

NORTH WEST UNIVERSITY: POTCHEFSTROOM

# Connecting the Dots: Paul Auster's Representation of Invisible Characters in Selected Novels

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In dedication to

**Jessie Niemann**

(1922-2010)

who introduced me to the world of Literature and will

always be an invisible presence in my life

### *White Nights*

No one here,  
and the body says: whatever is said  
is not to be said. But no one  
is a body as well, and what the body says  
is heard by no one  
but you.

Snowfall and night. The repetition  
of a murder  
among the trees. The pen  
moves across the earth: it no longer knows  
what will happen, and the hand that holds it  
has disappeared.

Nevertheless, it writes.  
It writes: in the beginning,  
among the trees, a body came walking  
from the night. It writes:  
the body's whiteness  
is the color of earth. It is earth,  
and the earth writes: everything  
is the color of silence.

I am no longer here. I have never said  
what you say  
I have said. And yet, the body is a place  
where nothing dies. And each night,  
from the silence of the trees, you know  
that my voice  
comes walking toward you.

- Paul Auster (2004c:65)

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## **Abstract**

In this dissertation I argue that invisible characters, as they appear in Paul Auster's novels, serve a very specific function within the interpretative framework of a text and that they should be considered to play a functional role, in order to arrive at a more holistic interpretation of the text and a more accurate analysis of said texts. I argue that Auster knowingly includes these characters in his novels as part of his narrative technique, in order for them to serve specific functions and to contribute to the structure of postmodern fiction. I make use of a contextualized close reading of five of Auster's novels and attempt a hermeneutic interpretation of these novels to arrive at a hermeneutic circle when combining these novels into an integrated whole, individual, work of fiction. Certain parallels can be drawn between Auster's various novels and these parallels contribute to the various motifs and themes found throughout his work. The importance of space in Auster's novels is also highlighted with emphasis on liminality which serves as an instigator for transgression to occur between different fictive worlds.

**Key Words:** Paul Auster, Postmodernism, Liminality, Identity, Characterization, Metafiction, Invisible, Silence, Focalization, Author, Reader, Worlds and Space, Time and Memory, Mystery, Games, Choices and Responsibilities, *The New York Trilogy*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

## Opsomming

In hierdie verhandeling argumenteer ek dat onsigbare karakters, soos wat hulle in Paul Auster se romans verskyn, 'n spesifieke funksie binne die interpretatiewe raamwerk van 'n teks speel. Daarom moet daar oorweeg word dat hulle 'n funksionele rol speelman en 'n meeromvattende sowel as akkurate interpretasie en analise van die tekste te maak. Ek argumenteer dat Auster hierdie karakters doelbewus by sy romans insluit as deel van sy verhalende tegniek, met die doel vir hulle om spesifieke funksies te dien en by te dra tot die struktuur van postmoderne fiksie. Ek fokus op 'n gekontekstualiseerde studie van vyf van Auster se romans en beoog 'n hermeneutiese interpretasie van hierdie romans om 'n hermeneutiese sirkel te bereik wanneer hierdie romans gekombineer word in 'n geïntegreerde, individuele, fiktiewe werk. Sekere parallelle kan gevind word tussen Auster se romans met hierdie parallelle wat by dra tot die verskillende motiewe en temas wat deur gaans in sy oeuvre gevind kan word. Die belangrikheid van ruimte in Auster se romans word ook uitgelig met die klem op liminaliteit wat dien as katalisator vir oorskryding om tussen verskillende fiktiewe wêreldes plaas te vind.

**Slutelwoorde:** Paul Auster, Postmodernisme, Liminaliteit, Identiteit, Karakterisering, Metafiksie, Onsigbaarheid, Stilte, Fokalisasie, Outeur, Leser, Wêreldes en Ruimte, Tyd en Geheue, Misterie, Spel, Keuses en Verantwoordelikheid, *The New York Trilogy*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace*, *The Book of Illusions*, *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction and Contextualization**



## Contextualisation and Problem Statement

This dissertation investigates the representation of invisible characters as well as their function in some of Paul Auster's fiction. Particular attention will be given to these characters as they relate to the worlds in which they find themselves and how they identify themselves within these spaces. In this context liminality and the idea of boundaries play a crucial role in an analysis of Auster's work. Characters find themselves in different narrative spaces and different worlds, yet these worlds merge in a unique way when the reader realises that Auster's range of novels could be combined into one whole, conglomerate, work.

The term 'invisible', as I use it in my dissertation, needs to be defined, since this term does not truly refer to invisibility in the sense we use it in day to day language. I use this term, because it suggests a presence and an absence at the same time and that these characters even when they vanish from the page or fade into the background have an undeniable effect on each novel's interpretation and the interpretation of Auster's *oeuvre* as a whole. Furthermore, this term refers to those characters whose characteristics and inner thoughts are not shared with the reader and so, the reader must decide for himself<sup>1</sup> what the exact role of these characters are in the scheme of Auster's work. An example of such a character is Stillman Senior in Auster's first novel *The New York Trilogy*, published in 1987:

Stillman's face. Or: Stillman's as it was twenty years ago. Impossible to know whether the face tomorrow will resemble it. It is certain, however, that this is not the face of a madman. Or is this not a legitimate statement? To my eyes, at least, it seems benign, if not downright pleasant. A hint of tenderness around the mouth even. More than likely blue eyes, with a tendency to water. Thin hair even then, so perhaps gone now, and what remains gray, or even white. He bears an odd familiarity: the meditative type, no doubt high-strung, someone who might stutter, fight with himself to stem the flood of words rushing from his mouth. (Auster, 2004b:39)

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<sup>1</sup>The male form is used throughout the dissertation for the sake of stylistic simplicity and not for any ideological reason. Readers should feel free to replace this with the female form if they so wish.

In this passage Stillman is described from Quinn's, the focalizer's, perspective and Stillman's personality is guessed at when Quinn studies a photo he has of Stillman. Stillman could be viewed as an invisible character as Auster does not share Stillman's thoughts and feelings with the reader, even though much of the novel depends on him as a character. The reader, therefore, has to follow hints and make up his own mind regarding Stillman's characteristics. Stillman is only one example of many invisible characters that can be found throughout Auster's fiction. Other similar characters are, for example, Samuel Farr in *In the Country of Last Things* (1987); Kitty Wu in *Moon Palace* (1989) and Hector Mann in *The Book of Illusions* (2002), to name but a few. As these characters frequently vanish from the page readers sometimes need to look for them "between the lines" of Auster's fiction.

In Auster's novels, more often than not, the novel is presented from a homodiegetic perspective and readers tend to focus only on this narrator-character. Even in cases where a heterodiegetic narrator is used, the focus remains on one fixed character and other characters often fade into the background; certain characters are neglected and while we read the novel, these characters' worth is undermined and their contributions to the novel are overlooked. Readers of Auster's fiction should be made aware of the importance of all his characters, not just the protagonist, since paradoxically much of the story depends on these, seemingly invisible, characters.

It is not only secondary characters, however, who fade into the background. A main protagonist of one of Auster's novels can be expected to reappear in another novel, sometimes merely mentioned briefly as is the case, for example, in *Moon Palace* when the main protagonist Marco Fogg decides to "stop in at Quinn's Bar and Grill" (Auster, 2004a:30). The owner of this bar could very well be Daniel Quinn, who frequently appears and disappears throughout Auster's *oeuvre*. The main protagonist of one novel, therefore, becomes an invisible character in another of Auster's novels and it is these characters that one

should pay attention to, as they subtly link Auster's novels and combine these novels into a whole.

Auster's novels could therefore be seen as representing parts of a puzzle, the puzzle being his complete range of fiction which should be read as a whole instead of separate individual works when one attempts to find meaning from these texts. His novels are characterized by an intricate array of connections and interconnections where characters appear and disappear continuously in these novels and worlds, through these characters, begin to overlap. It is these interconnections which in the end materialize and reflect characteristics of postmodern fiction. With this in mind, due emphasis should be placed on metafiction and spatiality as these two elements become some of the key features in Auster's novels.

Invisible characters create gaps in the narrative structure of the novel and it becomes the duty of the reader to fill these gaps using his imagination. Auster uses these characters to create an element of mystery and suspense, which are, however, rarely solved. In *City of Glass*, the first part of *The New York Trilogy*, the lead character, Quinn, pretends to be a private detective who needs to solve the mystery surrounding another character, StillmanSenior. Quinn proceeds to follow Stillman, but loses his sense of reality and identity and the novel abruptly ends after Quinn abandons his former life and home, and the narrator, who turns out to be a friend possessing Quinn's red notebook regarding Stillman, says the following: "As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now...wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (Auster, 2004b:133). Not only does Stillman's mystery remain unsolved, but Auster's novel ends with a new unsolved mystery, namely Quinn's disappearance. The open ending leaves much to the reader's own interpretation and imagination. However, I hope to show that this ending in fact leads to Auster's second novel *In the Country of Last Things*, where the reader suddenly reads about characters living in a

dystopian world and that this is possibly the space Quinn vanishes into at the end of *City of Glass*.

Emphasis is placed on the author-character-reader relationship, since it becomes the duty of the reader to interpret and link characters and their worlds in order to arrive at a holistic interpretation of Auster's novels. The narrators and characters, whether present or absent, in these novels are the main role players, but the reader's participation in interpreting the various relationships between these characters are crucial.

Likewise, space is a very important aspect in Auster's novels, since characters interact closely with, and often merge with, their environments, abandoning comforts such as the safety of their homes or quitting their jobs and venturing into unknown areas where they have to endure hardships such as hunger and harsh weather. These spaces then act as liminal spaces which instigate the character's transgression from one world into the next. Open endings emphasize that these characters' stories have not reached a definite conclusion, but that their stories do go on beyond what we can know from the information provided in the novel. Each of Auster's characters goes through some kind of test or quest in which they directly have to confront everything they have ever known or valued. During this quest characters go through certain phases and during each phase their view of the world and especially the environment around them begin to change. The spaces in the novels, therefore, change along with the characters. An example of this is, for instance, when Thomas Effing, one of the main protagonists in *Moon Palace*, leaves his wife and son and enters the desert which he describes as follows:

The land is too big out there, and after a while it starts to swallow you up. I reached a point when I couldn't take it anymore. All that bloody silence and emptiness. You try to find your bearings in it, but it's too big, the dimensions are too monstrous, and eventually it just stops being there. There's no world, no land, no nothing. It comes down to that, Fogg, in the end it's all a figment. The only place you exist is in your head. (Auster, 2004a:152)

As characters evolve, these spaces, in effect, merge with the mental states of the characters so that environmental conditions reflect the nature of the character's struggle with life. In these spaces characters soon find that they become separated from everyone they know and who form part of the world they come from. Again Effing can be seen as a good example when he relates his story and says: "He seemed to be separated from me by a thin veil, an invisible membrane that kept him on the other side of this world" (Auster, 2004a:157). A membrane, or rather border, is created between these characters and their distinct worlds and the people in these worlds. These characters have transgressed into a new reality, the liminal space contained within Auster's fiction and through which they will journey up to the end of each successive novel.

Characters evolve depending on the space in which they find themselves. Space, therefore, has relevance in each character's identity formation and liminality and boundaries come to play an important role when analysing these characters as they move through different narrative spaces and different worlds towards the final world, which we can aptly call the *Scriptorium*.

A common occurrence in Auster's novels is that once the characters go through the liminal world they vanish from the page and Auster leaves their stories hanging, so to speak. There is never any finality about the outcome of their transgressions and readers cannot find closure on these characters within the novels themselves. Even in the case where characters reappear in some of the other novels, little attention is paid to them and little information is given about the reasons why they now find themselves within this, seemingly, new and unrelated fictional story. They remain silent, background figures. However, silence, itself, I shall argue, is a form of communication in these novels. According to Ismail S. Talib, in his book *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction*: "Language is used for communication. However, language may also be avoided in order to convey a message..."

Silence – in contrast to what has been said, either by oneself or others – may at times be a more powerful communicative tool than if several words were uttered” (2002:121). The silent and invisible characters speak to us specifically through the gaps they create in the narratives.

Wolf Schmid, in his book *Narratology: An Introduction* (2010:204), writes that the reader who attempts to trace the thread constituting a story must understand both sides of selection. In this case, the reader must understand why Auster places focus on certain characters, letting others fade into the background, even though these (non-selected) characters still play a key role throughout his range of novels. Schmid (2010:204) further emphasises the notion that the reader must be aware of which characters have been the object of the negative selection in the work. It is important to identify the invisible (unselected) characters in order to arrive at a more holistic interpretation of the text. However, it is easy to overlook these characters and decide their worth during a first, initial reading of the novel. Auster uses these characters in such a way that the reader often realises their importance only once he has reached the end of the novel or, most likely, after the reader has read *Travels in the Scriptorium*, published in 2006.

This dissertation will deal with five of Auster’s novels, namely *The New York Trilogy* (1987); *In the Country of Last Things* (1987); *Moon Palace* (1989); *The Book of Illusions* (2002); and *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006). I have chosen these five novels specifically because of the strong examples they afford towards my argument, but really Auster’s entire *oeuvre* should be taken into consideration and can be subjected to my analysis. Even though each novel constitutes a separate story, all five novels can be linked as the same characters reappear and disappear in them. Readers will only be able to realise this linking of the novels once they have read all of them, after which they will also realise that a seemingly unimportant (invisible) character in one novel could become a very important (visible) and

lead figure in the next. Consider the following links: In *In the Country of Last Things* Anna Blume, the lead character, picks up a passport belonging to Quinn (the lead character in *The New York Trilogy*); in *Moon Palace* Marco Fogg's roommate is David Zimmer, who anxiously awaits news from his beloved (Anna Blume); David Zimmer becomes the lead character of *The Book of Illusions*; and finally, *Travels of the Scriptorium* brings together all these characters when the author, presumably Auster himself (incidentally Auster is also a character in *The New York Trilogy*), realises how he has had control over their fates and these characters directly confront him with the quests on which he has sent them in his earlier novels. Every lead character in a novel also fulfils the role of a secondary and invisible character in the same or another novel. One novel does not, however, serve to answer the questions left by the preceding novel, but rather goes on to tell a separate, individual story, and the links between these five novels could easily be overlooked or be disregarded. I shall argue that Auster uses these characters to create certain frameworks in his novels and that all his characters, combined, create a much larger frame encompassing the entire range of his novels and, thereby, make of his novels one single fictional world.

I shall furthermore argue that when analysing these novels one would arrive at different interpretations depending on whether one approaches each novel separately (frame by frame), or whether one approaches all five novels as a whole. Interpretations may also vary depending on which character the reader is focusing on. The novel, for all appearances, may centre on a fixed lead character, but in fact may reveal information regarding the story of a secondary (invisible) character.

Alan Palmer, in his 2004 book *Fictional Minds*, writes: "Just as in real life the individual constructs the minds of others from their behaviour and speech, so the reader infers the workings of fictional minds and sees these minds in action from observation of characters' behaviour and speech" (2004:11). What we know about invisible characters, we derive from

what other characters “tell” us and if there are any gaps left to be filled, readers make use of their own imaginations to do so. Thus, many of the characteristics of the invisible characters rely on how the readers choose to reconstruct these characters in their imaginations. When a narrative leaves such gaps, the reader might become aware of the importance to fill these gaps and this, according to Schmid, could be called *necessarily rescinded negation*:

It concerns non-selected elements that paradoxically belong to the story insofar as they form a gap in its thread. The reader must rescind the negation undertaken by the author and, in line with the indications more or less latently contained in the text, “reactivate” the non-selected elements for the story. While reading, we often perform this function, usually unintentionally, in the automatic process of inference. As a rule, we implement this filling-in of blanks consciously only when what is omitted appears in essential elements or even determines the direction of the thread. (2010:205)

This occurs when the reader realises that the gaps are created as a “means to an end”, so to speak. The gaps create the mystery element which lies at the core of the novel and keeps the reader in a mode of suspense and expectation. By “reintroducing” some of the characters in all five novels Auster enhances the mystery element, but, in the end, the reader needs to fill the gaps on his own and decide for himself how important the connections between the characters are, if important at all.

Is Auster consciously creating these gaps and purposefully keeping information from the reader? In an interview, conducted with Auster in 1990, taken from Auster’s *Collected Prose*, published in 2010, Larry McCaffery (2010:540) comments that Auster’s books do not use coincidence in an effort to “smooth things over” or to create the usual realist’s manipulated illusion that everything can be explained; furthermore, he states that Auster’s books seem fundamentally “about” mystery and coincidence, so that these operate almost as governing principles that are constantly clashing with causality and rationality. To this statement Auster replies with the following:

When I talk about coincidence, I’m not referring to a desire to manipulate. There’s a good deal of that in bad eighteenth- and



nineteenth-century fiction: mechanical plot devices, the urge to tie everything up, the happy endings in which everyone turns out to be related to everyone else. No, what I'm talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our lifelong certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. (2010:540)

This statement indicates that Auster knowingly tries to engage the reader, specifically through coincidences (for example: using the same characters, but telling different stories) in his novels. *The New York Trilogy*, *In The Country of Last Things*, *Moon Palace* and *The Book of Illusions* are all individual stories, stories that do not rely on any prior novels for the reader to understand the plot, yet they all collectively lead to *Travels in the Scriptorium* and there, what the reader thought he knew about the characters is proven incorrect. In fact, not only the characters, but the author, himself, becomes disinherited. The events in this novel may even confuse the reader. Auster knows that his reader will most probably become frustrated and highlights this when he, posing as Mr. Blank in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, reads his own story and frustratingly throws it away. Consider the following passage:

By now, Mr. Blank has read all he can stomach, and he is not the least bit amused. In an outburst of pent-up anger and frustration, he tosses the manuscript over his shoulder with a violent flick of the wrist, not even bothering to turn around to see where it lands. As it flutters through the air and then thuds to the floor behind him, he pounds his fist on the desk and says in a loud voice: when is this nonsense going to end? (Auster, 2008:143)

Auster sums up, through a character, the very emotions his readers experience as they read the novel. If the reader has no knowledge about the other novels and their characters, this novel, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, will seem pointless.

The use of invisible characters is part of Auster's narrative technique and it is also a "game" that Auster plays with his readers in mind. His novels become a puzzle which can only be pieced together after having read all of the novels and after connecting the links found between these novels. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* characters, so long denied a voice of their

own, speak up for themselves, lamenting their destinies as the author has sent them each on quests which ultimately forced them to abandon their worlds and face harsh and condemning struggles. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* Anna Blume makes the following statement: “You sent me off to a dangerous place, a desperate place, a place of destruction and death” (Auster, 2008:24). In this novel, for the first time, we get a real glimpse of some of the invisible characters’ emotions and feelings. Auster introduces a metafictional element into this novel, combining his fictive worlds with reality and commenting on the role writing plays when converting reality into fiction. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* we read the following:

Mr. Blank might have acted cruelly toward some of his charges over the years, but not one of us thinks he hasn’t done everything in his power to serve us well. That is why I plan to keep him where he is. The room is his world now, and the longer the treatment goes on, the more he will come to accept the generosity of what has been done for him. Mr. Blank is old and enfeebled, but as long as he remains in the room with the shuttered window and the locked door, he can never die, never disappear, never be anything but the words I am writing on his page. (Auster, 2008:144)

Mr. Blank is the author of the characters in this novel, but the roles are reversed when another character writes about Mr. Blank in order to convert him into a character who will live for eternity on the pages of fiction. For this novel to make sense it is important for the reader to know all the characters in Auster’s preceding works and also for the reader to realise that the novel comments upon an author’s relationship with his characters. Schmid writes that

...the reader must reverse-engineer, as it were, the non-selection by reproducing elements that were not selected, but belong to the story. Rescindable non-selection has become characteristic of modern narrative prose... The reader must then infer these motivations by going beyond the explicit story and tracing certain non-selected elements of the – mental – happenings, which the narrator withholds or which are not accessible to him. (2010:205)

Auster’s previously published novels’ characters belong to *Travels in the Scriptorium* and, without knowledge of these characters and their quests, the reader might not understand why they are acting out against Mr. Blank, who seems very much the victim in this story. In order

to interpret the novels, therefore, the reader must be made aware of the gaps left by invisible characters, and be able to link instances as they happen in not only one, but all five of Auster's novels. It might be necessary to go back to each novel, re-reading each novel bearing the other four novels in mind, to derive meaning from them as a whole.

A holistic interpretation of Auster's fiction requires that the reader collect together all isolated references to each character and construct a consciousness for each character that stretches beyond one specific novel and enters the domain of Auster's fiction, his entire *oeuvre*, as a whole fictive world.

I shall argue that invisible characters are very much a postmodern aspect within the novel, a contemporary element which emphasises the questions raised by such literature, questions to which there might not necessarily be answers. Invisible characters, therefore, could be viewed as a powerful narrative tool within the structure of the novel. Auster is not the only author who makes use of such characters, but his work is exemplary of what writing could, and most probably would, look like in the future of literature. Fiction has become one of the most important aspects in our daily lives, providing a means with which to escape reality and consequently it has merged with our realities and this is something that is addressed in today's literature.

