room, 304)**

As a story told by an unnamed narrator, a New York literary critic who, by means of an awkward combination of arrangement and chance, replaces his disappeared childhood friend in his family roles, the last part of the trilogy is the only one that *does not require* anyone to look for anybody. Ironically, however, it is also the only novel in which a New Yorker named Fanshawe is truly gone, almost entirely absent and unavailable as a character other than through other characters' memories. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the world Fanshawe has left behind (a wife whom the narrator marries and a baby child whom he adopts; a friend, i.e. the narrator, who publishes his writing; glory he has never wanted anyway) is

functioning intact without him, it is precisely his whereabouts (for we sense from the start that he must be alive) that provoke interest both in the readers and later in his alter ego – the narrator.

What makes the missing hero of the last part so interesting, however, may also have to do with the growth of characterisation, which differentiates *The Locked Room* from the two previous parts. In his complimentary review of Auster's concluding part of the trilogy, Stephen Schiff (1987) complains that "[t]he trouble with "City of Glass" and "Ghosts" is the absence of a flatfoot worth hoofing around decrepit New York with; [...] [and in them] one longs for characters more robust and more resourceful, less wan, less cipherlike". Indeed, Fanshawe's tangibility, built around a ton of details we find out about his past, is present throughout the novel despite the irritating lack of information about his current life. Schiff (1987) describes *The Locked Room* as "a beguiling entertainment that accomplishes nearly everything the first two books set out to do and provides a diverting main character as well". While the enigmatic aura hovering over Stillman and Black prevents us from pronouncing them boring exactly, it may truly be the maturity of Fanshawe's character that still buys him more audience than his predecessors could ever attract.

Not only is it unnecessary to track down Fanshawe (who may be in New York or out of New York), but it also becomes forbidden, as an anonymous letter, supposedly written by Fanshawe himself, arrives, threatening the narrator with death should he dare to find him. In fact, it is precisely at this point that the narrator reveals the truth about Fanshawe's disappearance, excluding all his previous semi-beliefs in his death: "The man wanted to leave, and he left" (Auster, 2011: 241). Naturally, such a thing as secret prohibition only augments the narrator's drive for a private investigation:

I was secure with Sophie now, and I felt that nothing could break us apart – not even Fanshawe, not even Fanshawe in the flesh. Or so it appeared to me then [...]. I understand now how badly I was deceiving myself, but I did not find that out until much later. [...] The fact that I did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe, that he was *inside me* day and night for all those months, was unknown to me at the time. (Auster, 2011: 244, emphasis added)

The narrator's confession that Fanshawe is "inside [him]" refers to much more than a simple stream of thinking. As Fanshawe's alter ego, the narrator has a fluid identity and, in fact, all the time *is* more of a Fanshawe than himself. The fact that he remains unnamed speaks in favour of this and makes us wonder whether the

unspoken name is *Fanshawe* exactly. The ambiguity which, although here better developed, reminds of Quinn's various names and the Black-White confusion, is again "a conspiracy of language" (carried out even through the language absence) in order "to create the conspiracy of the self" (Kravitz, 2013: 49).

Just like Quinn, the narrator is an amateur detective, but unlike both Quinn's and Blue's, his investigation takes place at a more hidden level, that is, it is more *private* than usual, reduced to his own knowledge. Even the beginning of the quest starts with Fanshawe's letter in the mailbox – the narrator's "hiding place, the one spot in the world that [is] purely [his] own" (Auster, 2011: 238). Since this mailbox also "link[s] [him] to the rest of the world" (Auster, 2011: 238), he is trying to gather from the letter as much information as possible. Apart from Fanshawe's words, which simultaneously say a lot and nothing at all, there is "the New York postmark" (Auster, 2011: 240). The New York postmark is the first eye-catching detail within the investigation that, however tiny, reveals, here again, the prime importance of the city to the narrative. In the simplest and clearest possible way, the postal marking connects the city and the language, by offering a linguistic form (i.e. the city name) as a useful piece of information about the sender. Combined with the content itself, this postmark could serve as "something of a clue" (Auster, 2011: 240). In other words, New York as the first source of orientation and area of search comes to mind of this protagonist as well. However, the narrator immediately and reasonably concludes that "it just as easily could [be] a blind, a bit of false information to throw [him] off [Fanshawe's] track" (Auster, 2011: 240). This suggests that his initial optimism and trust in the city may not be as developed as Quinn's and Blue's. The idea of orientation too soon turns into its opposite – a prospect of New York as a living labyrinth, a web of everything and everyone that has no centre or exit. He therefore puts away the letter as clueless, "lock[ing it] up [as a] secret inside [himself]" (Auster, 2011: 241) and subtly associating it with an urban image of a dark building with no doors or windows leading inside:

I read the letter over and over, trying to pull it apart, looking for an opening, a way to read between the lines – but *nothing* came of it. The letter was opaque, a *block* of darkness that thwarted every attempt to get inside it. (Auster, 2011: 240, emphasis added)

Gathering information about his life, Fanshawe's future biographer knows that, considering that the truth about Fanshawe's disappearance must be left out, "[the



book] could tell nothing but lies" (Auster, 2011: 248). „Lies" refer not only to the absence of true words but also to the lack of fixed identities (the biographer and the biography/Fanshawe) and the labyrinthine character of the city. Still, he continues his research and it is exactly during one research excursion that he recognises the original causes of his urge not only to learn about Fanshawe but also to find him – hatred and a wish to kill.

However, it soon becomes clear that his inner declaration was only a moment of emotional weakness, aided by constant underlying rivalry between himself and Fanshawe and the narrator's tendency to think in metaphors. This becomes obvious when, as if finally aware of the linguistic conspiracy and the absence of meaning in the language, he admits that continuing to investigate Fanshawe's life has nothing to do with *writing* anymore. His only aim is „to *find* him alive – and then to walk away from him *alive*" (Auster, 2011: 270, emphasis added), as „[k]illing Fanshawe would mean *nothing*" (Auster, 2011: 270, emphasis added). In other words, he needs a face-to-face encounter with Fanshawe only to prove his own independence from him. Consequently, his intention no longer entails (urban) search as a material for text, but search as a material for action – new search around city rooms which are still locked.

It would be quite wrong to say that this patient (if not entirely optimistic) investigator hiding under "[t]he word *biography*[,] [which] seem[s] to open doors for [him]" (Auster, 2011: 279, author's emphasis), does not hear anything substantial about his old friend's more recent life. On the contrary, some information about Fanshawe's virtues and flaws is allowed through the sieves of the city webs. However, equally incorrect would be to state that in all these stories the narrator, who all the time has Fanshawe "inside [him]" (Auster, 2011: 244), finds anything of substance he does not already know, suppose, or at least expect:

That Fanshawe was kind, that Fanshawe was cruel – this was an old story, and I already knew it by heart. What I was looking for was something different, something I could not even imagine: a purely irrational act, a thing totally out of character, a contradiction of everything Fanshawe had been up to the moment he vanished. I kept trying to leap into the unknown, but each time I landed, I found myself on home ground, surrounded by what was most familiar to me. (Auster, 2011: 283)

In addition to nurturing some hopes of finding fresh information in Paris – "an old-world city, [which] ha[s] nothing to do with New York" (Auster, 2011: 287), his mind is led by "the faint possibility that Fanshawe ha[s] returned to France" (Auster,

2011: 291). In fact, of all "the possibilities that [are] left" (Auster, 2011: 284), Paris is "the last one" (Auster, 2011: 284). However, after finding a clue neither in Paris nor in an empty countryside house in south France, and after actually "forg[etting] [his] purpose" (Auster, 2011: 288), the narrator concludes that "[u]nless [Fanshawe] want[s] to be found, [he doesn't] have a ghost of a chance" (Auster, 2011: 289).