Based on the above contextualisation, the following key questions to be investigated arise, *viz.:*

1. How and why are invisible characters represented in Auster's fiction and what functions do these characters fulfil?
2. What is the importance of space and metafiction, and these elements' significance, in Auster's novels and does it contribute to the identities of the characters?
3. What are the effects of these characters on meaning (or lack thereof) in the novel as a whole?

4. What are the parallel experiences between Auster's characters; where do these experiences lead; and also, as these experiences are not only limited to the main protagonists of the texts, what are the effects of characters appearing and disappearing throughout the novels when reading and analysing Auster's complete set of work?
5. Could the awareness of these characters influence the interpretations of the novels, especially when the five novels, which I shall discuss in my dissertation, are read as a whole?

### Aims

1. To identify invisible characters and illustrate how they are represented in Auster's fiction and highlight the functions these characters fulfil.
2. To highlight the space Auster creates in his fiction in order to show that this space is merely a preliminary, liminal, space characters move through before entering a new fictional world outside of the text and to illustrate the importance of metafiction found throughout the range of Auster's work.
3. To prove that Auster uses these characters to construct frames within frames of the fictional world he creates.
4. To illustrate that it is important to investigate the parallel experiences which characters undergo as these experiences contribute to the notion that Auster's fictional worlds are not contained in each separate novel, but rather comprises one single world spanning the entire range of his work.
5. To show the difference between reading each novel separately, focussing on the main protagonist, against reading all five novels as a whole, focussing on all characters, including invisible characters.

### Thesis Statement

In this dissertation I shall argue that invisible characters, as they appear in Paul Auster's novels, serve a very specific function within the interpretative framework of a text and that they should be considered in order to arrive at a more holistic interpretation of the text and a more accurate analysis of said texts. I argue that Auster knowingly includes these characters in his novels, as part of his narrative technique, in order for them to serve specific functions and to contribute to the structure of postmodern fiction. My argument draws specific attention to narrative and fictional spaces found within Auster's work, paying particular attention to the idea of liminality and boundaries between different worlds of different novels. Liminality, boundaries and metafiction plays a fundamental role towards the postmodern approach Auster incorporates in his writing.

### Methodology

I shall make use of a contextualized textual analysis of the five novels mentioned above. My investigation will loosely be based on a hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics stresses the importance of understanding texts and finding and understanding the message behind said texts. When reading Auster's novels it is important to first understand each novel separately before piecing together all the threads that constitute his work into a conglomerate whole.

Marshall and Brady (2001:99) write that the hermeneutic theory proposes a common understanding or meaning through access of shared linguistic or interpretive resources. The shared factors in my research would be the invisible characters and their functions within Auster's novels, as well as the liminal and narrative spaces found within his work. Consider the following:

...hermeneutic theory also posits that linguistic meaning is likely open to infinite interpretation and reinterpretation due to the interpretive ambiguity coming from presuppositions, to the conditions of usage;

different from authorial intention, and to the evolution of words.  
(Marshall & Brady, 2001:99)

Invisible characters create gaps within a narrative framework, but once one has read all of Auster's novels prior to *Travels in the Scriptorium*, some of these gaps are filled when looking at his work as a whole, instead of focussing on each novel separately. Klein and Myers (1999:67) ascertain that because of the interpretive nature of hermeneutics, the study cannot be applied in a mechanical fashion within a set of pre-determined criteria.

My study also follows what is called a *hermeneutical circle*, which involves a meta-principle, where the process of deriving understanding and meaning actively moves between a holistic understanding of the novel, as well as the individual characteristics that are discussed. Even though each novel can be regarded as a stand-alone novel and not part of a series, the hermeneutic circle does establish that once one has read *Travels in the Scriptorium* these novels can no longer be regarded as separate parts, but that they culminate into a whole. A reading of *Travels in the Scriptorium* relies on prior knowledge of preceding works as this novel presents a more definitive conclusion to preceding works' open endings.

I pay particular attention to the theory of liminality, with particular reference to Victor Turner's work and his phases of public conflict to highlight the differences between worlds and the shifts within the setting of each novel as these characters transgress from one fictive state into another. The liminal spaces in each novel are of utmost importance as these spaces instigate a character's growth and awareness of their status as fictional constructs. The four phases each character goes through will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

I also investigate metafiction in Paul Auster's novels as part of my methodology, and pay particular attention to this aspect in my analysis of *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Patricia Waugh (2002:239) writes in her book *Metafiction* that terms such as "metapolitics", "metarhetoric" and "metatheatre" are a reminder of what has been, since the 1960's a more

general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world. She explains that:

If, as individuals, we now occupy “roles” rather than “selves”, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself. (Waugh, 2002:239)

Metafiction plays an important role in Auster’s novels, since Auster’s characters are complex characters, very much aware of their fictional statuses who try, even though this is impossible, to take control of their own lives when they, finally, confront their author in *Travels of the Scriptorium*.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Beyond Auster's Fiction: Liminality and Phases of Conflict Against Society**

*The New York Trilogy*



*The New York Trilogy*, published in 1987, is without a doubt Paul Auster's most renowned novel and could be seen as the beginning of, what this dissertation shows to be, a very unique fictional world, a world Auster calls the *Scriptorium*. It consists of three parts, with each part presenting a separate story, namely: *City of Glass*; *Ghosts*; and *The Locked Room*. This novel forms the "platform" for Auster's entire *oeuvre* and I hope to show a key starting point for a comprehensive understanding of his *oeuvre* would be *The New York Trilogy* and the space which Auster creates in this novel.

What makes Auster's fiction unique and sets him, as a postmodern writer, apart from other postmodern writers is the fact that each of his novels can be seen as a piece of a puzzle. To understand his *oeuvre* it becomes necessary to understand each separate novel and find the links between these novels. As Matei Calinescu writes in his 1993 book *Rereading*: "...in order to understand a whole one must have a prior understanding of its parts, but in order to understand each part one must have a prior understanding of the whole" (1993:20). One reading or even one rereading of Auster's novels would not be enough to fully comprehend the extent of his fiction, or the intricate lives of his characters or the messages contained within his work. To fully comprehend the world which he creates in his fiction, one must study the separate parts presented in each novel and combine these parts in order to understand them as a whole. One must connect the dots.

On careful inspection of all of Auster's fiction, one soon realises that his novels are linked in a very subtle way: characters disappear and reappear in different novels, even though, at first glance, these novels seem to have little to do with each other; themes overlap; and, most significantly, characters all inevitably end up in a fictional world (in the *Scriptorium*) that cannot be entered by us, as readers.

Fictional space is an important aspect in any novel and in Auster's fiction it plays a key role. In his article, "Spaced-Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*", Steven E. Alford points out that

...we encounter genuinely puzzling characters and spaces: characters disappear from the space of the novel, characters seek to lose themselves by wandering through unfamiliar space, characters employ space as an arena for hermetic communication, and still other characters design utopian spaces based on their fears and misapprehensions. (1995:613)

Each character's behaviour is linked with the space in which he finds himself.

Usually, as a character's quest begins he enters a space perceptibly different from the one he previously found himself in and the world, itself, seems to shift into a new reality. One such example can be found in Auster's 1991 novel *The Music of Chance* when the main protagonist, Nashe, enters the setting in which most of the novel takes place. Consider the following:

The air suddenly seemed cooler to him, and a strong breeze was blowing across the ridge, rustling the foliage with the first faint sign of fall. As Nashe put his feet on the ground and stood up, an overpowering sense of happiness washed through him. It lasted only an instant, then gave way to a brief, almost imperceptible feeling of dizziness, which vanished the moment he began walking toward Pozzi. After that, his head seemed curiously emptied out, and for the first time in many years, he fell into one of those trances that had sometimes afflicted him as a boy: an abrupt and radical shift of his inner bearings, as if the world around him had suddenly lost its reality. It made him feel like a shadow, like someone who had fallen asleep with his eyes open. (Auster, 2006b:59-60)

Characters, therefore, enter new settings in which they will undergo a series of phases before the novel will reach its end and they transgress into Auster's *Scriptorium*. These settings usually entail that a barrier exists between these characters and the world they come from and that they, now, are separated from this world and move through a new reality. The settings Auster creates for his novels can be viewed as the essence of his fiction as all these worlds lead to one world beyond his fiction, a world he will only directly address in his novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

As novels do not have a definite end it is clear that characters move on to a next world and that their stories, therefore, do not end. Auster, however, does not reveal anything beyond the ending of the novel and readers can only guess what the final fates of these characters are. Readers, therefore, may find that they become frustrated, because it would seem that Auster's novels lead to nothing and nowhere and only once you have read *Travels in the Scriptorium* would some of the events discussed and described in his previous novels start to make sense. Alford also writes the following:

Novels needn't establish verisimilitude to carry out their business, but from the reader's point of view, it helps. When the novel refuses to do so (as in magical realism), we may be sure that the text intends something thematically significant. While on one level *The New York Trilogy* invokes the problematic between signification and selfhood, on another level we can see a thread in the trilogy involving the relationship between signification and space. (1995:615)

*The New York Trilogy* can be seen as the key that unlocks the door to Auster's fictional world, it is the first encounter we have with his characters and in this novel the disappearance of each character is felt and readers may feel compelled to find out what has happened to these characters and where they have disappeared to.

A common feature in Auster's fiction is that characters leave the pages of his fiction and that he provides us, the readers, with a fragmented plot without any finality. In the interview conducted by McCaffery and Gregory, Auster states that "...all my books are connected by their common source, by the preoccupations they share" (Auster, 2010:547). Every character in Auster's story goes through life-changing experiences as they are forced to make decisions and let go of their past, but instead of showing us the consequences of their decisions, Auster leaves endings open and readers have to decide for themselves what finally happens.

William G. Little writes in his article, “Nothing to go on: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*”, that there is a refrain of nothing in Auster’s fiction: “...a refrain pointing toward a darkness which refrains from coming to a modern, secularized conception of experience as fractured, arbitrary, and incoherent” (1997:134). This is significant, because characters only exist through the information given about them and thus many areas in their lives remain dark and unfilled. There are gaps in the narrative, because it would be impossible for an author to convey exactly every single detail pertaining to a character’s life and his doings. Auster’s novels are filled with such blanks, as are all novels, but what sets Auster’s novels apart from other novels is the fact that the characters become aware of the gaps in their lives and aware of the fact that one scene in their life jumps directly into another without anything happening in between. An example of this can be found in *City of Glass* when the main protagonist, Quinn, leaves his apartment to go to his first meeting with Peter Stillman<sup>2</sup>: “I seem to be going out... But if I’m going out, where exactly am I going” (Auster, 2004b:12)? The scene jumps from the moment Quinn accepts the case to the moment he leaves his apartment and he seems confused because he suddenly finds himself leaving his apartment.

Given these comments, this chapter asks the following questions: What is the importance of space in Auster’s novels and does it contribute to the identities of the characters; and how and why are invisible characters represented in Auster’s fiction and what functions do these characters fulfil?

The spaces in these novels are directly linked to each character’s journey towards the world beyond Auster’s fiction and, therefore, close attention should be paid to the settings found in these novels. Furthermore, it is important to take note of characters that disappear from

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<sup>2</sup>Since two of the important characters are both named Peter Stillman, I shall henceforth refer to the younger Stillman as “Peter” and the older Stillman as “Stillman Senior”.

Auster's pages and to keep these characters in mind when reading his novels. These characters do not simply disappear, but rather become invisible presences throughout all of his fiction, because their influence is not limited to the particular novel that tells their story, but stretches over the whole range of his novels and effectively combines all his novels into one single expanded work.

Schmid argues that "The border between the fictive world, to which every narrator belongs, no matter how neutrally, objectively or 'Olympic' s/he is constituted, and reality, to which, for all his virtuality, the abstract reader belongs, cannot be crossed – unless in some narrative paradox" (2010:54). Auster creates a narrative paradox in which he is able to merge our reality with the fictional reality, but in order to do so he first creates a liminal space through which characters must travel in order to reach this merged reality. In this chapter I show how Auster is able to present us with the unknown and that he does this by creating a liminal space. This liminal space serves as a narrative paradox, blurring the boundaries between fictive worlds and reality, but here instead of enabling the reader to enter the world of fiction, it presents us with characters that try to escape from the fictional bonds imposed upon them into a world where their existence will be real. This liminal space is a world situated between our reality (the reality we usually read about) and the world Auster creates which lies beyond the pages of his fiction and the liminal space is necessary, and crucial, for the characters to be able to transcend into this world beyond worlds. His novels, therefore, do not actually take place in this world he creates for his characters, but rather convey the stages in the characters' lives before they vanish from the page and enter this world. Schmid also indicates that

Being fictive means being represented only. Literary fiction is a representation of a world which implies no direct relationship between what is represented and a real extra-literary world. Fiction consists in making, in the construction of an invented, possible world...the absence of

a direct relationship between text and extra-textual world does not, in any way, mean that the fictive world is irrelevant for the reader or, indeed, even that it is less relevant than the real world. On the contrary, the fictive world can attain the highest significance for the reader. The reader can engage with the innertextual referents, e.g. characters and their actions, as with real, individual, concrete entities, even when s/he is aware of their fictivity. (2010:30)

We, the readers, are aware that the characters are merely fictional constructs, but characters need to be credible and the worlds in novels need to be believable so that the reader is able to enter this fictional space in his imagination and enjoy the text. Most readers read in order to escape from their everyday lives, to relieve stress and to break away from the bonds and limitations factors such as money and power impose on us. Through fiction we can enter worlds and travel to places we would not normally have been able to visit due to these limitations. The period in which we read, merges our world with the fictional world, because for as long as we read and think about these characters they exist in our minds. Auster's fiction relies on this merging of two worlds, our own and the fictional world, since characters become aware of their fictional states and try to break free from these states. This, however, is impossible, since their awareness of being fictive is a fiction in itself.

Auster spends little time on descriptions of characters' past lives or on speculating about their possible futures. Instead, he only conveys the present and the dilemmas in which these characters find themselves. Readers, therefore, have limited knowledge pertaining to these characters and need to decide for themselves why these characters find themselves in the predicaments they are in at the beginning of each novel. Instead of explaining and giving us a character's history, Auster merely jumps into the present of each character's life and continues from that moment into the future.

Each character soon finds himself going against social conduct, becomes isolated and inevitably loses touch, not only with reality, but also with the sense of self. Even though the world Auster writes about at first appears to be very much like our own, we, the readers, soon realise that it is a world blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. Auster's novels, therefore, can be viewed as, what Victor Turner (1974:41), in his book *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, calls a state of "betwixt and between." Characters find themselves leaving their past lives and everything they know behind and by the end of the novel they enter the fictional world where readers cannot follow.

In *Travels in the Scriptorium* this world is brought closer to the reader when Auster gives us a glimpse of the world in which these characters now reside, but still we remain outsiders, merely spectators, who are given a glimpse of this world as if through a window. Even in this novel, where we directly face this world and all the characters that have disappeared throughout his previous fictions, Auster still does not fill in all the gaps left by these characters and their disappearance and still does not answer all the questions we would have liked him to answer. The novel, rather, serves as a device with which he indicates various links between the novels, and makes the readers aware that they might have misread many important scenes during their initial reading of his novels. After reading *Travels in the Scriptorium* it will be necessary to go back to the very first novel and start rereading Auster's entire *oeuvre*.

What exactly is meant with the term "liminality"? Turner, in his 1979 essay, *Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, defines it as follows:

This term, literally 'being-on-a-threshold,' means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status. Since liminal time is not controlled by the clock, it is a time of enchantment when anything *might*, even should, happen. (1979:465-466)

This is an extended explanation following his definition of liminality in his 1974 book, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, where he describes liminality “to refer to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life” and that “it is often a sacred condition or can readily become one” (1974:47). What happens in Auster's novels is a form of enchantment where characters breaking free of fictional constructs gain a magical element once they enter the *Scriptorium* and exist beyond the pages of fiction since this new world merges fiction with reality.

I shall show, through means of examples from *The New York Trilogy*, how Turner's theory of liminality can be applied to Auster's novels when looking at specific characters and the world in which they find themselves. Auster's characters isolate themselves and become *outsiders*, often becoming spectators, and victims, of events beyond their control. Usually this process leads to their being “reborn” into a new system and literally forces them to abandon their past lives and beliefs. This also correlates with Turner's following statement:

What I call liminality, the state of being in between successive participations in social milieu dominated by social structural considerations, whether formal or unformalized, is not precisely the same as *communitas*, for it is a sphere or domain of action or thought rather than a social modality. Indeed, liminality may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix. It may imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence. (1974:52)

Liminality explains why these characters disappear and why they become invisible to us as readers, but, most importantly, why they remain important figures despite their disappearance from the page, representing the very essence of what Auster's novels are all about.

Another aspect or phase of liminality, according to Turner (1974:51) is that the unknown is brought fully into the light by the known and that this is able to occur through imageless



thought, conceptualization in various degrees of abstractness, deduction both informal and formal, and inductive generalization. Creativity is the ability to imagine something that goes beyond what we know and experience in our world. As Turner (1974:51) states, creative imagination, inventiveness, or inspiration goes beyond spatial imagination, and Auster's fictional world depends on this concept, since the very idea that characters can disappear from the pages of fiction and still exist in another realm is unreal and absurd, but liminality, here, does not necessarily imply logic and even goes beyond logical structures. Auster's fiction depends on his readers' capabilities to use their imaginations. We should forget that it is merely fiction and to enjoy the novels to the fullest we should make his world our own and try to enter it along with the characters. Schmid (2010:21-22) writes that fictional texts are, as a rule, not fictive, but real and that fiction should rather be understood as the representation of a distinct, autonomous, inner-literary reality.

My analysis of *The New York Trilogy* and its connection to liminality and Auster's fictional world also involves a close reading of the text with specific references to Turner's four main phases of public action in conflict situations. The conflict, here, being each character's struggle with society and letting go of their place in society, as well as the ritualistic motions leading up to their disappearance, actions which are set in motion once characters realise that they are merely fictional constructs and that the world as they know it is not what it appears to be. My focus is on the main protagonists' of the novel, but all of Auster's characters go through these motions and some even reappear in more than one novel, usually helping the current character who struggles with the bonds of fiction to progress towards the transgression into the next world.

The phases, according to Turner (1974:38-41) are the following: firstly, the *breach* of regular, norm-governed social relations occurring between persons or groups within the same system of social relations; secondly, a phase of *mounting crisis* in which the breach can widen and extend until it becomes coextensive; thirdly, the phase of *redressive action* or *escalation* (this is the phase where the individual finds himself immersed in the liminal phase); and fourthly, the final phase consisting either of the *reintegration* into society or the *rebirth* of the individual.

The rest of this chapter is divided into sections, each section consecutively dealing with *City of Glass*; *Ghosts*; and *The Locked Room*. My focus is on each character's disappearance from the pages of Auster's fiction and how they, according to Victor Turner's theory of liminality, undergo changes and are made ready to enter Auster's fictional world. It should be taken into account that *The New York Trilogy* could be viewed as Auster's most experimental novel and that not all of his novels share the exact sequence that will be discussed in this chapter, but the underlying messages remain the same throughout his fictional works and there are many similarities that can be drawn when comparing *The New York Trilogy* with any of his other novels.

### *City of Glass*

*City of Glass*, first published in 1985, comprises the first part of *The New York Trilogy* and tells the story of Daniel Quinn, a detective-fiction writer, who makes a decision one night which would alter his life entirely. The three characters I focus on in my analysis of *City of Glass*, namely Quinn, Peter and Stillman Senior, all reappear in some of his other novels. Their appearances in these novels are sometimes so subtle that it is easy to overlook them. In a sense, they become invisible characters in the complete range of Auster's fiction.

What is important about the space in this novel is the way in which Auster uses it to emphasise the notion of isolation and each character's extraction from society as well as how space contributes to their disappearance. As Little states:

Though the story does have a specific geographical and historical setting (New York City in the early 1980s), to the reader and to the detective the location frequently transforms into a kind of anti-*topos*, place of absence. Framed as a traditional detective story, in which so often the mystery is solved upon disclosure of a hidden location, Auster's text repeatedly refuses hermeneutical and topographical orientation, yielding nothing in acts of narrative and environmental emptying out. (1997:150)

As Quinn, the main protagonist, goes through certain phases and begins to see the world in a new way, the space around him also shifts. Quinn's world is falling apart and, towards the end of the story, the city becomes desolate. When Quinn finally realises that he will never get the answers he is looking for and that he wasted his time and efforts following a man aimlessly around the city he thinks: "A white wall becomes a yellow wall becomes a grey wall, he said to himself. The paint becomes exhausted, the city encroaches with its soot, the plaster crumbles within. Changes, then more changes still" (Auster, 2004b:104). There is a direct link, therefore, between character and space and as this space is liminal, merely a world between worlds, it is crucial to pay attention to the changes which occur within this space.

A first reading of *The New York Trilogy* may confuse the reader, because the story sets out as a detective story, but then veers into new directions when the reader realises that the case will never be solved. After the first reading it would be easy to assume that the story merely describes a man who aimlessly follows another man and that nothing of significance actually happens in this story. In "The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*", William Lavender introduces the following analysis of *City of Glass*:

*City of Glass*, then, is a deconstruction. Or a sabotage. It deconstructs the form of the novel, the canons of criticism, theory, and tradition, and it

deconstructs itself, as it literally falls apart in its progression. Characters appear, they are sketched full of potentials which we logically expect to be fulfilled, and then they walk off the page never to return. (1993:220)

Characters are what make the story. Without characters a novel would merely consist of “sentences that describe things”. The character, thus, drives the story. Auster, however, introduces characters and presents them as important and key figures in the plot only to have them disappear without warning. The first character to appear only to unexpectedly disappear without resolving anything in the novel is Peter, who claims that his life is in danger and that his father is trying to kill him. The second character is the father, Stillman Senior. My analysis, however, will show that, even though at first it appears that these characters do not meet readers' expectations and that they leave the novel before any definite conclusion could be drawn, they do fulfil important and crucial roles in Auster's *oeuvre*. They are the first characters who introduce the reader to the idea that a world exists beyond the worlds we read about in novels and that they exist within this world even after the novel has reached its end.

Having characters become aware of their status as fictional constructs is very much a postmodern trait. Most novels present characters that are as real as the world they reside in, since readers need to believe the story which they are reading and during the reading process the story is not usually seen as merely fictional. Schmid (2010:31) comments on this when he writes that fictive objects do not differ from real ones through any kind of thematic or formal features, but only through a characteristic that cannot be observed in themselves, which is that they do not exist in the real world. Auster, however, presents us with characters aware, or who become aware, of the fact that they do not exist in the real world. They have to deal with this knowledge, come to terms with it and find a way to carry on their existence beyond the page and to do this they need to break free of the bonds fiction imposes on them. One such example is when the

character, Peter, cries out for help as he realises that Paul Auster is the only one who would be able to save him: "I know you will save my life, Mr Auster. I am counting on you. Life can last just so long, you understand" (Auster, 2004b:22). The only Auster he can contact, however, is the Auster inside the novel who consequently is a character himself and thus his existence is also limited to the pages of the novel and he would not be able to help Peter with his dilemma.

Peter and Stillman Senior are the characters who lead Quinn into, and through, the liminal space. They are the ones who introduce him to the notion that he is merely a fictional construct and they are also the ones who make him aware that there is a world beyond the text. Without these characters Quinn cannot go through the necessary phases leading up to his own disappearance from the novel.

It is important to note that Auster opens his novel with the event that leads to Quinn's disappearance. *The New York Trilogy* opens as follows:

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, 2004b:3)

Quinn, being the main protagonist, is an important figure throughout the novel, but we know little of him. The narrator even states that: "As for Quinn, there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance" (Auster, 2004b:3).

There is a reason why Auster begins the story with the aforementioned event. Schmid writes:

The narration of a story presupposes the selection of elements (situations, characters, actions) and their properties. In contrast to the happenings, which can be endlessly extended into the past and whose interior can be

infinitely detailed, the story has a beginning and an end, and a certain degree of concretization [...]the selection of elements and their properties in a fictional work is undertaken – in line with the rules of fiction – by the narrator, as it were, the narrative material in the form of the happenings, which are the product of the author's invention, but the author him or herself does not appear in the represented world as the selecting entity. By selecting the elements of his or her story, the narrator draws a 'thread' through the happenings, which connects certain elements and leaves others aside. While doing this, the narrator orientates himself on the criterion of the relevance of the elements to the story he is in the process of narrating. (2010:195)

Only information which is absolutely necessary is given in the novel and Quinn's life and everything that happened to him before the events in the novel is, therefore, unnecessary. Towards the end of the novel the reader finds that the narrator is an unknown character who was given Quinn's red notebook and so the story we read is events pieced together by the unknown narrator and the gaps left will never be filled as the narrator, himself, has limited knowledge and can only relate what he reads in the notebook. At the end of *City of Glass* we read:

At this point the story grows obscure. The information has run out, and the events that follow this last sentence will never be known. I would be foolish even to hazard a guess... As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now. I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations. The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand. As for Auster, I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout. If our friendship has ended, he has only himself to blame. As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck. (Auster, 2004b:133)

*City of Glass*, therefore, resembles a story which consists of only a middle and not a clear beginning or definite end. It begins with a man already feeling that he is an outsider and already struggling against society and ends with this man disappearing, but where he disappears to we, like the narrator, will never know.

If we consider Turner's phases of public conflict it becomes clear that Quinn, from the beginning of the novel, goes through the first phase and that there is already a breach of regular norm-governed social relations between Quinn and society. According to Turner (1979:38) this first phase is usually signalled by a person who deliberately chooses to step outside of the regular boundaries connecting him to a society through a specific act. This act cannot actually be seen as a crime, but does resemble one and serves as a symbolic trigger that sets the rest of the phases in motion. The person usually acts, or believes he/she acts, on behalf of other parties, whether they are aware of it or not. He thus sees himself as a representative, not as an instigator.

Quinn is introduced as an outsider, a recluse, he deliberately chooses to step out of the boundaries connecting him to society as is evident in the following passage:

The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long... 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... He was alive, and the stubbornness of this fact had little by little begun to fascinate him – as if he had managed to outlive himself, as if he were somehow living a posthumous life. (Auster, 2004b:4-5)

As Quinn is a detective-fiction writer it is easy for him to accept the case working as private detective Paul Auster and, consequently, adopting this false identity sets the first phase fully into motion.

Adopting a false persona is the crime which Quinn commits and he justifies this act by convincing himself that he does this in order to protect Peter and Virginia. Consider the following:

The fact that there was now a purpose to his being Paul Auster – a purpose that was becoming more and more important to him – served as a kind of moral justification for the charade and absolved him of having to defend his lie. For imagining himself as Auster had become synonymous in his mind with doing good in the world. (Auster, 2004b:50-51)

As Peter cannot face his father and defend himself, Quinn sees himself as Peter's representative. Quinn has lost hope after the death of his wife and son and now he sees this task as a way of redeeming himself and that, if he should succeed, there is still hope and good in this world.

As soon as Quinn accepts the case the novel quickly moves into Turner's (1979:38-39) second phase of public conflict which entails a mounting crisis, widening the breach and extending it until it becomes coextensive with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the conflicting or antagonistic parties belong. There is an escalation of the crisis, the true state of affairs is revealed, which presents a turning point. During this phase it is impossible to pretend that nothing is amiss. This phase, already, has liminal characteristics, since it is a threshold between more or less stable phases of the social process: "It takes up a menacing stance in the forum itself and dares the representatives of order to grapple with it" (Turner, 1979:39). The crisis cannot be ignored or wished away.

This second phase is entered into once Quinn enters Peter's apartment during their first, and only, meeting. The apartment acts as a threshold between the fictional world and the liminal world. Consider the following:

As he crossed the threshold and entered the apartment, he could feel himself going blank, as if his brain has suddenly shut off. He had wanted to take in the details of what he was seeing, but the task was somehow beyond him at that moment. The apartment loomed up around him as a kind of blur. (Auster, 2004b:14)

The apartment is a metaphorical boundary that exists between our reality and Auster's imaginary world. It serves as a doorway through which Quinn enters the liminal space. From the moment he enters the apartment Quinn finds himself in Auster's liminal space and he experiences this transgression of boundaries physically. He has left the fictional reality behind and is now trapped, along with Peter and Stillman, in this world between worlds.



In this apartment we meet Peter, the instigator of the whole event. Peter is one of Auster's strangest characters since he seems to consist of fragments and appears "broken". As can be seen in the following description of him:

...it was a young man, dressed entirely in white, with the white-blond hair of a child... It seemed to Quinn that Stillman's body had not been used for a long time and that all its functions had been relearned, so that motion had become a conscious process, each movement broken down into its component submovements, with the result that all flow and spontaneity had been lost. It was like watching a marionette trying to walk without strings... Quinn could not image himself addressing a word to this person. It was as though Stillman's presence was a command to be silent... As their eyes met, Quinn suddenly felt that Stillman had become invisible. He could see him sitting in the chair across from him, but at the same time it felt as though he was not there. (Auster, 2004b:14-15)

Auster uses Peter to introduce the idea of authorship and an author-character relationship into the story. Peter resembles a blank page, a page on which no words have been written. This character is merely an idea with no physical substance, appearing invisible to Quinn, even though one cannot deny his existence. Quinn notices that he appears to have movements much like a marionette trying to walk without strings and this is significant when we view Peter as a character who breaks free of the bonds that connects him to an author and enters the novel on his own terms. Peter's speech is fragmented, because his story is fragmented and undeveloped, as can be seen in the following example:

This is what is called speaking. I believe that is the term. When words come out, fly into the air, live for a moment, and die. Strange, is it not? I myself have no opinion. No and no again. But still, there are words you will need to have. There are many of them. Many millions I think. Perhaps only three or four. Excuse me. But I am doing well today. So much better than usual. If I can give you the words you need to have, it will be a great victory... They say, they say. But what does poor little Peter say? Nothing, nothing. Anymore... Poor Peter Stillman. A little boy he was. Barely a few words of his own. And then no words, and then no one, and then no, no, no. Anymore. (Auster, 2004b:16)

Without an author Peter does not have a sufficient vocabulary with which to describe his feelings and experiences. He needs to function on his own and go through the motions (much like a baby learning to walk and talk and fend for itself) of acquiring the necessary skills with which to survive. Millard points out the following:

First, the novel shows that the opposition between the “real” world and the world of fiction is a false one. The real world is composed of stories, of fictions, of narrative, and ultimately of language in the same way that the fictional world of a novel is constructed. The “real” lives of Auster’s characters are comprised of the language of fiction. Second, a character’s identity is created by the acquisition of language and any sense of that character’s subjectivity is determined by the language they use. Furthermore, this is true of “real” characters as much as it is of fictional ones because language speaks us – it is a social system already in place when we are born and we learn how to articulate our sense of ourselves entirely through our use of it; we become in fact a function of the language that we use. Third, history, and especially perhaps the history of America, is a form of fiction, and like other fictions it is dependent upon the narrative devices that are found in imaginative works such as novels. History is not ontologically constructed, and it is therefore subject to the same textual and hermeneutic uncertainties as fiction. (2000:183)

Peter is not a fully developed character as he is present on only ten of the pages in the novel, entering abruptly, baffling us with his strangeness before once again disappearing. He seems to be acutely aware of the fallibility of his existence as can be seen in the following example:

And then there are times when I say nothing. For days and days on end. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I forget how to make the words come out of my mouth. Then it is hard for me to move. Yaya. Or even to see. That is when I become Mr Sad. (Auster, 2004b:21)

Is this not typical of any character in a novel? Pages and pages will go by where a character does not make his/her appearance, where they, in effect, do not exist, and so, for the duration of those pages their world would be dark, they will have no voice, they will not be able to see and they will not be able to move. Peter is the first character able to break free from these constructs and

in the novel he introduces this notion to Quinn, hinting that Quinn could break free from the fictional world and exist without the author's control.

As Peter enters there is a mounting crisis, because it becomes clear that something is terribly wrong and an injustice has been done to this character. Peter explains little, in fact, he is unable to explain exactly what is wrong with him since his speech is limited, but he leaves Quinn to piece together the various riddles of his story.

Peter's fear, when he finds himself in the pages of Auster's fiction, is that the author, who is literally his maker and, therefore, father, will try to kill him. A character's existence depends on the author and his very life, therefore, is in Auster's hands. The real "suspect" in the case, it is clear, is not Stillman Senior, but Paul Auster, the writer of *City of Glass*. Consider the following:

He will come. That is to say, the father will come. And he will try to kill me. Thank you. But I do not want that. No, No. Not anymore. Peter lives now. Yes. All is not right in his head, but still he lives. And that is something, is it not? Sooner or later I will run out of words, you see. Everyone has just so many words inside him. And then where will I be? (Auster, 2004b:18-19)

Not once, in the whole meeting, does Peter call his father by name. It is Virginia Stillman who tells Quinn that his father is Stillman Senior and provides the photograph so that Quinn could identify him. We, the readers, cannot simply assume that Peter is talking of Stillman Senior, because if we pay close attention to what Peter is really trying to say, Paul Auster fits the description perfectly.

Shortly after Peter says that he does not want to be killed, he says the following: "I am the end of everyone, the last man. So much the better, I think. It is not a pity that it should all end now. It is good for everyone to be dead" (Auster, 2004b:19). This death could, however, be seen as a metaphorical death, a death in this world which is a prerequisite for rebirth into the next

world. Peter is the last man, because he is the one who will enlighten the others and lead them to a better life beyond the page. Once the meeting is over, Peter disappears from the page. He has served his purpose and can now move on to the next world, leaving Quinn to fit the pieces of the puzzle together on his own. He is also the key figure who will lead Quinn to this next world, and so, Peter is the hero of this story and, subsequently, the impact Peter makes in this novel is carried over to Auster's later novels. Avid followers of Auster's fiction would know the name Peter Stillman, he is without a doubt one of Auster's most best known characters. It is because of his strangeness and the strange words he uses in his speech that no reader can disregard or forget him.

Neither Quinn, nor the reader, can ignore that circumstances have changed and that the world in which Quinn now finds himself and about which we are reading is not our own reality, or the reality Quinn was used to, and that here, in this liminal space, anything can happen and anything is possible. Readers, along with Quinn, need to grapple with this notion, the readers because it is not what they expect from a novel, and Quinn, because he suddenly has to deal with the fact that what he always presumed to be real is not so and that his world is not what he thought it was.

As Quinn begins phase three of his transgression, Peter disappears from the page and Stillman Senior enters the novel. Most of the novel takes place during this third phase, which according to Turner (1979:39) is the phase of *redressive action* in which the character fully enters the liminal space. Quinn leaves the Stillmans' apartment, but the world he enters once he leaves the apartment is no longer the world he was a part of prior to the meeting. Turner (1974:39-41) explains that during this phase certain adjustive and redressive "mechanisms" are swiftly brought into operation by leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed

social system. These mechanisms may range from personal advice and informal mediation to the performance of a public ritual. There is again a notion of “escalation” in crisis after which both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression. The liminal features in this phase involves the notion of being “betwixt and between;” furnishing a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the “crisis;” and it may also be in the metaphorical and symbolic idiom of a ritual process.

During this time in the novel, Quinn is not fully aware of his status as a character. Peter has simply introduced this notion, but the journey to enlightenment is Quinn's to take and he needs to find out on his own terms that he is merely a character and he also needs to find his own ways to deal with this fact. It is a solitary act, a ritual of sorts, which he needs to face and experience on his own.

During this phase in the novel, Peter and Stillman Senior can be viewed as the leading and structurally representative members of the disturbed social system. Peter, the invisible presence of which every reader is aware and around whom the mystery revolves and Stillman Senior as the suspect character whose motives needs to be uncovered. Peter's hold on Quinn grows stronger as Quinn's thoughts are focused on Peter and his strange situation. Consider the following: “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, 2004b:36). For the first time Quinn begins to question reality. He goes to the station to await Stillman Senior's arrival and with Stillman Senior's entrance the crisis escalates. Consider the following:

The train pulled into the station, and Quinn felt the noise of it shoot through his body: a random, hectic din that seemed to join with his pulse, pumping his blood in raucous spurts. His head then filled with Peter Stillman's voice, as a barrage of nonsense words clattered against the

walls of his skull. He told himself to stay calm. But that did little good.  
(Auster, 2004b:54)

Quinn is slowly moving further and further away from the fictional reality and Peter's world begins to intrude the liminal space. In this world Quinn, like Peter, needs to learn how to function without the control of an author. It is at the station that the crisis reaches its climax, because Auster does not introduce only one Stillman Senior into the story, but two. The introduction of two Stillman Seniors presents Quinn with the final choice, the choice of whether he should transgress beyond the text, or return to the world of fiction. Though the two men are both, undeniably, Stillman Senior, there are remarkable differences in their appearances. The first Stillman Senior is described as follows:

His hair was white, and it lay on his head uncombed, sticking up here and there in tufts. He was tall, thin, without question past sixty, somewhat stooped. Inappropriately for the season, he wore a long, brown overcoat that had gone to seed, and he shuffled slightly as he walked. The expression on his face seemed placid, midway between a daze and thoughtfulness. He did not look at the things around him, nor did they seem to interest him. He had one piece of luggage, a once beautiful but now battered leather suitcase with a strap around it. Once or twice as he walked up the ramp he put the suitcase down and rested for a moment. He seemed to be moving with effort, a bit thrown by the crowd, uncertain whether to keep up with it or to let the others pass him by. (Auster, 2004b:55)

This Stillman Senior reminds us of Peter Stillman, both of them are clearly out of place in this world, both struggle with movement and they both are preoccupied with some other existence. The second Stillman Senior, however, seems much more in tune with the world, more in control of surroundings and, one can easily deduct that he would pose more danger than the first, somewhat confused, man. Consider his description:

Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's. For a second Quinn thought it was an illusion, a kind of aura thrown off by the

electromagnetic currents in Stillman's body. But no, this other Stillman moved, breathed, blinked his eyes; his actions were clearly independent of the first Stillman. The second Stillman had a prosperous air about him. He was dressed in an expensive blue suit; his shoes were shined; his white hair was combed; and in his eyes there was the shrewd look of a man of the world. He, too, was carrying a single bag: an elegant black suitcase, about the same size as the other Stillman's. (Auster, 2004b:56)

Each Stillman Senior then walks off in a different direction, one going right, the other left and Quinn, consequently, is forced to choose between them. At first he follows the Second Stillman Senior, but then abruptly changes his mind and rushes after the first:

For no reason, he went to his left, in pursuit of the second Stillman. After nine or ten paces, he stopped. Something told him he would live to regret what he was doing. He was acting out of spite, spurred on to punish the second Stillman for confusing him. He turned around and saw the first Stillman shuffling off in the other direction. Surely this was his man. This shabby creature, so broken down and disconnected from his surroundings – surely this was the mad Stillman. (Auster, 2004b:56)

From this point onwards Auster introduces a series of events that lead Quinn further away from his reality. He leaves his apartment, abandoning everything he knows and literally spends days living in an alley-dumpster. He becomes obsessed with following Stillman Senior and in doing so he completes the ritual necessary for him to transgress the final boundary between the fictive world and Auster's *Scriptorium*. Auster (2004b:72) tells us that Quinn has arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words.

Through Stillman Senior, Auster again addresses issues that arise between a character and his author. Stillman Senior embodies fictionality and directly comments on his status as a fictional character. In one conversation he has with Quinn, Stillman Senior says: "Most people don't pay attention to such things. They think of words as stones, as great unmoveable objects with no life, as monads that never change" (Auster, 2004:75). Characters are constructed out of words put down on paper and without language and words and the ability to write down these

words there would be no characters. A character's very existence, therefore, depends on a language and on specific words which define them. Stillman's statement could be interpreted to mean that most readers, and writers, think of characters as limited imaginary beings. They think of these characters as objects with no life of their own and no existence beyond the pages of the novel and as they are written during a specific time and into a specific novel, their lives will never change, they are destined to exist in the exact same states for eternity, or at least for as long as there are readers to read their story.

Being fictional means being constructed out of language, out of words and Stillman continuously makes Quinn aware of the fact that they are merely words, but he also expresses the hope that words are capable of change and not just dead objects. Language, in this sense, is a living organism. In her article "Triangular Strategies: Cross-Mapping the Curious Spaces of Siri Hustvedt, Paul Auster and Sophie Calle", Christina Ljungberg writes the following: "Alone the power of words, of word transformation, can rescue, resuscitate or recreate something or somebody from oblivion" (2007:125). Stillman's aim is to find a way to adapt to changes, to still be significant no matter in what time or age he finds himself; he wants to become timeless. Once characters disappear from this space and enter Auster's *Scriptorium* time will no longer be a deciding factor in their lives. Stillman, therefore, is one of the characters, along with Peter, who is working towards a new reality, a reality that will stretch beyond their existence, as we know it, into infinity. Stillman says to Quinn: "Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost" (Auster, 2004b:77). Quinn needs to accept the changes in his life, he needs to embody these changes and make it a part of himself, freeing himself from the constructs placed on him as a fictional character that has been written into a specific story, during a specific time and for a specific reason by an author. Stillman



Senior disappears from the novel after a few conversations and he does not return. Quinn needs to go through the last stages of his transgression alone.