Fanshawe is in Boston, and it is himself who says so, once again pellucidly anonymous. Years of research, avenues of search, streams of unanswered questions have ended in a moment. An urgent invitation, an ad-hoc trip to Boston and a brief visit, a locked room of an 19<sup>th</sup>-century house, a non-transparent double door behind which a man is standing, ready to shoot himself should his guest try to break in, are all here to announce a fameless victory of an investigator whose entangled case is about to be solved by a simple confession of the suspect. And yet, despite the fact that the narrator "recognize[s] too much in that voice to pretend it [is] anyone else [but Fanshawe]" (Auster, 2011: 305), it is a glamorous, theatrical ending his case has been waiting for – an ending he could only reach by removing the visual obstacle between himself and Fanshawe. However, although he threatens many times to do it, he cringes from breaking in. As if it were someone else's case, as if it were not a unique opportunity to finally see and touch his alter-ego, as if it were not only a door almost anyone could break down with a little force, the investigator runs off without actually finishing the job, leaving the Fanshawe file open on its very last, blank page. Of course, he goes exactly where his friend's voice tells him to go: "[...] go back to New York[,] [t]hat's all I ask of you" (Auster, 2011: 312). While waiting for a home-bound train, he has just enough time to read a red notebook Fanshawe has dedicated to him – a notebook offering the last (linguistic) hope that the truth about Fanshawe may lead him in yet another direction. However, the content seems to be intentionally incomprehensible and purposeless. In addition to having just enough time to read the notebook, he has just enough time to tear out all its pages and get rid of them. Therefore, the last understandable Fanshawe's message remains the known one. The only road to finding Fanshawe, even Fanshawe knows it, must be leading back to New York – the city where in fact there is *no* Fanshawe other than the one "inside" (Auster, 2013: 244).

Once again, the reasons behind the failure of urban signs to lead the protagonist towards his aim, lie at the level of the hero himself. Similar to Quinn and Blue, the narrator of *The Locked Room* is not ready to recognise and follow city

clues, which might be as close as in front of his eyes. For, if we are to believe Fanshawe's voice in the last scene, it is precisely in New York that he spent much of his incognito time. Moreover, Fanshawe admits "watch[ing] [him] and Sophie and the baby [...] [,] camp[ing] outside [their] apartment building [...] [,] [and even] following [them] everywhere [they] went (Auster, 2011: 309). As for the first letter Fanshawe wrote to him out of anger caused by the publication of his "garbage" (Auster, 2011: 308) book entitled *Neverland*, he says he left it *personally* in his mailbox. At the same time, there is no reason why we should not believe Fanshawe; after all, his letters show that he knows both New York addresses his friend has lived at. Our inference concerning the narrator's quest, therefore, may take only one direction: despite his inner claims to the contrary, despite all mental strain and legwork focused on the search, despite what he himself believes he wants or does not want, *he has never really wanted to find Fanshawe*, neither outside nor inside himself. The ultimate proof of this are two moments in the narrator-Fanshawe scene. The first one, although it comes later than the other one, is undoubtedly the moment of the narrator's furious departure, signifying the rejection of upcoming success. This rejection can only be interpreted as the absence of a wish to succeed, or rather, as the existence of success on the other side of where he used to claim it was, on the side where he already is – *in front of Fanshawe's locked door*. Indeed, it is not the repeated Fanshawe's threat that he will kill himself or his visitor that blocks the narrator and leaves the door between them locked. What blocks him is his present life as it is, imperfectly ideal as it is, a life in which Fanshawe continues to exist only as a memory, subject matter, urban legend, idea, spectre, but not as a real man. The second moment has to do with the narrator's reaction to Fanshawe's increasingly clearer voice on the other side of the door. Simultaneously with realising that the voice is unmistakably Fanshawe's, the narrator briefly, almost unnoticeably, admits he would like a situation in which he would once again be able to avoid Fanshawe. "I wanted it to be an impostor" (Auster, 2011: 305), he says. Speaking of his initial pessimism then, we realise that his low trust in city signs had nothing to do with the level of optimism, but only with the degree of his search determination. Speaking, on the other hand, of chances and remembering the narrator's desperate thought in Paris about the conditions in which chances may arise, we cannot but conclude an interesting point. To a certain extent we may debate on, Fanshawe *does want* to be found, but what his friend is bound to get, even if only because of his own choices, is actually no more than "a ghost of a chance" (Auster, 2011: 289).

## 5. Conclusion

Analysing Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* from the perspective of the role of the city, we have presented the ambiguity of this role in each of the novel's three parts – *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. The ambivalence of the city, which is dominantly New York, refers to its two opposite roles or characteristics: the city is seen as a source of *orientation* and help to the protagonist/detective, but it also functions as a *labyrinth*, a postmodern rhizome, a space void of centre, order, logic, clues, meaning. In the first part, what might appear as a City of Glass – a transparent urban world which could assist Quinn in penetrating the life of the man he is supposed to follow – turns out to be a city of inaccessible glass windows and alien see-through doors, behind which people and their lives can no longer be found. In *Ghosts*, Blue's favourite old-school detective tools, such as following the selected person through the city, studying their friends, noticing signs, making connections, and drawing conclusions, are eagerly used whenever an opportunity, although rare, arises. However, while expected to provide a clue, the tools are in fact useless. Black's occasional walks, no matter how long and complicated, always end in the same unfathomable place. The narrator of *The Locked Room* seems less optimistic about finding in New York some clues concerning his lost friend (lost in the world and also inside the narrator), but he anyway does a systematic research of both New York and Paris networks which seem at least a bit likely to solve his quest. Unfortunately, his self-imposed detective case starts heading towards its end only when his friend himself reveals his whereabouts out of New York.