As a desperate last resort Quinn tries to contact the real Paul Auster, the private detective who should have taken the case in the first place. This Paul Auster tells him that he must have the wrong address and Quinn replies: "You're the only one in the book" (Auster, 2004b:94). The only person who can truly help Quinn and rescue him from the dilemma in which he finds himself is Paul Auster, creator and writer of *City of Glass*. Writing a character called Paul Auster into the novel is a very cunning trick on Auster's part, because it not only thwarts Quinn, but also thwarts the reader. The Auster in the novel is only a character and, just like Quinn, he too will disappear once the novel has reached its end or once his role in the novel has been fulfilled. He cannot provide answers to the questions we, and Quinn, ask, because he is part of the tragedy Auster presents us with and he will share the same fate as Auster's other characters. Ljungberg writes the following:

Autobiography and its various fictional forms are, like rituals, by definition concerned with origin; they contain a sense of performance, and also, like rituals, they can claim to tell the truth: neither autobiographies nor ritualistic acts have to submit to any verification procedures – their truth claims are mimetically internalized. That is precisely what makes the texts by Hustvedt, Auster and Calle excellent objects of study as they verily perform ritual acts of remembrance and passage while, at the same time, their authors authenticate these acts by letting each other perform as *real* characters within their narratives of identity and selfhood. In so doing, they not only recontextualize rituals but also create a new and radical liminal space oscillating between fiction and fact, making the factual a dynamic and inclusive part of the fictive. (2007:115)

As a character Paul Auster, the Paul Auster in the novel that is, will have to go through the same rituals Quinn goes through in order to reach the next world. His journey is not described in this novel, however, but once one reads *Travels in the Scriptorium*, one cannot help but wonder whether the lead character of that novel, Mr. Blank, and the Paul Auster of this novel is not one

and the same person. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* he will be on the brink of entering a world and gaining a new sense of self. The significance of including himself in his novel also contributes to the relationship between reality and fiction, once again blurring the boundaries between these two worlds.

The fourth and final phase, according to Turner (1979:42-43) is a *reintegration* into a social group or that social; recognition and legitimization of the irreparable schism between the contesting parties will occur; the nature and intensity of the relations between parts, and the structure of the total field will have changed; opposites will now become alliances and closeness will have become distance. During this phase Quinn realises that he has lost everything and that he has absolutely nothing to go back to. The fictional reality contains nothing for him. Consider the following:

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, 2004b:104)

This is inevitably what each of Auster's characters needs to face before they are able to enter the world where at last they will be free from authority, where no author would be able to decide their fates and where they will no longer be merely fictional constructs to be used and manipulated to the whim of the author who created them. Quinn realises that he is no longer the same man he was before the event and that he has been recreated. When he sees his own image he thinks:

More than anything else, he reminded himself of Robinson Crusoe, and he marvelled at how quickly these changes had taken place in him. It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. He tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult. He looked at this new Quinn and shrugged. It did not really matter. He had been one thing before, and now he was another. (Auster, 2004b:121)

The phases are complete and Quinn is now ready to transgress the final boundary between the liminal world and the *Scriptorium*. It is only fitting that he returns to the Stillmans' apartment, the place where his journey began, and this is where he disappears. The apartment is described as follows: "The place had been stripped bare, and the rooms now held nothing" (Auster, 2004b:127). Again the apartment provides a doorway between worlds.

Of all of Auster's characters, Quinn's journey through the liminal space is one of the most riveting and endearing stories we read about, because Auster places us inside Quinn, shares each and every experience he has with us and we feel as though we go through the motions alongside him and as if we, too, fail him in some way. We fail simply because we cannot understand or derive meaning from the text, since there is no meaning to derive, as Auster writes in the very beginning of the novel, there is simply an event and its consequences. Quinn is only the first of many characters who will transgress the boundaries of Auster's fiction:

For every soul lost in this particular hell, there are several others locked inside madness – unable to exit to the world that stands at the threshold of their bodies. Even though they seem to be there, they cannot be counted as present. (Auster, 2004b:109-110)

Characters are fictional constructs. They seem to be a part of our world, because as we read about them we do not see them as mere words, they come alive in our imaginations, they exist for as long as the pages in a novel lasts. Their bodies therefore, run parallel to the bodies of a text and once the text has reached its end they face a threshold between that world, the world into which they have been written, and the next, the world where neither reader nor writer can follow, the *Scriptorium*. Characters seem to be present, yet they are eternally absent.

*Ghosts*

Auster incorporates visual effects and visual spaces into his novels to enhance his characters' identities and the liminal process through which they go before entering his *Scriptorium*. He does this by placing his characters in rooms where they are isolated and shut off from the rest of society and he also correlates weather changes with the moods or phases in his characters' lives. When they do eventually venture outside they mostly find themselves alone in abandoned, almost dystopian, landscapes. Little attention is paid to interactions between the character and society and characters usually identify with some or other aspect of nature or structure in the world. In Auster's novel *Moon Palace* (1989), for example, the main protagonist spends some time living in New York's Central Park:

I slept in the park every night after that. It became a sanctuary for me, a refuge of inwardness against the grinding demands of the streets. There were eight hundred and forty acres to roam in, and unlike the massive gridwork of buildings and towers that loomed outside the perimeter, the park offered me the possibility of solitude, of separating myself from the rest of the world. (Auster, 2004a:55)

Similarly, in Auster's 2008 novel *Man in the Dark*, one of the protagonists finds himself in a dystopian city and as the story unfolds and circumstances become dire, the city begins to fall apart:

They have come to a wealthy suburban street of large Tudor houses with pristine front lawns, tulip beds, forsythia and rhododendron bushes, the myriad trappings of the good life. As he climbs out of the jeep and looks down the block, however, he notices that several houses are standing in ruins: broken windows, charred walls, gaping holes in the facades. Abandoned husks where people once lived. (Auster, 2009:63)

Auster's characters, therefore, usually find themselves in spaces that correlate directly with their emotional and physical states. If they need to reconstruct their identities, they find themselves in

worlds that also need to be reconstructed, and when they isolate themselves they go to spaces where humanity has little significance.

In *Ghosts* a private detective, Blue, is commissioned by a man, White, to follow and observe the actions of another man, Black. From the onset of this part of the book Auster presents the reader with facts, conveying the story in as few words as possible and, once again, leaving the reader to decide for him/herself whether any meaning can be derived from the text.

As plainly stated in *The Locked Room*, the third and final book in *The New York Trilogy*, the three stories, in the end, are the same story, representing different stages in the narrator's awareness of what it is about:

The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. The same holds for the two books that come before it, *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about. I do not claim to have solved any problems. I am merely suggesting that a moment came when it no longer frightened me to look at what had happened. If words followed, it was only because I had no choice but to accept them, to take them upon myself and go where they wanted me to go. But that does not necessarily make the words important. I have been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle. (Auster, 2004b:294)

The struggle is certainly each main protagonist's struggle with his identity and his place in the world. All three stories follow a similar trend which ultimately leads to the disappearance of the protagonists after they have completely let go of everything that bound them to the world in which they lived. All three the protagonists need to let go of their identities and recreate themselves before moving on to Auster's *Scriptorium*. In "Wrong Numbers: The Endless Fiction of Auster and Deleuze and Guattari and..." Robert Briggs points out the following:

...a few points of correspondence can be found between the three stories, which could define Auster's collection as not so much a nonidentical or uncertain trilogy as rather a trilogy about the nonidentical and the

uncertain. So, although there is little continuity between genre and character, there is a certain persistence of duplicitous identities. (2003:216)

It is obvious that there are a few similarities and differences between the characters Quinn and Blue. Quinn breaks his bonds with society even before the novel begins by isolating himself and writing under a pseudonym. Moreover, he feels out of tune with reality and everything in the world, considering himself an outsider from the very beginning of the novel and, ultimately, deciding to take on a case of which he should, in the first place, not be a part of. The events in *City of Glass*, therefore, can be seen as consequences of decisions made by Quinn and that he is responsible, in a way, for what happens to him. Quinn is also able to move freely in his world, there are no rules or constrictions placed on him by an authoritative figure (except by the author of the novel), which prohibit him from doing what he wants to do. He is free to remain a member of society, yet chooses to become an outsider and isolate himself.

Blue, however, is a character forced by his career to isolate himself and what happens to him cannot be viewed as his own choice, but rather the unpleasant consequences of the event described in *Ghosts*. Blue is a real private detective, bored with his job because nothing exciting has happened for a long time. Blue is also engaged to be married and very much in love. He is a normal man, trying to make a living with no reason to let go of his identity as he does have a place and a function in society, but when White contacts him and when he accepts the case he is forced to break all contact with the outside world and to work under cover, this is part of the job and for as long as the case lasts and he is paid by White, he is not allowed to function as a part of society. It is, therefore, his duty, as a private detective, to isolate himself and not make contact with anyone outside of the case. This can be seen in the following example:

White leaves the office, and a moment later Blue picks up the phone and calls the future Mrs Blue. I'm going under cover, he tells his sweetheart.

Don't worry if I'm out of touch for a little while. I'll be thinking of you the whole time. (Auster, 2004b:138)

He does not intend to break off his relationship with the future Mrs Blue and as far as he is concerned it would only be for a little while, after which he would be able to go on with his life as he did before. Blue, therefore, enters Turner's first phase of public conflict, namely the breach of regular norm-governed social relations, only after he accepts the case and breaks contact with his loved ones and everything pertaining to his life. He enters this first phase not out of choice, but rather out of duty.

Blue, from the very beginning, knows that White is pretending to be someone else, but his job is not to investigate White and he gets paid to observe Black and, therefore, he decides to ignore his misgivings and do what he gets paid to do without thinking about the true meanings behind the case. He has no information about Black as White does not say why Black should be followed, but Blue feels that it would become clear as time passes and that he, eventually, would understand why Black needs to be watched. This also is a marked difference between *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, since Stillman Senior is sketched as a threat to his son and needs to be watched in case he attempts to murder or harm his son, but Black is not sketched as posing a threat to anyone and no reasons are given as to why White wants him observed.

Black remains a mysterious, unfathomable, figure throughout the whole novel, but we, the readers, just like Blue expect that we would come to understand Black and know why he is important as we progress through the novel. Consider the following:

But the present is no less dark than the past, and its mystery is equal to anything the future might hold. Such is the way of the world: one step at a time, one word and then the next. There are certain things that Blue cannot possibly know at this point. For knowledge comes slowly, and when it comes, it is often at great personal expense. (Auster, 2004b:138)

In this passage Blue is the subject, he is the one who will experience personal loss and it is clear that the story centres on Blue and the changes he will undergo. White and Black, and all the other marginal characters, will only have secondary roles; this is not their story and they only serve to contribute to the plot by enabling events to unfold. In *City of Glass*, Auster presents the story in such a way that the reader is under the impression that the story deals with Peter Stillman and Stillman Senior (Senior appears to be the primary subject) and that we, the readers, along with Quinn will solve the case. *Ghosts*, from the very beginning makes it clear that the story is not about the case, but rather about Blue and his identity in the world.

As previously stated the characters in *Ghosts* remain in rooms, isolated and shut off from the outside world. When they do venture outside they find themselves in landscapes void of people which foreground the notion of “blankness” and the idea that they find themselves in a space which still needs to be developed and still needs to be defined. Once again, an apartment serves as the doorway between the fictional reality and the liminal world Blue enters. The apartment is described as follows:

It's a small studio apartment on the third floor of a four-storey brownstone. Blue is happy to see that it's fully equipped, and as he walks around the room inspecting the furnishings, he discovers that everything in the place is new: the bed, the table, the chair, the rug, the linens, the kitchen supplies, everything. There is a complete set of clothes hanging in the closet, and Blue, wondering if the clothes are meant for him, tries them on and sees that they fit. (Auster, 2004b:139)

As in *City of Glass*, this apartment marks the beginning of the liminal phase, Turner's second phase of public conflict. Once Blue enters it, he has stepped over the threshold between the world he has lived and functioned in his entire life and the new world, the liminal world. This will be his home and the primary space in which he exists until his disappearance from the page



at the end of *Ghosts*. Everything in the apartment, even his clothes, is new because Blue enters a new reality and world in which he will have to redefine himself.

Black's apartment can be seen through Blue's window which becomes a boundary separating Blue from Black. Auster incorporates many such boundaries between the characters. They live in different apartment buildings with a street between these buildings and Blue can only observe through a window and never observe from a closer vantage point. During the first stages of the case Black seldom, if ever, ventures from his apartment and consequently Blue is thereby forced to remain inside the apartment since he is not allowed to abandon his post.

Auster separates these two characters for a reason. Since Blue is the main protagonist and the story is about his transgression through the different phases of liminality it is necessary that he is separated from all other characters. Black functions in another reality, because Blue is the only person trapped in the liminal space, it is thus impossible to share a physical space with Black. There is always some kind of barrier that separates Blue from Black. Consider the following:

Parting the curtains of the window, he looks out and sees Black sitting at a table in his room across the street. To the extent that Blue can make out what is happening, he gathers that Black is writing. A look through the binoculars confirms that he is. The lenses, however, are not powerful enough to pick up the writing itself, and even if they were, Blue doubts that he would be able to read the handwriting upside down. (Auster, 2004b:139)

Blue can only observe Black from a distance. The binoculars is yet another barrier between the two characters as Blue needs to watch Black through a lens and even this cannot shed light on what Black is reading and writing: "Without being able to read what Black has written, everything is a blank so far. Perhaps he's a madman, Blue thinks..." (Auster, 2004b:140). Blue can only speculate. He is in fact trying to read Black through his observations, but as Black is

inscrutable he becomes a blank entity, creating informational gaps in the text, gaps which Blue attempts to fill using his imagination, much like the reader tries to fill the gaps in the text using his imagination. Consider the following: "...it is merely a blank stare, signifying thought rather than seeing, a look that makes things invisible, that does not let them in" (Auster, 2004b:139). The only thoughts revealed to us are Blue's thoughts, whereas Black and White's thoughts remain unknown and will never be revealed as can be seen from the following example:

For to watch someone read and write is in fact to do nothing. The only way for Blue to have a sense of what is happening is to be inside Black's mind, to see what he is thinking, and that of course is impossible. (Auster, 2004b:141)

Auster continues to thwart the reader into believing that some light will be shed on who Black is and why he is important, but if we read closely there are subtle hints throughout the novel that indicate that we will never know.

Auster also incorporates time into the novel, correlating "day" and "night" with Blue's state of mind and emotions. When darkness falls, Blue enters a state of despair: "As time passes, Blue grows more and more discouraged. He's not used to sitting around like this, and with the darkness closing in on him now, it's beginning to get on his nerves" (Auster, 2004b:141). His inner self is described as "dark" (Auster, 2004b:145) and "unexplored" (Auster, 2004b:145), but as a new day dawns, however, and light enters the apartment Blue is filled with renewed hope and motivation: "Blue, ever the optimist, wakes up the next morning in a cheerful mood. Outside snow is falling on the quiet street, and everything has turned white" (Auster, 2004b:142).

The colour "white" is incorporated into the text in such a way that it enlightens characters, but at the same time it also hides details. Characters such as Peter Stillman and White appear as "blank" and unfilled figures. Snow also signifies a new day, fresh with new

possibilities, but at the same time it is the beginning of winter, which is known as the barren and deadly month of the year. When snow begins to fall in *Ghosts*, Blue enters the third phase, namely the phase of *redressive action*. During this phase Blue truly is in between worlds and the crisis escalates. His isolation forces him to turn towards himself and to explore those areas of his life which he previously neglected:

Until now, Blue has not had much chance for sitting still, and this new idleness has left him at something of a loss. For the first time in his life, he finds that he has been thrown back on himself, with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next. He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity... (Auster, 2004b:145)

While Blue is watching Black he becomes acutely aware of his own characteristics and his own identity and finally he deduces that while he is watching Black he is, in fact, also watching himself. Black acts as a mirror image to Blue. Everything Black does, Blue does too: when Black is reading, Blue is reading Black; when Black is writing, Blue is writing reports to White; and when Black is eating, Blue becomes aware of his own hunger.

Even when he ventures outside of the apartment he is surrounded by silence and the only other character present is Black, but as Black cannot share Blue's physical space his presence is only acknowledged through the footprints he leaves behind:

It is a windless morning, so still that he can hear the snow falling on the branches of the trees. No one else is about, and Black's shoes have made a perfect set of tracks on the white pavement. (Auster, 2004b:142)

Black's footprints lead Blue into a fixed direction and though his intentions remain unvoiced he is the one who leads Blue from the page and makes Blue aware of the fact that there is more to this world and to Blue's life. Here the outside landscapes and environments correlate directly with Blue's inner turmoil and his struggle to make sense of it all.

“Black” is a colour of things hidden or obscured and this can be linked directly with Blue’s own unknown inner self as this is repeatedly described as a dark and unknown entity.

Paul Jahshan, in his article “Paul Auster’s Specters”, introduces the notion that

...the mirror image and/or the double are treated as signifiers used to point to signifieds, be they moralistic, aesthetic, or, at best, existentialist. In such readerly activities, readers are hardly taxed beyond their ability to just *understand* and *consume* a message. One of the key points of postmodernity and of post-structurality was the realization, probably for the first time in the history of literature, that the signifier only and ultimately points to itself. The vertiginous and writerly glance at the abyss opening up when the signified is finally seen as infinitely deferred and hence forever unattainable is allegorized most effectively by the mirror image with which Auster constructs a meta-literary, virtual representation of a writing looking back at itself. (2003:392)

Black represents a part of Blue, the hidden dark part. He is the inner self which Blue must face in order to transgress into the *Scriptorium*. At first we, the readers, do not read *Ghosts* as a story about one man, but rather as a story about three, or at least two, men. It is not clear, from the beginning, that these three men finally merge into one and that they all (Blue, Black and White) are finally one and the same man. Blue is the liminal figure, the one that has to escape his past and go through the motions that would lead him to a future beyond the text. Black represents the fictional figure, the man who cannot break free of the boundaries fiction imposes on him and who keeps Blue grounded to his own fictionality. White represents the figure that will transgress all boundaries and exist beyond the text.

Black and White are the signifiers in *Ghosts* and they continuously point back to Blue, the signified. These characters signify change and choices, much like the two Stillman Seniors in *City of Glass*, they represent two possible outcomes in Blue’s life. Each character represents a different reality and a different outcome.

Outside of the apartment there are also environmental factors which are significant in the liminal space. The white snow is used as a direct barrier between Blue and Black and can be seen as a barrier between fiction and truth. As Black can be seen as Blue's own mirror image, Black represents the Blue that is of the old world, the fictive world and the world out of which Blue breaks free and from which he transcends into the liminal space from where he will again transcend into Auster's *Scriptorium* once he disappears from the page. Consider the following:

Because of the snow, visibility is poor, and Blue has trouble deciphering what is happening in Black's room. 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, 2004b:143)

Snow, here, obscures Blue's view of the world and hides Black's true identity, who, as it turns out, is in fact also White. White, in this regard can be seen as the "inner" Blue and his *self* who commissions him to investigate his own identity in order to break free from the bonds fiction imposes over him. This is why there are no replies given to his reports on Black, because Blue needs to face the truth on his own and decide for himself what meaning, if any, can be derived from his investigation into Black's doings. Little writes the following:

White is thus not simply the dis-figured figure of dis-figurement but moreover an elusive, blinding figure with the unfathomable dimensions of a white whale. Not exclusively a primary color of integrity and unity, white is also the color of nothing, a color that deconstructs or shipwrecks the metaphysical longing for a unified origin or original union. Indeed, white shows up in the story as the sign of a duplicitous or impossible nonorigin. (1997:152)

As white is a colour which symbolises "nothing" it enhances the idea of liminality in that it shrouds anything solid into shades of grey. It is the colour behind which characters hide, the characters appear "blank" with no personalities or true identities, and the incorporation of this colour into the novel as an element shrouding meaning prevents the protagonist, along with the

reader, from discovering who these other characters truly are and what their true motives are.

There are countless examples referring to the non-origin of Black and White, one of which is:

...he looks Black in the eyes, but Black gives nothing away, looking back at Blue with utter blankness, dead eyes that seem to say there is nothing behind them and that no matter how hard Blue looks, he will never find a thing. (Auster, 2004b:181)

The origins of Black and White, along with that of the two Stillmans, will never be discovered, and it is thus fair to say that they are in a state of “nonorigin”. Jahshan (2003:399) argues that White represents the ultimate deferral of meaning which cannot be caught but can be arrived at through the mirror image, namely Black.

Black can be seen as the character that represents Blue's prior self, his identity before the case, whereas White can be seen as representing the unlimited possibilities of the person Blue can become in the future. Black also represents a limited persona, whereas White is filled with unlimited possibilities stretching beyond Blue's true self.

If Black and White are, in fact, merely extensions of Blue's own personality and in a sense his other “selves” they have no fixed origin as they are derived purely from Blue's mind. Their existence depends solely on Blue's awareness of them and this fact dawns on him as the story progresses:

He lies down on his bed and thinks: goodbye, Mr White. You were never really there, were you? There never was such a man as White. And then: poor Black. Poor soul. Poor blighted no one. (Auster, 2004b:184)

They exist, because he exists and once he discovers his own potential and breaks free from the bonds imposed on him by his fictional status they will disappear and in a sense merge with him to again become one person. As Blue has no contact with White, his only connection with this particular extension of his personality is through Black, so that in order for him to discover the

part White represents, he needs to find the truth behind Black and, firstly, deal with Black's part of the extension.