Therefore, the two constants in the trilogy are, on the one hand, the heroes' tendency to rely on the city as a reference point over the course of their quests, and, on the other hand, the subsequent failure of the city to offer any key information and recognisable clues. However, what we have also remarked is the fact that the causes of this urban failure should be looked for not in the city as such, but in the protagonists themselves. All three of them, we have shown, face a personal, i.e. psychological, obstacle that forever thwarts the solution to their cases. Quinn's search too soon turns into a personal fight against his own present life overwhelmed by his tragic past, while the idea of solving his current detective case serves only as a means for extending the fight. Similarly, Blue's private eyeing of another man more than obviously transforms into his focusing on himself, so that every attempt to watch, follow, or interpret the other man in fact becomes a scopophilic encounter

with himself. In this (linguistic) (dis)arrangement of things, where it is not quite clear who is who and even whether there are two men or only one looking himself in the mirror, any assistance on the part of the city is illusory. Finally, tracking down Fanshawe by means of a thorough (re)search in New York and Paris is unsuccessful simply because his friend, despite all his claims and conscious wishes, does not actually want to find him.

Acknowledging that the protagonists strive for *orientation* (hoping to get *somewhere*) and instead end up entangled inside a *labyrinth* (or get practically *nowhere*), we may raise this ambivalence to yet another level. This is the level overpassing the characters and stream of events, the level of the whole trilogy and Auster's rejection of definiteness – terminological, notional, or purely material. In this respect, looking at the role of the unsurpassed city to which the trilogy unalienably belongs, we may pose the following question: does the city with its detective case still lead the protagonists *somewhere* or actually *nowhere*? At the same time: do the notions of *nowhere* and *somewhere* truly exist separately in relation to the trilogy or are they equally meaningless, or else meaningful?

Quinn's only wish is to be *nowhere*, which he identifies with his city and where his failed and pointless case seems to end. However, since the case leading nowhere has only been "a bridge to another place in his life" (Auster, 2011: 131), he must be living now a new life *somewhere* – neither in his old flat, which is a collateral of his quest, nor in the Stillmans' abandoned flat, where only his red notebook has been found, but by all means somewhere in New York. That his new somewhere is still in New York we know because it would be quite a job to rebuild the necessary nothing around another city. After all, it is all about a new place in his life, not a new life in another city.

Blue's disappearing into the city after an extreme attempt to end the unfinished case, could be said to be more of a *somewhere* than a *nowhere*. Nowhere, just like nothing, as Black's fate has shown, remains within. Somewhere, just like something, is both within and outside. As for the city itself, the narrator of *Ghosts* allows himself to offer other places as Blue's possible destinations, and yet we know he stays *in New York, in the present*, for we must not forget that "neither one will ever change" (Auster, 2011: 137).

The narrator of the third part finds his friend *nowhere*. In New York (as well as beyond New York), Fanshawe is never completely understood, never certainly dead, never evidently alive. However, if the city leads him *nowhere*, it is Fanshawe who

leads the narrator back *somewhere*, and this is precisely New York again. If for Fanshawe New York is nothing (embodied in his book's title – *Neverland*), it certainly must become something for his friend – in fact it already is, but he still needs to realise it somewhere down the railway between Boston and New York. If there is no Fanshawe, his friend (either with the same name or nameless) does exist and must go on living.

That Auster's *nowhere* is as fruitful and hopeful as any *somewhere* may be confirmed and summarised by an outward feature such as the sequence of letters. That *no* and *where* could in an Austerian morphology slide into *now* and *here* not only indicates the interchangeability of *somewhere* and *nowhere* (whereupon the latter serves as a further explanation of the first), but also finalises the only finality of the novel – *the now of New York*.

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