Auster, therefore, directly addresses investigative processes in *Ghosts* by forcing Blue to investigate himself and turn back on himself in order to discover all the "black", unknown areas in his life. This would finally lead him to his identity as White, who represents his enlightened self and without whom an encompassing whole can never be reached.

Blue, finally, confronts Black head-on and discovers that the manuscript Black was working on is in fact the reports he, himself, has sent to White. He breaks through the barriers that separated him from Black and enters Black's apartment. This fourth, and final, phase therefore signifies Blue's awareness of his link to the other two characters as parts of himself. He kills Black, killing the very link that binds him to the world contained in the novel and freeing himself, finally, from all aspects that rendered him incapable of rising above all expectations of him. After Blue kills Black, he leaves the liminal space, disappearing from the page, and transcends into the *Scriptorium*:

But the story is not yet over. There is still the final moment and that will not come until Blue leaves the room. Such is the way of the world: not one moment more, not one moment less. When Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door, that will be the end of it... For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing. (Auster, 2004b:197-198)

This marks the end of our journey through the text, because once Blue disappears from the pages of Auster's fiction he enters the *Scriptorium* where no reader can follow. His presence, however, remains palpable and Auster highlights the notion that the postmodern age encourages us to think beyond that which we can know with certainty and that which we can experience. We should,

rather, embrace the unknown and accept that some questions in life just never will have answers.

Jahshan emphasises this when he argues that:

This is when the lessons of postmodernism, learnt and acknowledged, have to give place to a new vision which can cater to the exigencies of our present age. This is the final stage where even postmodernism *must* disappear. This is the reason why, in *Ghosts*, something also finally happens. Blue has begun leading “the semblance of an independent life,” and is now “in the dark.” Blue *disappears*, even as voice, and melts into the void of his own writing. He becomes yet another *spectre*, a *ghost*. (2003:403-404)

*Ghosts*, like most of Auster's fiction, has an open ending, because for these stories there can be no definitive endings. We, as the readers of the text, can only speculate where these characters will find themselves once their fiction has come to an end and, as Auster says again and again, we can only decide for ourselves what meaning can be derived from the text and whether or not it means anything at all. No end, therefore, is possible if we cannot decide for ourselves what this end would be.

### *The Locked Room*

One very important, if not the most important, notion found in all three parts of the trilogy is the idea that what the reader is dealing with is a work of fiction and that Auster repeatedly emphasizes the fictionality of his characters throughout the text so that the reader cannot deny that they are reading about fictional constructs functioning in a fictional world. This, however, serves to blur the boundaries found between our reality and the fictional reality found in the novels, an important aspect of metafiction. Bran Nicol explores this notion in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* when he states that

...the most characteristic formal practice in postmodern fiction is what is known as *metafiction*, fiction that in some way foregrounds its own status as a fictional construct. Metafiction is essentially an ironic form in that it



demonstrates that we cannot accept the *reality* we are presented with in a novel at face value. The story is undermined by its form, by the *way* in which it is told. (2002:6)

Once we realise that we cannot accept the reality we are presented with at face value a new world opens up before us and we are allowed to enter the liminal space along with the characters as we, too, need to find a balance between these two worlds in order for us to make sense of it and understand what is being conveyed.

Auster does not explicitly highlight the notion of fiction and fictionality in *The Locked Room* as he does in the two previous parts of the trilogy. In this final part the narrator claims to be the author of all three parts of the trilogy, introducing the notion that all three parts are fictive, but at the same time it highlights the fact that this third, and final, part is the closest to the truth. This part of the novel is told in a much more realistic manner from the first person perspective of the unknown narrator and the very fact that this narrator claims to be the author of the preceding parts further serves to blur boundaries between fiction and reality as the reader might now begin to suspect that it is told by the real Paul Auster and that it conveys actual facts of this author's life. David Lodge comments on the blurring boundaries between fiction and fact in postmodern literature when he states that

...the literary text is always metaphoric in the sense that when we interpret it we apply it to the world as a total metaphor. This process of interpretation assumes a gap between the text and the world, between art and life, which postmodernist writing characteristically tries to short-circuit in order to administer a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary. Ways of doing this include: combining in one work violently contrasting modes – the obviously fictive and the apparently factual; introducing the author and the question of authorship into the text; and exposing conventions in the act of using them. (2002:269)

Once Auster introduces himself into the text the reader becomes more and more confused as to what, in the novel, can be regarded purely fictional and what should be viewed as fact. This

third part of the novel presents itself as more realistic, more believable to the reader and when we read that it tells the same story as the previous two parts we struggle to distinguish between fact and fiction. The first two parts of the novel come across as absurd, even unrealistic, and can be read as a figurative metaphor rather than factual, but the third part forces the reader to acknowledge that what we are reading about might very well be based on facts and that the first two parts were simply the narrator's attempts to make sense of everything that had happened to him. We then begin to wonder whether this narrator is not Paul Auster himself. In *The Locked Room*, for instance, the narrator-author remains unnamed, but he marries Sophie and they later have a son named Paul. Auster's daughter is Sophie Auster and his wife's initials are also S Auster. It becomes impossible to ignore Auster as the author of *The New York Trilogy* as he becomes more and more entangled with the text itself.

In *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* the boundary between our reality and the characters' worlds is fairly obvious and the transgression of the characters from their reality into the liminal space is foregrounded. Nicol also explains that

...metafiction encourages us to pursue the implications of this obvious fact to their logical conclusion: fiction is fictional, but no more so than reality. The effect of metafiction is to momentarily collapse the distinction between fiction and reality by causing the *outside world* to intrude into the world of the novel, as in the classic examples where the author suddenly appears *as himself*, breaking the illusion of reality, as in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985). But what follows from this is that the obverse also happens: the fictional world spills over into the real world. (2002:7)

In Auster's fiction the boundaries between fact and fiction become the very essence of the liminal spaces he creates in each of his novels, because in this space characters cling to their existence and their perceived realities, but at the same time they need to transgress to another level and go through phases in which they are forced to re-evaluate their lives and their

identities. These spaces force characters to confront their inner selves, to shun their pasts and to, finally, be reborn so that they can be introduced into a society where fiction does not limit them in any way.

From the very onset of *The Locked Room* the narrator faces the struggle between his supposed reality and the liminal space he is forced into in his quest to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of his friend and even though this is not the approach Auster encourages in the reader, this is finally what *The Locked Room* is all about: it is the story of a man struggling with his own identity and his place in the world he finds himself in. A man who finally realises that he is not the man he always thought he was and that his identity is dependent on factors beyond his control. And this change can only happen once he enters the liminal space, because liminality is the process of change and recreation. The narrator says: "... and as I write this now, I realize that even on that first day I had slipped through a hole in the earth, that I was falling into a place where I had never been before" (Auster, 2004b:205). This place is his own mind, and so, his mind becomes the metaphorical space in which *The Locked Room* takes place. In *The Locked Room* the narrator is controlled by Fanshawe, the invisible character that permeates this part of the text and who also, finally, as we come to the end of *The New York Trilogy* permeates the entire novel. Fanshawe also features as a key figure in Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

In *The Locked Room* space is both metaphorical and literal. The unknown narrator is approached by Fanshawe's wife after Fanshawe has been missing for a few months. Sophie commissioned a private detective named Quinn to help find her husband, but he has failed in his attempts and retracted from the investigation and when the narrator, later, tries to find Quinn, Quinn has disappeared and no trace of such a man can be found. Fanshawe wanted Sophie to give his manuscripts to the narrator, leaving the narrator in charge of the decision of whether his

work is good enough to publish, or whether it should be destroyed. Soon the narrator finds himself inarticulately linked with Fanshawe and as their lives begin to overlap they, in effect, merge and become one person.

*The Locked Room* effectively combines *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, because it relays how the narrator tries to find Fanshawe by following the trail he leaves behind and interviewing several people whose paths crossed with Fanshawe's path (*City of Glass*) and it relays how the narrator and Fanshawe, finally, merge as Fanshawe permeates every aspect of the narrator's life and takes over his thoughts (*Ghosts*). Fanshawe represents the past in the narrator's life, being his childhood friend, and the investigation also forces the narrator to reflect on his past and come to terms with many episodes which affected his life during past encounters. At the same time Fanshawe also represents the narrator's future self and the person he will become as the novel progresses.

The journey involves literal spaces as the narrator moves into Fanshawe's home, marries his wife, adopts his child and finds himself in spaces where he is separated from the real world and becomes trapped in the liminal space of Auster's novel. Space, however, also becomes metaphorical as the character Fanshawe begins to inhibit and invade the life and mind of the other character, the narrator. Roberta Rubenstein (2001:256) argues that the "hole" in the text that Auster described in *Ghosts*, in *The Locked Room*, becomes a different kind of metaphorical space. Fanshawe is not able to inhibit the narrator's body, but he can invade, and in a sense, take over his mind. Consider the following example:

Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning. From the moment his letter arrived, I had been struggling to imagine him, to see him as he might have been – but my mind had always conjured a blank. At best, there was one impoverished image: a door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in that room, condemned to a mythical solitude – living perhaps, breathing perhaps,

dreaming God knows what. This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull. (Auster, 2004b:292-293)

Fanshawe takes over the narrator's very being, but it is the narrator, himself, who allows this to happen: "For in this case it is the man himself who is the agent of his own destruction..." (Auster, 2004b:256). The narrator writes a biography of Fanshawe and as he tries to fill in all the blanks of Fanshawe's life and discover who Fanshawe truly is, or was, he becomes submerged in his friend's past and soon realises that his friend's past is linked with his own past and that what he writes in the biography is more a reflection on his own life and his own perceptions than it is on Fanshawe's life and perceptions:

Every life is inexplicable, I kept telling myself. No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling. To say that so and so was born here and went there, that he did this and did that, that he married this woman and had these children, that he lived, that he died, that he left behind these books or this battle or that bridge – none of that tells us very much. We all want to be told stories, and we listen to them in the same way we did when we were young. We imagine the real story inside the words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person in the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception. We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself. (Auster, 2004b:248-249)

Delving into Fanshawe's life, therefore, forces the narrator to acknowledge the limited knowledge he has about himself and soon he becomes trapped in the vestiges of his own mind, looking back on his past and reliving many moments that helped form the person he has finally become. Here, Auster introduces another aspect where fact and fiction merge, because the narrator soon realises that he is unable to relay the truth in the biography and that the biography, itself, becomes a work of fiction:

There was never any question of telling the truth. Fanshawe had to be dead, or else the book would make no sense. Not only would I have to leave the letter out, but I would have to pretend that it had never been written. I make no bones about what I was planning to do. It was clear to me from the beginning, and I plunged into it with deceit in my heart. The book was a work of fiction. Even though it was based on facts, it could tell nothing but lies. I signed the contract, and afterwards I felt like a man who had signed away his soul. (Auster, 2004b:248)

In this biography, as is the case with so many biographies since no writer can know another person exactly, fact spills over into fiction and fiction spills over into fact, merging our world with the narrator's created world. In the biography Fanshawe died, but the narrator knows that Fanshawe is still alive. Writing that he is deceased, to the narrator, feels as though he is, in effect, killing Fanshawe and if he kills Fanshawe he is also killing a part of himself. Consider the following:

...I was going to take a living man and put him in his grave. I was the chief mourner and officiating clergyman at this mock funeral, and my job was to speak the right words, to say the thing that everyone wanted to hear. The two actions were opposite and identical, mirror images of one another. But this hardly consoled me... the second fraud was serious, a dark frightening thing. I was digging a grave, after all, and there were times when I began to wonder if I was not digging my own. (Auster, 2004b:252)

Writing these lies goes against his moral values, but at the same time he knows it is necessary for the well-being of his marriage, his relationship with his children and his success as a writer. Fanshawe needs to be dead for him to lead the life he is living, but this opens recesses in his mind in which his identity shifts and changes and he can no longer recognise himself.

In this way his mind becomes the liminal space that separates him from the rest of society and keeps him separate from the people he loves and tries to protect. As he falls deeper and deeper into the recesses of his own thoughts, a barrier is erected between himself and the rest of the world: "This was the tangible evidence, the remains of a dead world. I had stepped into the

museum of my own past, and what I found there nearly crushed me” (Auster, 2004b:258). The narrator realises this when he goes to visit Fanshawe's mother and she leaves him alone in Fanshawe's room while she, along with Sophie and Ben (Fanshawe's son), goes to the garden outside. The narrator watches them from the room, but is separated from them by the window, a physical barrier separating fictional reality from the liminal space in which the narrator becomes trapped.

Direct communication through this barrier is impossible. This enhances the character's isolation from society (a liminal feature) and is presented as a physical barrier between the narrator and other characters. As events begin to unfold and the narrator becomes more and more trapped in the recesses of his own mind, however, these physical barriers will no longer be necessary as the liminal space in his mind, is one where only he can dwell and excludes his family and the rest of society. “Solitude became a passageway into the self, an instrument of discovery” (Auster, 2004b:278).

Again Turner's phases feature, because at first the narrator tries to justify his actions by convincing himself that he is acting on behalf of Sophie and ensuring a future for their son, as can be seen in the following passage: “...I argued to myself that keeping silent was the only way to protect her” (Auster, 2004b:241). This silence, however, creates a boundary between himself and the rest of society and only further compounds his isolation. Sophie complains that she can no longer reach him:

I can't get through to you anymore. You just don't hear what I'm saying... You're so close to being gone already. I sometimes think I can see you vanishing before my eyes... We're coming to the end, my darling, and you don't even know it. You're going to vanish, and I'll never see you again. (Auster, 2004b:286)

Our identities reside within our minds and Auster highlights this idea when he allows the narrator's mind to be taken over by Fanshawe. As the narrator's obsession with Fanshawe grows and he reaches the point where he loses touch with reality and what is palpable in his life, he loses the unique essence that identifies him and can only be found in his thoughts. The narrator therefore disappears because he is no longer the person he was; he is transformed into a new persona, a mixture of his old self and of the persona Fanshawe forces on him.

In *The Locked Room* Fanshawe is a ghostly presence, appearing and disappearing, disrupting the narrator's life, yet at the same time awakening those parts of him that would otherwise have been ignored and if ignored would have left him incomplete. In *The Ethics of Alterity*, Thomas Docherty comments on characterization in postmodern fiction and introduces the notion that

...the character is constantly disappearing from its own surface, constantly escaping the parameters which the text implies for its figuration: in short, the character is constantly "being there", constantly evading the fixity of a definite or identifiable and single "place" for itself. To this extent, it becomes the merest series of instantiations of subjectivity, rather than a characterological selfhood; it has no place, but a series of *dispositions*, as the parameters of its figuration shift and metamorphose in temporal sequence. (2002:367)

This is exactly what we find when we read *The Locked Room*, or in fact the whole of *The New York Trilogy*, since characters repeatedly appear only to disappear again before we can fully grasp their role in the novel and their importance in the novel. Fanshawe appears through the memories the narrator has of him, but soon these memories merge with the narrator's own persona so that it becomes unclear whether we are reading about Fanshawe or about the narrator himself. Fanshawe cannot be kept within the confines of the text, but rather enters and leaves continuously and so he evades interpretation. Fanshawe's "place" is not within this novel, but resides somewhere outside of the text.



The narrator, however, will never be able to escape Fanshawe as Fanshawe permeates into all aspects of his life. Fanshawe is present in his wife and adopted child, he permeates the house in which they live, he becomes their sustenance once they generate an income from his published works and, finally, when it appears that the narrator is breaking free of Fanshawe's grasp Fanshawe communicates directly with the narrator through letters: "Fanshawe stood apart from us, and yet he was the one who held us together, the one we approached to arbitrate our disputes, the one we could count on to be fair and to cut through the petty quarrels" (Auster, 2004b:212). Fanshawe, in this way, becomes a boundary between the narrator and everything in his "real" world and also becomes an excuse for the narrator to continue on the path that would lead to his disappearance and his loss of self.

The only way, therefore, that the narrator would be able to have some semblance of individuality and regain some control of his own actions and thoughts would be to accommodate Fanshawe within his mind. The narrator needs to let Fanshawe take control, if not he would remain an outsider; a mere spectator of events. Consider the following:

The house wouldn't make room for me, and by the third day I sensed that I was no longer alone, that I could never be alone in that place. Fanshawe was there, and no matter how hard I tried not to think about him, I couldn't escape. This was unexpected, galling. Now that I had stopped looking for him, he was more present to me than ever before. The whole process had been reversed. After all these months of trying to find him, I felt as though I was the one who had been found. (Auster, 2004b:292)

In the above passage the focus is placed on the narrator, his feelings and emotions and struggle with Fanshawe's presence in his life. Even though Auster gives the impression that *The Locked Room* is about Fanshawe and why he disappeared, in the end, it circles back to the narrator and the narrator's identity. This is typical of postmodern anti-detective novels, as StephanoTani, in *The Doomed Detective*, writes:

The detective of the anti-detective story no longer has the detachment... Unwillingly, he gets emotionally caught in the net of his detecting effort and is torn apart between the upsurge of feelings and the necessity for rationality. The detective's relationship with the mystery or with the crime cannot be impersonal any more, suggesting that something unexpected (not an expected solution) awaits the reader at the end of the fiction. (2002:321)

In *The New York Trilogy* all three "detectives" become emotionally involved with the case they are working on. They become personally invested in the event to such an extent that it takes control of their very lives. In the end all three parts deal with their personal discoveries of selves, instead of with the initial mysteries presented to us, as readers, in the beginning of each story. These initial mysteries are necessary as they force each character into the spaces in which they become isolated, shut off from society and can finally transgress the boundaries of fiction. Each of these characters also, finally, chooses to let go of the mystery and abandon their quest, and this also is an important aspect of anti-detective fiction. Tani argues that

...the anti-detective is like the Kierkegaardian ironist who knows that the only way to remain free (not imprisoned in the fiction and its serialization) and somehow superhuman is to choose not to choose (not to solve the mystery), since choice is a limitation of freedom and of the power of creativity as it turns the potential into the actual. To choose not to choose is the widest choice the anti-detective can make, because to let the mystery exist does not restrict his freedom to a single choice and, at the same time, potentially implies all solutions without choosing any. The anti-detective arrives reluctantly at this non-solution, however, forced to it by the proliferation of meanings (clues) in the events he goes through; at the same time, even if unwillingly, he or she still transcends in a single sweep the honourable but limited victories of an endless career, since here, too, not to choose is to allow all outcomes. (2002:324)

Quinn disappears at the end of *City of Glass* after choosing to abandon the case, Blue disappears after killing Black and, in effect, eliminating the case altogether while the narrator of *The Locked Room* destroys Fanshawe's red notebook, tearing out each page and throwing it in a dustbin, eliminating the truth as well as Fanshawe's existence. *The Locked Room* ends with the

possibility that the narrator will be reintroduced into society and that he breaks all bonds with Fanshawe as he destroyed the notebook, but we know the narrator is no longer the same man and that it will be impossible to go back to the life he lead before Fanshawe entered and disrupted everything. Fanshawe disappears from the page, but his words will always reside within the narrator's mind and with this end comes a new beginning:

All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seem to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity... He answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again. (Auster, 2004b:313)

It remains open, unfinished and to be started again, because the narrator (after the novel has come to its end) will enter a new world, where he will have to function without an author, he will have to survive on his own terms. A new journey begins for this narrator, a journey beyond *The New York Trilogy*.

And so, *The New York Trilogy* opens a doorway into Auster's fictional world, his *Scriptorium*. It gives us a glimpse into this world, but at the same time it excludes us and shuts us out. The readers cannot know where these characters disappeared to, we can only speculate. We can also, finally, ask ourselves why Auster writes about these characters and what functions they fulfil. A possible answer is that they inevitably lead to a world where fiction and reality merge to become one, one world in which author, reader and character can live and function together. These characters disappear from the pages of Auster's fiction, because they cannot, indefinitely, exist on mere pages, but they also cannot exist within our sense of what is real. They need to be aware of their fictionality and then transgress to a world where fiction becomes real, a world solely in

the imagination of the author and later in the imagination of the reader, and thus a world restricted to the mind. Imagination, as we all know however, is limitless and filled with infinite possibilities.

## **Chapter 3**

# **Connecting Different Worlds**

*In the Country of Last Things*

It has so far been established that Auster creates a very unique fictive world in which his characters function. In this world certain events force the character to investigate his inner self, abandon everything he knows and values, recreate himself and, finally, transgress the boundaries between that which is written and that which stretches beyond the page and can only exist within the world of our imagination. The worlds the characters find themselves in shift and evolve along with the characters' transgression phases and buildings, outdoor locations and even natural elements such as the weather play an important role on each character's awareness of the self. This is also crucial when one reads Auster's entire range of works and tries to uncover the mystery he presents us with. These characters need to be alive, they need to exist and although they are fictional constructs the reader needs to be aware that they are fictional constructs breaking free from conventional fictionality and entering a new capacity of literature which surpasses that which we can read and know.

What makes Auster's novels unique is that although each novel tells a separate story, they even take place in different locations and during different times, each novel is subtly linked to another in order to finally create a conglomerate whole, a fictive world that encompasses not only a few characters, but all the characters as well as their creator, Paul Auster. The characters (such as Quinn and Peter Stillman in *City of Glass*, Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*, and David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*) haunt his novels; they are invisible yet present and their very silence carries with it a voice much more prominent than would otherwise have been possible. Like Virginia Woolf's novels, Auster's novels convey the unspeakable onto the page by making the reader aware that not everything can be said, not every character can command the same amount of attention and that there are gaps within the narratives which can only be filled using one's own imagination.

It is clear that Auster not only conveys the unspeakable in his fiction, but that this is also something he looks for in other works and something which he values in other writers. He mentions the importance of this in two of his critical essays: firstly, in his 1975 essay *The Poetry of Exile* on the poet Paul Celan when he writes: “The unspeakable yields a poetry that continually threatens to overwhelm the limits of what can be spoken. For Celan forgot nothing, forgave nothing” (Auster, 2010:352), while in his 1976 essay *Innocence and Memory* on poet Giuseppe Ungaretti he writes: “...Ungaretti’s poetic source is silence, and in one form or another, all his work is an expression of the inexhaustible difficulty of expression itself” (Auster, 2010:360). Auster is very much aware of the fact that not everything can be said, that words limit expression and this theme is given shape and developed in all of his novels.

When we read about characters we are given the bare necessities of information, the novels begin with an event and little is said about these characters’ histories and lives before this event takes place. Also, his novels centre on one character and little information is given about other characters. These secondary characters’ thoughts and emotions are not shared and they cause gaps within the narrative structure of the novel. This, however, enables the reader to fill these gaps using his own imagination and so each reading is thus unique and depends on the reader’s personal interpretation of the text.

When considering the importance of characters that disappear and reappear throughout Auster’s work, we should consider the following question: Why is it important to identify the connections between Auster’s different novels and what is the contribution of each character, whether the main protagonist or a marginal character, to the creation of meaning derived from Auster’s *oeuvre*?

I shall illustrate how certain characters provide links between various novels and contribute to the idea that Auster's *oeuvre* should be read as a whole instead of separate, individual, novels, by taking a closer look at his 1987 novel *In the Country of Last Things*. This novel tells the story of a woman who enters a city and finds herself in a desolate, dystopian space in which she would have to change her whole life in order to survive. Anna Blume is the main protagonist, yet we know that there is an unknown narrator who remains in the background throughout the novel and we are also presented with significant secondary characters whose stories are never told. Some of these characters, such as Samuel Farr, however, become central figures in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The story, however, is related to us by means of the letter Anna writes and she, herself, is vividly aware of the fact that there are gaps in her narration, that it would be impossible to relate events exactly as they happened and that her side of the story would never be the complete story, but merely her own personal and partial version of it. Memory, also, becomes a factor that interferes with the accuracy of what she writes down. Consider the following:

Bear with me. I know that I sometimes stray from the point, but unless I write down things as they occur to me, I feel I will lose them for good. My mind is not quite what it used to be. It is slower now, sluggish and less nimble, and to follow even the simplest thought very far exhausts me. This is how it begins, then, in spite of my efforts. The words come only when I think I won't be able to find them anymore, at the moment I despair of ever bringing them out again. Each day brings the same struggle, the same blankness, the same desire to forget and then not to forget. When it begins, it is never anywhere but here, never anywhere but at this limit that the pencil begins to write. The story starts and stops, goes forward and then loses itself, and between each word, what silences, what words escape and vanish, never to be seen again. (Auster, 2005:38)

This passage highlights the notion that Anna does not share everything that happens to her, but merely the things that she can remember at the time she is writing the letter. It would be impossible to know what things she might have forgotten and so *In the Country of Last*



*Things* becomes a novel which we should approach by reading between the lines. The information Anna gives enables us to connect certain episodes and to piece together a thread that runs through the novel, but many gaps remain to be filled exclusively using our imagination. Palmer (2004:34) writes that story-worlds differ ontologically from the real world because they are incomplete and that every story contains ontological gaps. He stipulates that

...no discourse could ever be long enough to say in its story all that could be said about the whole storyworld. So, fiction is necessarily incomplete and full of blanks where nothing is said about a part of the storyworld and gaps where something but not everything is said. (Palmer, 2004:34)

This is even more prominent in works, such as *In the Country of Last Things* or *The New York Trilogy*, in which we find a homogeneous narrator and only one specific point of view is presented to the reader. Only one character's story is told and the secondary or marginal characters are not granted a voice of their own. Anna admits that the story of the city, of everything that happens in the city and how things have come to be as they are, is too big for her to tell. She would never be able to fill in all the gaps left in her narrative and her letter will evoke questions that, quite possibly, would never be answered: "The story is so big, you understand, it's impossible for any one person to tell it" (Auster, 2005:102). This is all the more reason to pay particular attention to the secondary characters as well, because even though they do not have voices of their own, their actions (described by Anna) might reveal a lot about the city and people in the city and it might also explain what effects this dystopian landscape has on the people who inhabit it. These people disappear into the background of the text, yet it is this very fact that forces us to look for them and acknowledge their presence in the text.

It is important to remind oneself of the difference between fiction and reality, and also to remember what fictionality entails. Schmid (2010:30) stipulates that being fictive means

being represented only and that literary fiction is a representation of a world which implies no direct relationship between what is represented and a real extra-literary world. Characters are merely figures represented on the page through the use of words, they consist out of language and are not physical entities which we can see or feel in our reality. They, therefore, merely represent a world and its inhabitants, but can never be of this (our) world and part of its inhabitants: “Fiction consists in making, in the construction of an invented, possible world” (Schmid, 2010:30). Although we are aware of the fictionality of Auster’s characters and that they do not exist and function as we exist and function, it is necessary, for the enjoyment of his novels, to believe that they are real and to let them become real in our imaginations. The blurring of boundaries between what is real and what is fictive becomes especially important in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. This is the novel which will combine all of Auster’s previous novels into a whole. However, even here Auster leaves an open ending, leaving the impression that this novel is not the end and not the final explanation:

It will never end. For Mr. Blank is one of us now, and struggle though he might to understand his predicament, he will always be lost. I believe I speak for all his charges when I say he is getting what he deserves – no more, no less. Not as a form of punishment, but as an act of supreme justice and compassion. Without him, we are nothing, but the paradox is that we, the figments of another mind, will outlive the mind that made us, for once we are thrown into the world, we continue to exist forever, and our stories go on being told, even after we are dead. (Auster, 2009:144)

In this paragraph, Fanshawe, the silent character of *The Locked Room* is the narrator and Mr. Blank is Paul Auster himself. This novel presents us with Auster’s characters in direct relation to their fictional aspects (which will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation), because in this novel we cannot deny them their fictionality and at the same time their very fictionality brings them to life and closer to our reality. They no longer exist only on the pages of fiction, but as characters aware of the fact that they are merely figments of another mind, dependent on

someone else's imagination, yet at the same time the very fact that they are aware of this grants them the ability to break free and transgress the boundaries fiction imposes on them.

Readers need to believe that what they are reading is real, even if stories take place during highly unlikely circumstances or in a world which we know does not exist. Schmid writes the following:

...the absence of a direct relationship between text and extra-textual world does not, in any way, mean that the fictive world is irrelevant for the reader or, indeed, even that it is less relevant than the real world. On the contrary, the fictive world can attain the highest significance for the reader. The reader can engage with the innertextual referents, e.g. characters and their actions, as with real, individual, concrete entities, even when s/he is aware of their fictivity... Fictive objects do not differ from real ones through any kind of thematic or formal features, but only through a characteristic that cannot be observed in them themselves: that they do not exist in the real world. (2010:30-31)

This passage illustrates how a reader must be able to live, for the duration of the reading process, within the fictional world and in his imagination he must, in a sense, be able to experience the events along with the characters, which is the most pleasurable aspect when reading a novel. Novels provide an escape from our reality and allow us to enter other worlds and experience other things we are not able to experience in our own lives. The reader experiences, through the act of reading, the experiences and turmoil of the character, in effect he becomes this character in his imagination. Calinescu illustrates this when he writes:

...we must be endowed with the ability to portray ourselves as actors of our own selves – but also of other selves – and thus be able to become inhabitants of fictional worlds, where all sorts of things may make-believable happen and directly affect us... reading involves mental mechanisms that are also active in daydreaming and in various forms, simpler or more developed, of symbolic play (including role playing). (1993:189)

Reading each of Auster's novels separately can be just as enjoyable as reading his entire range of novels as a whole, but so much is lost when one disregards the connections between these novels

for without knowledge of all the preceding novels and knowledge of all the characters within these novels, *Travels in the Scriptorium* would seem like an absurd story, having absolutely no meaning and making absolutely no sense. The novel does not recap previous stories and events, but forces the author to ponder the fates of each of his characters and the consequences of his actions as he wrote a storyline for each of these characters. Without knowledge of the preceding works these characters will not make sense, because the reader will not be able to understand why they are torturing the old man, Mr. Blank and why they are so angry at him. The direct link between Mr. Blank and Paul Auster will also be missed. To understand Auster's writing one must, therefore, uncover his fictional world and understand how each character functions in this world and connects with the other characters.

Different readers would arrive at different interpretations of Auster's novels. If one takes each novel separately and focuses merely on the events related in this one novel, the story will be contained within the pages of the novel, but when one takes the whole range of novels and search for connections between these novels the story shifts and changes and expands into a universe where nothing and everything is contained all at once. Throughout his work Auster leaves trails and hints of how to approach his work and small commentaries on what the reader might feel as he goes on the quest of uncovering the truth behind Auster's fiction. Consider, for example, a statement taken from *In the Country of Last Things*:

What another has seen fit to throw away, you must examine, dissect, and bring back to life... The job is to zero in on these little islands of intactness, to imagine them joined to other such islands, and these islands to still others, and thus to create new archipelagos of matter. You must salvage the salvageable and learn to ignore the rest. (Auster, 2005:36)

Every reader approaches a novel differently, reading for different purposes and analysing each novel differently. Something which is insignificant to one reader might be very important to

another and meaning is derived from different scenes and events in different ways during each individual reading process. Each of Auster's novels can be seen as a separate island, an island that fully supports its own ecosystem and on which life is maintained in a certain way. The characters in these novels face different challenges, their stories differ, the quests on which they go differ and, finally, each novel does reach a unique conclusion, even though these novels' endings remain open for individual interpretation. The real challenge, however, is to find the connections between these novels and to join these different stories so that they finally lead towards one unique narrative, gathered from many different perspectives, yet ending in one fixed world where characters function together in the same space. The reader who follows these links and is able to make the connections will arrive at a new meaning of the text and the challenge for this reader is to be able to decide what is important and what should be disregarded, because once you know about the connections it is easy to grab hold of all details and search for meaning in them, although this would be an impossible task.

It is against this background that particular attention should be given to Auster's 1987 novel, *In the Country of Last Things*. As the second novel in Auster's range of novels it is highly significant to pay particular attention to characters in this novel as the connections between this novel and his preceding novel, *The New York Trilogy*, and two of his later novels, *Moon Palace* (1989) and *The Book of Illusions* (2002), are highlighted through the actions and relationships of Anna Blume, the main protagonist. These connections are subtle, to the point that they "disappear" within the text. Only a close reading will reveal the significance of certain events within the novel. Particular attention must be paid to detail as the connections in this novel can be merely an object Anna picks up in the street or a relationship with a character, such as Samuel

Farr who pretends to be a doctor and later becomes an actual doctor in *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

As an example, consider the very subtle link between *The New York Trilogy* and *In the Country of Last Things*. Anna Blume finds herself in a dystopian city, a city where there is little hope for survival and humanity has turned against itself. She has come here in search of her brother, William, but she soon realises that William is lost forever and will never be found, because in this city people and items merge and become part of the landscape:

Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn't waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it. (Auster, 2005:2)

The city in which she finds herself is a place in which things and people disappear, lose their value and their definitions, and where any link with the outside world is broken. If you live in this city long enough you will forget that there is something else outside of the city walls. The city becomes more and more primitive as time passes so that the people who function in this city lose touch with the modern world and everything it has to offer. Anna, at one stage, tries to escape from the city, but soon realises that there are no means by which to leave. Ships are no longer allowed to enter the docks and when she asks whether any airplanes enter or leave the city the guard does not even know what an airplane is:

You see what you are up against here. It's not just that things vanish – but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well. Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever. I am no more immune to this disease than anyone else, and no doubt there are many such blanks inside me. A thing vanishes, and if you wait too long before thinking about it, no amount of struggle can ever wrench it back. Memory is not an act of will, after all. It is something that happens in spite of oneself, and when too much is changing all the time, the brain is bound to falter, things are bound to slip through it. (Auster, 2005:87)

The people wandering the streets appear as ghosts, they have no pasts and no hope for a future. They exist, but merely attempt to survive the exact moment they find themselves in, concentrating on staying on their feet, because once they fall down there is a real possibility that they would never be able to get up again.

Another interesting aspect is that Anna learns to squint in daylight, opening her eyes just enough to see; with this image, Auster conveys the idea that the inhabitants in this city are in a way blinded, that they will never be able to see or realise what is happening to them. Consider the following:

...during the days, there is a brightness that is sometimes intolerable – a brilliance that stuns you and seems to blanch everything, all the jagged surfaces gleaming, the air itself almost a shimmer. The light forms in such a way that the colors become more and more distorted as you draw close to them. Even the shadows are agitated, with a random, hectic pulsing along the edges. You must be careful in this light not to open your eyes too wide, to squint at just the precise degree that will allow you to keep your balance. Otherwise, you will stumble as you walk, and I need not enumerate the dangers of falling. (Auster, 2005:21)

Without really opening their eyes they will never learn how to escape the confines the city imposes on them and, likewise, they will never be able to see the suffering of others since their focus would be contained on their own personal paths and nothing else is taken into consideration. Clara Sarmiento, in her article “The Angel in a Country of Last Things: Delillo, Auster and the Post-human Landscape”, argues that

...people walk a monotonous dehumanizing labyrinth of streets, all exactly alike, and wander in circles with no sense of direction... Loneliness (not solitude) is everywhere, in the general obsession with death and survival at any price. (2006:147-148)

In this dire setting, one would not expect Anna and Quinn, the main protagonist of *City of Glass*, to cross paths. In *The New York Trilogy* the main protagonists, who live in one of the most

famous cities in the world, are the only characters who recreate themselves and become alien to their surroundings. Anna, however, finds herself in an unnamed country, evidently not even a part of America, during an unspecified time, quite possibly the distant future, and surrounded by faceless, unidentified people who are so starved that they lose all substance and cannot feature in the novel as real people: “There are people so thin, she wrote, they are sometimes blown away” (Auster, 2005:3). The connection between these stories is difficult to imagine, yet Auster does provide us with a direct link between Anna and Quinn and effectively links his two novels, as can be seen in the following extract:

Little by little, my hauls became almost adequate. Odds and ends, of course, but a few totally unexpected things as well: a collapsed telescope with one cracked lens; a rubber Frankenstein mask; a bicycle wheel; a Cyrillic typewriter missing only five keys and the space bar; the passport of a man named Quinn. (Auster, 2005:36)

Quinn is mentioned fleetingly and he, himself, is not present, only his passport is recovered. At the end of *City of Glass* he disappeared and the narrator does not know where he disappears to. The link made between these two novels indicates that it is possible that Quinn entered the very country and city in which Anna finds herself and like her brother he has become lost within the city and will never be found. If we look at the other items she found we notice that she also mentions a mask, which is relevant as the character White in *Ghosts* wears a mask “of the sort that children wear on Hallowe’en” (Auster, 2004b:169) to disguise his identity. It is quite possible that this is the mask Anna finds along with Quinn’s passport. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* Auster stresses the importance of these seemingly insignificant details when Quinn says to Mr. Blank: “But we musn’t forget the passport either. A small point, I suppose, but it was tough work just the same...” (Auster, 2008:133).



This marks the beginning of Auster's "game" with his readers. It becomes a game in so far as the readers need to uncover the subtle links between novels and pay close attention to seemingly insignificant details in order to connect the novels and move towards a holistic reading of Auster's fiction. Sometimes these links are easily disregarded, but once you realise that they are there, and that Auster leaves traces of them throughout the range of his works you become almost addicted to uncovering them all. Calinescu explores the notion of "games of reading" when he writes that

...any reading of a worthwhile text, be it undertaken for purposes of entertainment or knowledge, can acquire a ludic dimension. In other words, any reading of a text that is perceived as valuable or interesting can take on, in addition to its more obvious features and explicit goals, the characteristics of a game. In certain cases this game may be intended by the author as a challenge to the reader's ingenuity, for instance by proposing a mystery or puzzle... (1993:138)

This very fact is what makes avid Auster readers follow his work so closely, what keeps them reading and rereading, because it becomes a challenge to uncover all the links and fit all the pieces of the puzzle together so that one day they might hope to be able to have the whole picture, to know every detail there is to know about his characters and his fictional world. Whether this is possible or not is not the question and not what keeps readers intrigued, it is the game itself that keeps readers reading.

The reader also obtains satisfaction when he or she realises how much detail is contained within his or her own memories. As you read one novel, events and details of the other novels are recalled, and seemingly insignificant details in the previously read novels become highly significant with the new reading. Calinescu also states the following:

Actually, the reader's concentration, attention, and alertness to the details of the text, including mere hints and connotative minutiae, will often be increased by the adoption of a ludic perspective... Another significant component of such a game of reading, and certainly a contributor to its

intellectual excitement, consists of the lively, informal, and playful switching of the reader's mind from the one text/game to other texts/games of the same kind held in his or her memory: the frequency and quality of such comparisons, which often bear on minute but fascinating details, are a measure of the stimulating value of the text under (ludic) scrutiny. (1993:139)

In some instances different characteristics of Auster's characters are revealed in different novels, which becomes evident when one pays attention to the unknown narrator of *In the Country of Last Things*. This character turns out to be the main protagonist of Auster's 1989 novel *Moon Palace*, i.e. Marco Fogg's university roommate David Zimmer, and David is also the main protagonist in the 2002 novel *The Book of Illusions*. The game is to fit the pieces of this character's life together, to discover who he was in relation to who he will become throughout Auster's work.

In *In the Country of Last Things*, David remains silent and unnamed. We are only aware of him as Anna directly addresses him in the letter she writes, which finally becomes the narration he relates to us. The novel opens with the following line: "These are the last things, she wrote. One by one they disappear and never come back. I can tell you of the ones I have seen, of the ones that are no more, but I doubt there will be time" (Auster, 2005:1). By not directly conveying the letter, but rather giving the notion that an external person is relating what he has read in the letter, Auster effectively distances us from Anna, the main protagonist. Schmid (2010:69) writes about diegetic and non-diegetic narrators and states that the narrator, as the narrating entity, remains outside the "inner" world of the novel and that it is only the narrator's "previous" self that appears in the narrated world. This is highly relevant in *In the Country of Last Things* as Anna can be seen as the narrator of the events and one tends to forget that these events are related to us by the receiver of her letter. By the time Anna's story is narrated to the reader she would have escaped from the city, disappeared and would have moved

on to the world beyond the pages of Auster's fiction. In this city Anna, like other Auster characters, undergoes certain phases which enable her to become a new person, to be reinvented, before entering the world beyond the page, the *Scriptorium*.

Auster asserts that each of his novels concentrates on the main protagonists, which is evident as most of his novels have a homogenous narrator. Auster, himself, says:

...all my books are connected by their common source, by the preoccupations they share. But each book belongs to its central character: Quinn, Blue, the narrator of *The Locked Room*, Anna Blume, Fogg, Nashe. Each one of these people thinks differently, speaks differently, writes differently from all the others. But each one is also part of myself – which probably goes without saying. If all these books were put together in one volume, they would form the book of my life so far, a multifaceted picture of who I am. But there's still more to come, I hope. If you think of the imagination as a continent, then each book would be an individual country. The map is still quite sketchy at this point, with many gaps and unexplored territories. But if I'm able to keep going long enough, perhaps most of the blanks will eventually be filled in. (Auster, 2010:547)

Even though the focus of each novel is on its main protagonist, Auster does make use of marginal characters to fill some of the gaps in his novels. A marginal character in one novel can become a main character in the next and through this extended technique one does not only gain a fixed point of view on a character, but also a fuller picture of who and what this person is and the role he/she plays in other characters' lives.

David Zimmer is a good example of such a character. We come to know him through Anna's perspective in *In the Country of Last Things* as someone who is capable of great love, but who also remains distant as he does not enter the country in order to help her and also never voices his own opinion about her letter. She writes: "But you loved me, didn't you? You loved me until you were insane with it" (Auster, 2005:11). In *Moon Palace* David, again merely a marginal character whose role only comprises a few pages in the novel, is portrayed as a excited

and avid student who gets caught up in his studies, a serious young man who is almost too responsible for his age:

Zimmer was in good form that night, rattling on about Trotsky, Mao, and the theory of permanent revolution, and I remember how at a certain point Kitty put her head on my shoulder, smiling a languorous and beautiful smile, and how the two of us then leaned back against the cushions of the booth and let David run on with his monologue, nodding in agreement as he resolved the dilemmas of human existence. (Auster, 2004a:93-94)

Later in the novel he is portrayed as a family man, a typical middle-aged American with a successful job at a university walking down the street with his two sons. He is and has everything the main protagonist Marco Fogg will never be or have: “It almost didn’t matter what had become of him, that he was teaching at a university somewhere in California...and then he and his family scampered off to wherever it was they were going” (Auster, 2004a : 103). *Moon Palace* has not even reached its middle before Zimmer disappears from its pages. When his role is fulfilled he is dismissed as if insignificant.

The link between David and Anna is also directly referred to in *Moon Palace*, however, in such a way that a reader could easily disregard the information since attention is paid to Marco Fogg and not David Zimmer. Through Marco’s perspective Auster writes:

He had been in love with the same person for the past two or three years, a girl by the name of Anna Bloom or Blume, I was never sure of the spelling. She had grown up across the street from Zimmer in the New Jersey suburbs and had been in the same class as his sister, which meant that she was a couple of years younger than he was. I had met her only once or twice, a diminutive, dark-haired girl with a pretty face and a bristling, animated personality, and had suspected that she was probably a bit too much for Zimmer’s studious nature to handle. Earlier in the summer, she had suddenly taken off to join her older brother, William, who worked as a journalist in some foreign country, and since then Zimmer had not received a word from her – not a letter, not a postcard, nothing. As the weeks went by, he grew more and more desperate over this silence. (Auster, 2004a:86)

This paragraph comprises the whole of Anna's involvement or appearance in *Moon Palace* and some information is revealed about her past which is not revealed in *In the Country of Last Things*. One of the gaps Anna leaves in her narrative is filled. We also learn of David's desperation when Anna disappears which is something *In the Country of Last Things* does not convey. We also now know that Auster's novels are not written in a chronological order, as *Moon Palace* was published two years after *In the Country of Last Things*, but relates events taking place prior to Anna's journey through the dystopian landscape, but it is narrated twenty or so years after the events of *In the Country of Last Things*. Part of the puzzle is to create a timeline for the events described in the range of novels. This is one of the examples that shows that not only do narrational gaps get filled once one reads all of the novels, but gaps in time are also filled and a more holistic interpretation of each character and their role during a specific period in time is arrived at.

Some time goes by before David again features in a novel, this time as main protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*. The novel opens with David a widower, his wife and two sons died in a plane crash and David now needs to reinvent himself and adjust to his new lifestyle without a family. In this novel David's quest is to find the vanished silent comedian Hector Mann and his search for Hector becomes the force that keeps him going forward. Consider the following extract:

We all want to believe in impossible things, I suppose, to persuade ourselves that miracles can happen. Considering that I was the author of the only book ever written on Hector Mann, it probably made sense that someone would think I'd jump at the chance to believe he was still alive. But I wasn't in the mood to jump. Or at least I didn't think I was. My book had been born out of a great sorrow, and now that the book was behind me, the sorrow was still there... She couldn't have known that on June 7, 1985, just one week short of my tenth wedding anniversary, my wife and two sons had been killed in a plane crash. She might have seen that the book was dedicated to them (*For Helen, Todd, and Marco – In Memory*), but those

names couldn't have meant anything to her, and even if she had guessed their importance to the author, she couldn't have known that for him those names stood for everything that had any meaning in life – and that when the thirty-six-year-old Helen and the seven-year-old Todd and the four-year-old Marco had died, most of him had died along with them. (Auster, 2009 : 5-6)

In *The Book of Illusions* David is given a voice for the first time and for the first time we hear his side of the story and see the world through his eyes, but time has passed and what he will relate to us has little or nothing to do with the events in the preceding novels. We come to know David more intimately, but he is most definitely not the same man he was as a heart-broken, eager student in *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace*. In the next chapter I shall pay more attention to the novels *Moon Palace* and *The Book of Illusions* since it can, for both of these novels, be debated whether the story truly centres on the main protagonists or whether these protagonists are not used to convey the stories of marginal characters. These characters remain silent, but their stories, through their silence, may reach deeper into the readers' minds had they told these stories themselves. This notion is explored and explained in more depth later on in the dissertation.

Auster's focus on his main protagonists is so intense that often the secondary or marginal characters disappear from the text and by this I mean that readers do not pay any attention to these characters and their role in the story is often disregarded. One such character is Samuel Farr of *In the Country of Last Things*. Samuel only appears towards the middle of the novel and then features for a short period before again disappearing, only to reappear once more near the end of the novel. One immediately concludes that his role is not as important as that of the main protagonist Anna Blume, yet he is the one that enables Anna to survive to the end of the novel. And in this way he enables her to consequently disappear from the text as he is the one that provides her with enough hope to want to survive and escape from the city.

As Anna enters the city in search of her brother her only link with him and hope of finding him, even from the beginning of the novel, is to find Samuel Farr since he is the journalist sent to the city to replace her brother. She has a picture of Samuel and this picture gains special significance in her search, because rather than holding onto a picture of her brother she holds on to Samuel's picture and inevitably it results in the fact that her search soon veers away from her brother and becomes a search for Samuel. Samuel is mentioned before she finds him and this indicates his importance:

...I understood that this picture was suddenly the only thing I had left. It was my last link to William... The man's name was Samuel Farr, but other than that I knew nothing about him... I had no friends, no one to talk to, no one to share a meal with. If not for the picture of Sam, I don't think I would have made it. Just knowing that he was in the city gave me something to hope for. This is the man who will help you, I kept telling myself, and once you find him, everything will be different. I must have pulled the photograph out of my pocket a hundred times a day. After a while, it became so creased and rumpled that the face was almost obliterated. But by then I knew it by heart, and the picture itself no longer mattered. I kept it with me as an amulet, a tiny shield to ward off despair. (Auster, 2005:43-44)

The reader's presupposed notion of the roles Samuel and William will portray in the novel is effectively reversed in that William becomes the link to Samuel and that Anna finds Samuel because of William rather than finding William because of Samuel. As soon as she finds Samuel she abandons her search for William, because Samuel grounds her and through Samuel her role becomes fulfilled so that she no longer has the need to go in search of her brother. Her narrative veers into a new direction and she writes: "Needless to say, I never sent any reports, and I never found William" (Auster, 2005:103). Before we reach the middle of the novel she gives up on William and lets the reader know that it would be futile to hope that he would ever be found.

Samuel's story is given to us in fragments and no details about his life prior to the city are provided. He comes forward as an intellectual, obsessed with writing a book (to him this

book is a moral obligation) about life in the city, and he seems to be the only one who still believes that there is a way out of the city. Consider the following:

Sam spoke in a jittery, self-mocking voice, skipping from one subject to another in ways that were difficult for me to follow. I had the sense of a man on the verge of collapse – of someone who had pushed himself too hard and could barely stand up anymore. He had accumulated over three thousand pages of notes, he said. (Auster, 2005:103)

Little is relayed about the actual conversations between Anna and Samuel. Anna describes their relationship and the focus of these descriptions is more on her own life and the things she sees rather than on Samuel, who is portrayed as a man of action rather than a man of words and it is his silence that comforts Anna from the very moment they meet:

Chance had flung us together in an almost impersonal way, and that seemed to give the encounter a logic of its own, a force that did not depend on either one of us. I had made an outlandish suggestion, a wild leap into intimacy, and Sam had not said a word. The mere fact of that silence was extraordinary, I felt, and the longer it went on, the more it seemed to validate the things I had said. By the time it was over, there was nothing left to discuss. (Auster, 2005:106)

Auster could easily have given Samuel a more prominent role in the novel, his knowledge about the city, Anna says “Sam knew more about the city than anyone I had ever known” (Auster, 2005:107), would have provided a more holistic view on the city, what happened to it and what the possible fates of people in the city could be. Had Samuel been the main protagonist he would have acted as a guide, guiding the reader through the desolated streets, the labyrinth of waste and death, to a place where one could break free of the grips of this landscape. Anna is unable to do so, since she never focuses on the city and its inhabitants, her main focus is always on herself and her own survival. Auster, however, made the choice and selected Anna as his main protagonist and for the purposes of this novel his focus and attention had to remain on her.



As readers we need to accept why authors choose one particular character and not another, but this does not mean that we need to disregard all characters except those who have been selected. Schmid explores the notion of selection in writing when he argues that

...the reader who attempts to trace the thread constituting a story must understand both sides of selection, not only selection as position (the selection of certain elements) but also as negation, the rejection of other options. It is only against the background of the non-selected that the selected gains its identity and meaning. Experiencing a story as a meaningful whole entails inferring the *logic* of its *selectivity*. But not only that. The reader must be aware of which character has been the object of the negative selection in the work... (2010:204)

Anna is obviously the selected character as the whole of the novel centres on her story, but Samuel (the non-selected) is also a key figure in the novel. Anna gains much of her identity from Samuel and the novel's meaning relies on Samuel as a character. It is therefore necessary, as Schmid says, to understand both the selected and the non-selected characters and to consider the importance of both these characters in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the text. As Samuel could easily be overlooked and fades into the background of the text, he becomes one of the important "invisible" characters, a character that should be acknowledged for his worth.

Samuel is important as he fills the role of "saviour", not only for Anna, but for many other characters in *In the Country of Last Things* and later in Auster's novel *Travels in the Scriptorium* he becomes Mr. Blank's (Auster as writer and creator) doctor, again portraying the role of healer or saviour. Being a doctor is seen as a status symbol, a state of importance and Samuel is the only doctor in the range of Auster's works. He is therefore on par with *The New York Trilogy*'s characters Peter Stillman Junior and Senior and Fanshawe, he is a guide that sets other characters free by leading them out of the fictional world where they struggle to break free from the author's control.

Anna and Samuel's life together only comprises a short part of the novel before he once again disappears from the pages when she is injured and separated from him. The library in which they were housed burns down and Anna cannot find Samuel. Once Samuel disappears Anna becomes disorientated, and again stresses that there are gaps in her story and that no matter how hard she tries, certain gaps will never be filled. She writes:

Little by little, I am trying to tell you what happened. I can't help it if there are gaps in my memory. Certain events refuse to reappear, and no matter how hard I struggle, I am powerless to unearth them. (Auster, 2005:125)

Anna finds herself in a place called "Woburn House" where injured and homeless people are taken care of and the owner of this home, Victoria, describes it as follows: "We help people here... Not all the people who need help can get here by themselves, you understand, so we go out and find them" (Auster, 2005:1270). Both Anna and Samuel enter this house during the final stages of the novel and it is here where Anna reinvents herself, where she lets go of her past and transgresses to a new state in which she is able to break free from Auster's fiction. Some time passes and Anna slowly recovers from her injuries and her psychological distress at losing Samuel and then, as soon as we forget about Samuel and his role in the novel, he reappears. Samuel, off course, is no longer the same man, he has changed. He lost the book he was working on in the library-fire, he lost Anna and their unborn child with no hope of ever finding them again, and so it is only natural that he will no longer be the Samuel Anna first met in the library. She writes:

This was Sam, but it was also not Sam. He sat there with a dead, wholly absent look in his eyes – drifting inside himself it seemed to me, utterly lost. I saw everything in a rush, a whirlwind, a flicker. This was Sam, but he did not recognize me, he did not know who I was. (Auster, 2005:160-161)

If we take into consideration that all of Auster's characters go through certain phases before breaking free from the fictional constructs imposed on them, and that these phases correlate with

Victor Turner's phases of public conflict, it becomes clear that during Samuel's absence he underwent certain changes. Situations forced him to reinvent himself and once he emerges (he is reintegrated into society) he is a new person, a person who no longer recognizes Anna as she has not yet gone through all four of Turner's phases. We know that Samuel went through these phases during his absence in the novel. He lost everything he valued and was forced to reinvent himself and once he reaches Woburn House and finds Anna alive and well, he enters Turner's fourth stage and is reintroduced into society. Auster shares with us this final stage of Samuel's life, but we are still aware that it is conveyed to us through Anna, who freely admits that there are gaps in her memory, and then again through the unknown narrator, who, as we do not know him, cannot be seen as a reliable figure. This is what Samuel says about the time he went missing:

"I gave up trying to be anyone," he said. "The object of my life was to remove myself from my surroundings, to live in a place where nothing could hurt me anymore. One by one, I tried to abandon my attachments, to let go of all the things I ever cared about. The idea was to achieve indifference, an indifference so powerful and sublime that it would protect me from further assault. I said good-bye to you Anna; I said good-bye to the book; I said good-bye to the thought of going home. I even tried to say good-bye to myself. Little by little, I became as serene as a Buddha, sitting in my corner and paying no attention to the world around me. If it hadn't been for my body – the occasional demands of my stomach, my bowels – I might never have moved again. To want nothing, to be nothing. I could imagine no more perfect solution than that. In the end, I came close to living the life of a stone." (Auster, 2005:162-163)

The most significant aspects, however, of his experiences will never be related to us, leaving meaningful gaps which the reader needs to fill on his or her own.

Soon after Samuel is integrated as a permanent member of Woburn House he is appointed as the new doctor, without any qualifications in this field, he becomes the symbol for hope and a future and the sole comfort to many of the city's inhabitants. The medical supplies in

the house have run out and Samuel's role is to help others through words. Consider the following:

Just because he calls himself Dr. Farr, that doesn't mean he'll be doing what a doctor does. He'll talk, and people will listen to him. That's all it amounts to. A way of giving people a chance to find their own strength. (Auster, 2005:165-166)

As characters consist solely of words, the best possible way for Samuel to help them would be through speech and in fiction Samuel gets the status of a real doctor as nothing more than words is necessary. At the same time, it is his new role as a doctor that saves him and enables him to grasp other worlds and accept that the city is not all there is to life: "His pose as doctor had suddenly given him access to the intimate thoughts of others, and these thoughts now became a part of who he was. His interior world grew larger, sturdier, more able to absorb the things that were put into it" (Auster, 2005:168). Anna comments that: "There was no question that he looked like a doctor, but after a while he began to act like one, too" (Auster, 2005:167) and this marks the role Samuel will fulfil in the world beyond the text once he leaves the world in the novel and enters Auster's *Scriptorium*. Mr. Blank in *Travels in the Scriptorium* is looking at a photograph of Samuel realises that Samuel is his doctor:

Holding the picture firmly in his two hands, Mr. Blank lifts it up until it is directly in front of his face, then studies it for a good twenty seconds. Farr, looking very much as he does now, is sitting in a garden somewhere dressed in a white doctor's coat with a cigarette burning between the second and third fingers of his left hand. (Auster, 2008:86)

I have only touched on some the characters that appear, for the first time, as well as those who reappear in *In the Country of Last Things*. There are still quite a few others, such as William; Isabel; Victoria; and Boris, to name only a few. These are characters that appear and disappear in the novel, they are disregarded and most easily forgotten, but their role is crucial to the

development of the story and they all help Anna to survive the city and break free from the constraints of Auster's fiction.

It is clear that these characters provide crucial links between the various novels in Auster's *oeuvre* and they therefore enable Auster to construct frames within the larger frame of his work. These characters function within their specific novels and then cross the boundaries of this one frame when they enter another novel, extending the frame until it encompasses a whole range of different novels. These characters also contribute greatly to the holistic interpretation of Auster's work when applying a theory of hermeneutics to the texts, as each character should be understood separately in one fixed text before their roles become apparent in the overall reading of all involved texts in order to complete the hermeneutical circle.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Whose Story is it Anyway?**

*Moon Palace*

*The Book of Illusions*

As has become clear, Auster's novels are subtly linked to each other through the appearance and disappearance of the same characters over the range of his work. These characters share common traits and certain parallels, a point emphasized by Leona Toker when she stresses the importance of considering parallel experiences when analysing novels:

Parallel experience is of the greatest interest when it is isomorphic with a novel's themes – a theme here being understood not as a semantic field that accommodates multiple recurrent motifs but as a latent statement that can be regarded as the organizing principle of the work. However, though the reader may be aware of the mental operations performed in piecing together the data of the text, he or she seldom registers the analogy between these operations and the experience of the characters: parallel experience is not among the notions that underlie our reading conventions. (1993:4)

When analysing Auster's novels the parallel experiences found between characters are of great interest as they contribute, significantly, to the overall themes of the novels while also leading the characters toward his novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*. They all undertake some kind of quest in which they inevitably try to merge with their environments in order to become invisible to society and finally to disappear from the world of the novel in which they find themselves. Throughout Auster's work characters appear and disappear and as one character steps into the foreground, another character steps back and becomes a mere presence, seemingly invisible in the text, but undeniably still there. Transcendence of the textual world along with disembodiment, perhaps more than anything else, can be seen as the central themes in Auster's novels. Themes such as separating body from mind; transcending into a new reality; and, vanishing from a world where one can never truly belong.

This chapter, then, asks the following questions: What are the parallel experiences between Auster's characters; where do these experiences lead; and also, as these experiences are not only limited to the main protagonists of the texts, what are the effects of characters appearing

and disappearing throughout the novels when reading and analysing Auster's complete set of works? I argue that it is of utmost importance to investigate the parallel experiences which characters undergo as these experiences underpin the notion that Auster's fictional worlds are not contained in each separate novel, but rather comprises one single world spanning the entire range of his work. The various individual experiences link the characters and draw them towards each novel's end, so that finally, once they disappear from the text, they are able to reappear in the *Scriptorium*, where they are able to live free from the author who exerted so much control over them during their textual existence. This chapter also investigates the appearance and disappearance of characters in the texts, focusing on the main protagonists, but showing that other characters can be seen to replace the main protagonists and take over their roles from time to time so that more than one character could be regarded as a main character in the novel.

Central to this is an aspect highlighted throughout the novels, namely the *disembodiment* of characters. Characters become alienated from their surroundings and try to break free from any physical boundaries imposed on them, often through means of starvation or some or other form of self destruction. This element can be traced from the very beginning of Auster's work, for example when Quinn, the main protagonist of *City of Glass*, decides to eat as little as possible and literally lives in an alley dumpster for a period of time in *City of Glass* or when the main protagonist Anna finds herself in an apocalyptic country where people are described as "ghosts" roaming the streets in *In the Country of Last Things*.

These experiences are not limited to protagonists only, but also extend to secondary characters. Each of Auster's characters undergoes a process of recreation, whether their stories are told in the novel in great detail or not. This entails that they live through some life-changing



event and in the process try to separate their outer-selves from their inner-selves, hence the consequential disembodiment.

The narrative, told from a homodiegetic viewpoint, usually revolves around the main protagonist, but other, secondary characters step into the foreground and once they do, they take priority over the protagonist in such a way that he or she disappears from the text for the duration of such a character's involvement in the plot. Once these secondary characters' roles are fulfilled they again disappear, but they remain invisible presences for the duration of the novel, if only in the reader's mind. More often than not it can be argued that the novel in question does not, therefore, revolve around one fixed character, but rather around an intricate number of characters who appear and disappear throughout the text, but whose influence, even after their disappearance, remain palpable throughout Auster's work. His characters exert a force which stretches beyond their existence on the pages of his fiction. Finally, in his novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*, it is they, the characters, who will be in control of events when the author becomes a fragile old man who can no longer fend for himself.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I shall present a close analysis of two of Auster's texts, namely *Moon Palace*, published in 1989, and *The Book of Illusions*, published in 2002. These two novels are linked through the characters Marco Fogg (*Moon Palace*) and David Zimmer (*The Book of Illusions*). Both these characters appear and disappear in these two novels. The difference in time between the publication of the two novels is also of importance, since it shows that Auster never truly lets go of characters once he finishes a novel, even after more than ten years have elapsed between the publishing dates he still reintroduces old characters into his work, creating a continued storyline. David Zimmer has aged considerably between his appearance in *Moon Palace* and his role as main protagonist in *The Book of Illusions*. It could

then be argued that there is a semblance of chronology in Auster's work and that just as time elapses for us in our world, time also goes by in the fictional world that Auster creates. The difference in time between these two novels shall be discussed in more detail in the second part of this chapter. I shall now, however, first turn to *Moon Palace*, one of Auster's most esteemed novels.

### *Moon Palace*

*Moon Palace* is told through the homodiegetic narrative of the main protagonist Marco Fogg. Fogg relates events taking place in his early twenties after the death of his uncle leaves him with no family and insufficient income to pay for his studies at university.

The death of his uncle marks the beginning of Fogg's journey into the liminal world of the text as can be seen from the following extract: "My uncle simply dropped dead one afternoon in the middle of April, and at that point my life began to change, I began to vanish into another world" (Auster, 2004a:3). Later in the novel Fogg describes this liminal space as a *half-world*: "Like an epileptic on the brink of a seizure, I had entered that strange half-world in which everything starts to shine, to give off a new and astonishing clarity" (Auster, 2004a:31). This description is a clear indication of liminality, as liminality is literally a state of being between two phases or two worlds. Fogg has transcended boundaries from his perceived reality into another world, where things no longer are what they seemed to be. This notion of transcending boundaries from one reality into another is consistent throughout all of Auster's work. And it is always a strange or unpredictable event which triggers the transcendence. This is yet another parallel that can be drawn between the novels.

Three of the characters in *Moon Palace* (Marco Fogg, Thomas Effing and Solomon Barber) try to disappear from society and become disembodied figures. These characters,

although central to *Moon Palace*, however, are not the only characters that attempt to transcend boundaries in search of a deeper truth, but they are the characters whose stories are told in this novel and other characters remain strangers who only briefly appear in the text. Fogg's uncle, Victor, for instance, went on a similar quest and in the last conversation he has with Fogg before he dies, he says: "But I relish the thought of those open spaces, of playing my music under the desert sky. Who knows if some new truth will not be revealed to me out there" (Auster, 2004a:12)? Whether or not he found what he was looking for remains a mystery. Kitty Wu, Fogg's girlfriend also transcends into a new world when, after her father's death, she leaves China and comes to America to study music. Finally, Auster introduces his readers to the character David Zimmer who is Fogg's roommate and best friend. In *Moon Palace* we learn of Zimmer's depression and anxiety over the estrangement of his missing girlfriend who turns out to be Anna Blume, the main protagonist of *In the County of Last Things*.

Fogg, instead of finding a job, decides to separate mind from body and nearly dies from starvation. He sells off his possessions one piece at a time and the room in which he stays becomes a physical representation of his own disappearance and separation from the world:

I had only to look at my room to know what was happening. The room was a machine that measured my condition: how much of me remained, how much of me was no longer there. I was both perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theatre of one. I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear. (Auster, 2004a:24)

Rooms, buildings and other literal locations are of great importance in Auster's work and characters' inner turmoil more often than not directly correlates with such locations as was illustrated in the preceding chapters. We can therefore deduct that another parallel that can be drawn between Auster's novels is the settings in which his stories unfold. These locations contribute not only to the plot, but also to the motifs found throughout Auster's *oeuvre*.

Fogg soon realises that he is not only emptying his room piece by piece, but that the room symbolises his own self and his state of mind: "...it occurred to me that the inner and the outer could not be separated except by doing great damage to the truth" (Auster, 2004a:24). His state of mind has direct effects on the environment in which he finds himself, and so, as he loses his belongings and his home, or as his environment slowly deteriorates, he also loses his mind and his inner self. Consider the following passage:

I was trying to separate myself from my body, taking the long road around my dilemma by pretending it did not exist. Others had travelled this road before me, and all of them had discovered what I finally discovered for myself: the mind cannot win over matter, for once the mind is asked to do too much, it quickly shows itself to be matter as well. In order to rise above my circumstances, I had to convince myself that I was no longer real, and the result was that all reality began to waver for me. Things that were not there would suddenly appear before, my eyes, then vanish. (Auster, 2004a:29)

Fogg has to convince himself that he is not real, because only once he has realised and accepted this fact will he be able to transgress the boundaries separating the liminal space from the world beyond fiction. As soon as he lets go of his past and his beliefs regarding his existence, he begins to discern differences between the world of the text and reality and his reality begins to shift. For Fogg, just as it is for all of Auster's characters, it is a domino-effect, because once an event is set into motion these characters can do nothing but move forward, even if it means great loss awaits him in the future. One event throws the character into the liminal space, abolishing the past reality, and as a result forces the character to come to terms with a new reality. The greatest loss of all is surely the realisation that the world is no longer their home and that what they perceived to be real was merely an illusion. Even though characters realise that their reality has shifted, they can never fully escape this fictional world, because for as long as the text

continues they are trapped between the pages of the text. In the article “Under the Sign of *Moon Palace*: Paul Auster and the Body in the Text”, Debra Shostak states that:

By first subscribing to the postmodern condition and then by deconstructing certain oppositions – such as the subject and object, the “I” and the body, and even postmodernism and realism as literary modes – *Moon Palace* paradoxically commits itself, however provisionally, to presence and the referential word. (2008:151)

The “referential word” is the text itself and without the text these characters would never come into existence. Without the word, therefore, they are nothing. Their very existence depends on language and so characters often muse over language and meaning which can be derived from words. There is a definite parallel which can be drawn throughout Auster’s work in relation with signs, or words, and their meanings. Stillman Senior in *City of Glass* attempts to create a new language, because words have lost their true meaning and the words we attribute to certain objects no longer accurately refer to such objects. In *Moon Palace*, Fogg is preoccupied with the distinction that can be drawn between reality and illusion. Shostak (2008:154) writes that Fogg’s tendency to dematerialize and repress the knowledge of the body is expressed in its displacement into the language of signs and the “code” that he cannot decipher. The following passage illustrates this idea:

‘An electrically transmitted voice is not a real voice,’ I said. ‘We’ve all grown used to these simulacra of ourselves, but when you stop and think about it, the telephone is an instrument of distortion and fantasy. It’s communication between ghosts, the verbal secretions of minds without bodies...’ (Auster, 2004a:25)

Postmodernism, according to Peter Barry (2009:85-86), no longer distinguishes between what is real and what is simulated. He writes that within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses and that everything is a model or an image and all is surface without depth. In postmodernism we do not deal with reality, but with the *hyperreal*, a term

coined by the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard (Barry, 2009:86) in his book *Simulations*, published in 1981. *Moon Palace*, perhaps more explicitly than Auster's other novels presents the reader with a story that could very well happen in real life, but which is finally so absurd that it clearly enters a fantastical world.

The first three chapters of the novel are dedicated to Fogg's struggle with his "self" and little attention is paid to secondary characters. This is Fogg's part of the story and Auster directs the reader's focus to Fogg's inner struggle as well as his attempt to disappear from the world. He loses his apartment and spends some time sleeping in Central Park and then, finally, when it seems that he will never be able to survive the harshness of his situation, his friends David and Kitty find him, they take him home and care for him. However, after this ordeal Fogg is no longer the same person; he will never again see the world through the same eyes and never again experience things as he had before his uncle's death:

Causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe: down was up, the last was the first, the end was the beginning. Heraclitus had been resurrected from his dung heap, and what he had to show us was the simplest of truths: reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant. (Auster, 2004a:61)

Like Quinn of *City of Glass*, Blue of *Ghosts*, the narrator of *The Locked Room*, and many of Auster's other characters, Fogg has gone through Turner's four phases of public conflict, which has been discussed earlier, until, finally, he is "recreated" and introduced into a new reality, a hyperreality in which life itself is dictated purely by chance.

Fogg sees an advertisement for a job as a caretaker for an old man in a wheelchair. On a whim he decides to go for an interview and he gets the job. It is purely by chance that he has seen this advertisement, but what is truly remarkable about the relationship he develops with the

old man, Thomas Effing, is that Effing turns out to be Fogg's grandfather. Fogg, however, will only know this after Effing's death.

Chapter four of the novel introduces us to Effing. Fogg describes his first meeting with Effing as follows:

The first time I set eyes on Thomas Effing, he struck me as the frailest person I had ever seen. All bones and trembling flesh, he sat in his wheelchair covered in plaid blankets, his body slumped to one side like some minuscule broken bird. He was eighty-six years old, but he looked older than that, a hundred or more, if that is possible, an age beyond counting. Everything about him was walled off, remote, sphinxlike in its impenetrability. (Auster, 2004a:96)

Effing, here, seems very similar to Peter Stillman of *City of Glass*. Both these characters are broken and unable to function normally in the world. Effing also introduces the fantastical elements in *Moon Palace* when he relates the strange events that happened to him in his youth. Through Fogg, as the narrator, Effing becomes the main protagonist. Fogg now steps into the background and from chapter four onwards little is said about Fogg's state of mind and personal life; instead, Auster focuses the reader's attention on Effing.

Effing also seems preoccupied with the difference between reality and illusion. In his first conversation with Fogg he says:

It often happens that things are other than what they seem, and you can get yourself into trouble by jumping to conclusions... Are you sure you're alive, boy? Maybe you just imagine you are... Anything is possible. It could be that you and I are figments, that we're not really here. Yes, I'm willing to accept that as a possibility. (Auster, 2004a:100-102)

Effing, therefore, does not question everything around him, because he knows that there is a greater power which exerts control over all people, i.e the author. And again, like Peter Stillman in *City of Glass*, Effing is the character who first introduces the author-character relationship into *Moon Palace*. Effing also becomes the centre of *Moon Palace* in that he links Fogg to Solomon

Barber, Fogg's estranged father. In this way the novel revolves around Effing more than it does around the other characters.

In the story Effing relates, he decides to leave his old life behind and tries to disappear from society. His journey takes him to the desert, a landscape void of people. Effing refers to his time in the desert as his "death", saying: "When the situation presented itself to me, I had no regrets about vanishing. I saw my chance to be dead, and I took it" (Auster, 2004a:147). It is here, in the desert, where Effing's view of the world begins to shift and a new world is opened to him. Consider the following example:

The land is too big out there, and after a while it starts to swallow you up. I reached a point when I couldn't take it anymore. All that bloody silence and emptiness. You try to find your bearings in it, but it's too big, the dimensions are too monstrous, and eventually, I don't know how else to put it, eventually it just stops being there. There's no world, no land, no nothing. It comes down to that, Fogg, in the end, it's all a figment. The only place you exist is in your head. (Auster, 2004a:152)

The desert acts as the liminal space in which Effing undergoes the different phases and he is forced to adapt to this landscape in order to survive. His reality vanishes and the world he knew no longer exists for him. Again we find an environment that exerts a strong force on the character and the environment symbolises the phases this character goes through in order to be recreated. The desert forces him to turn to his inner self and he becomes disembodied, not so much out of choice, but rather out of necessity. The desert also acts as a physical barrier separating Effing from the real world and it forces him to let go of everything he knows and everything he ever perceived to be real. In this barren landscape nothing can be taken for granted and he has to recreate himself in order to survive.

In the desert, Effing lives in a cave and at one point an Indian pays him a visit, confusing him with the hermit who lived there before Effing. Effing describes this encounter and says: "He



seemed to be separated from me by a thin veil, an invisible membrane that kept him on the other side of this world” (Auster, 2004a:157). The Indian, who is still in contact with the outside world cannot penetrate Effing’s world as Effing has entered the liminal space, which plays such an important role in Auster’s fiction. This is only one of many examples which can be found throughout the novel indicating that there exists a physical, palpable, barrier between the selected character (in this case Effing) and the non-selected entities.

For the duration of Effing’s story Fogg remains a silent, invisible character, a mere spectator of events. After Effing’s death Fogg searches for Solomon Barber in order to give him Effing’s *memoir* and when they finally meet and Barber tells his story, it becomes clear that Barber is Fogg’s father. Again we read about a character who tries to vanish, but Barber’s vanishing method is different from that of Fogg and Effing. Barber stays connected with society, but he is morbidly obese and literally hides within his own body, using it as a barrier between himself and society. Along with the impressive dimensions of his body he also shaves his head and wears strange hats. His strategy is to stand out in such a way that he cannot be viewed as part of this world. Consider the following:

The larger his body grew, the more deeply he buried himself inside it. Barber’s goal was to shut himself off from the world, to make himself invisible in the massiveness of his own flesh. (Auster, 2004a:235)

These three characters, therefore, all strive to become invisible and to disappear from the world. Not one of them, however, is able to do so until the novel reaches its end or until they, themselves, die. Barber dies after falling into an empty grave, injuring his back. In the hospital he loses a substantial amount of weight and his body cannot cope with the trauma this sudden loss of weight causes. This, however, marks Barber’s transitional phase, because as he loses the weight a “new” Barber emerges and he is recreated in preparation for the next stage of his

journey: "...a second Barber came up to the surface, a secret self that had been locked inside him for years" (Auster, 2004a:287). Barber's body is disappearing and once his body disappears he is able to break free from the bonds of fiction and disappear from the text. Consider the following passage:

He weighed only 210 pounds at the time, and it was as though half of him had already disappeared, as though once the process had been set in motion, it was inevitable that the rest of him should disappear as well. (Auster, 2004a:289)

Again we read about a character who becomes disembodied, who aims to separate mind from body and break free from the world and all the constraints within it. He does so, however, mentally rather than physically. These three characters are very much aware of their bodies and their place in the world in relation to the functionality of their bodies. All three of them are limited by their bodies and forced to lead the kind of life that they view as lacking and incomplete, hence their attempts to break free from their bodies and exist beyond the constraints physicality places on them. In his article, "The Death of the Other: A Levinasian Reading of Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*", Kanae Uchiyama (2008:120) writes that by focusing on physical fragility throughout the novel, Auster seems to reveal that the human is corporeality itself, prior to representing the world. It is our bodies that binds us to the world and prevents us from entering other realities. We are here, on Earth, until the day we die and finally break free from the mortal constraints in which we function our entire lives. By destroying their bodies, these characters attempt to escape the world and, in effect, to escape Auster's fiction. For the duration of the novel, however, they will not be able to break free from the bonds fiction imposes on them.

To convey three characters' stories in one novel, and have three main protagonists, an author is forced to select one character on which he focuses during a specific part of the novel.

In *Moon Palace* the first part is dedicated to Fogg, the second part to Effing, the third part to Barber and finally we return to Fogg briefly as the novel draws to its end. Each part demands that certain characters remain in the background and we can say that they are, for that part of the novel, the *non-selected*.

In order to tell each man's story it is necessary for that character to become the focal point of the part of the novel dealing directly with him. These characters go through the various phases on their own; their stories therefore cannot be related only out of Fogg's perspective as he was not present during the major events in Effing or Barber's lives. As a result it is therefore necessary to highlight one protagonist as a selected entity during a specific part in the novel, however, the reader is still very much aware of the status and presence of the non-selected entities whilst reading each individual part. As we read *Moon Palace* it is only natural that we switch from one protagonist to the next and Auster writes in such a way that we hardly notice the change in selected characters. It is, after all, still Fogg's story as both Effing's and Barber's stories contribute to Fogg's history and his identity. Again I stress the importance of what Schmid (2010:205) call *necessarily rescinded negation* when non-selected characters form gaps in the narrative thread of the novel and the reader then has to rescind the negation undertaken by the author and "reactivate" the non-selected elements of the story.

During each successive part in the novel a gap is created by the missing protagonists in the narrative which only deals with one character at a time. Bearing these characters in mind, however, we are able to fill in certain missing gaps from each part as each man's relation of events has direct consequences on the other two men and it, in this way, becomes the reader's responsibility to "reactivate" each non-selected character (entity) and fit the missing pieces together. As Schmid states:

The reader must reverse-engineer, as it were, the non-selection by reproducing elements that were not selected, but belong to the story. Rescindable non-selection has become characteristic of modern narrative prose. To the extent that narrative prose endows its protagonists with complex, many-sided psyches, and presents the story from the standpoint of the narrated figure, the mental processes that motivate actions and speech become a problem. The elements of the consciousness that the narrator explicitly describes are no longer able to conclusively motivate actions and speech. The reader must then infer these motivations by going beyond the explicit story and tracing certain non-selected elements of the mental – happenings, which the narrator withholds or which are not accessible to him. (2010:205)

Both Effing and Barber's stories lead to Fogg's story, even though these three stories are not told in chronological order. Much of the missing information in the first part of the novel, therefore, becomes available during the second and third parts of the novel.

As we read Effing and Barber's stories we cannot help but remember Fogg's part of the story and slowly we begin to piece the entire narrative together, to create a whole. For us to fill in the blanks of Fogg's past and the reason why he finds himself alone in the world, it is necessary to know why his father was never a part of his life. Similarly, in order to understand Barber's ordeal and self-hatred it is necessary to understand what he must have gone through when his own father, Effing, disappeared in the desert. Once we reach Barber's part of the story it becomes necessary to think back to Effing's story and fill in the blanks left in the silence of his son and wife whom he left behind. The uncertainty that goes with a father's disappearance would have a strong psychological effect on any person and so it takes over Barber's life and becomes the very essence of what defines him as a man. Effing and Barber's stories, therefore, fill in the blanks left in Fogg's life and also explains why he almost starves himself in an attempt to disappear from the world. As Fogg, himself, explains:

For twenty-four years, I had lived with an unanswerable question, and little by little I had come to embrace that enigma as the central fact about myself. My origins were a mystery, and I would never know where I had

come from. This was what defined me, and by now I was used to my own darkness, clinging to it as a source of knowledge and self-respect, trusting in it as an ontological necessity. (Auster, 2004a:286)

Fogg's very identity is based on the uncertainties of his origins. This is what defines him and keeps him grounded or bound to this reality. It is also what keeps him contained within Auster's fictional world. Once he discovers the truth, however, his world shifts and his identity is recreated. The knowledge about his father and grandfather finally enables Fogg to break free from Auster's fiction and he is reborn. We read: "...I had only to keep on walking to know that I had left myself behind, that I was no longer the person I had once been" (Auster, 2004a:297). The novel ends with Fogg walking to the ocean, having lost his inheritance and all his worldly possessions, having lost all contact with people within the world, he now has the opportunity to enter a blank page, so to speak, and to start a new life. Fogg, like Auster's other characters will now disappear from the page. The novel's last paragraph reads as follows:

I had come to the end of the world, and beyond it there was nothing but air and waves, an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China. This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins. (Auster, 2004a:298)

As with all of Auster's novels, *Moon Palace* ends with a new beginning. Fogg, just like the other characters, move on to a world where we cannot follow, but it is clear that in this new world (with the new life) there will be no limitations as Fogg has finally broken free from the constraints of Auster's fiction.

It is clear that many parallels can be drawn between Auster's novels. The stories overlap and yet they all help to fill in the blanks left in the reader's mind. The parallels become important, because they also convey the idea that Auster is haunted by the fates of his characters and even though each character faces a harsh ordeal, in the end they do break free and move on to something better. Each novel ends with hope and the promise of a new life. Finally, when we

read *Travels in the Scriptorium* we will obtain a better understanding for the open endings left in Auster's novels.

### *The Book of Illusions*

When investigating appearing and disappearing characters in Auster's novels, the importance of each character varies throughout the novels. Sometimes characters are merely mentioned, sometimes it is only a relevant item that links this character to the text, but their presence is undeniably felt and readers cannot ignore that these characters are the key elements which combine Auster's novels into one complete piece of work.

Each of Auster's novels highlights the notion of chance encounters and the fact that these encounters are able to spiral events into directions that one would normally not expect. McCafferty (1991:51-52) mentions the coincidences in Auster's fiction and says that Auster's books seem more fundamentally about mystery and coincidence and that these aspects become governing principles in Auster's work, constantly clashing with causality and rationality. To this statement Auster replies with the following:

...what I'm talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our lifelong certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second... Chance? Destiny? Or simple mathematics, an example of probability theory at work? It doesn't matter what you call it. Life is full of such events. And yet there are critics who would fault a writer for using that episode in a novel. Too bad for them. As a writer of novels, I feel morally obligated to incorporate such events into my books, to write about the world as I experience it – not as someone else tells me it's supposed to be. The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all these mysterious goings-on in the world. (Auster& McCafferty, 1991:52)

Auster's books are driven by chance events that force a character into a direction away from his reality and towards the unknown. These events lead characters to "stumble" upon each other (chance encounters), but soon these encounters gain importance as these characters do help each other through the liminal spaces in Auster's fiction and towards the *Scriptorium*. It becomes clear that even though these events seem unstructured or unplanned, they do have a purpose within the larger framework of Auster's work. The novels, themselves, need not be read as a whole. Auster does not present his work as a series that should be read from beginning, starting with *City of Glass*, to end. In fact, it is easy to overlook the links found between these novels, but once these links are discovered the message contained in these novels shifts and changes and we are presented with a whole new story which has no limits.

*The Book of Illusions* opens with a man, David Zimmer, who, after the death of his wife and their two young sons, finds himself disconnected from his surroundings. He needs to adapt to the changes in his life, but he is also not yet ready to let go of the past, and he has difficulty coping with his new circumstances. When the mystery surrounding Hector Mann's, a silent comedian who vanished in 1929, disappearance presents itself, it gives Zimmer an excuse to escape from his everyday life and immerse himself in a project that would enable him to avoid everyone and everything he knows: "But the pressure is what I need. If I loosened my grip now, I'd fall apart. I'd fly off in a hundred different directions, and I'd never be able to put myself together again" (Auster, 2009:25). After the project is completed Zimmer says: "...I could carry on with my crazed, solitary life without having to turn my back on the past. I wasn't ready to let go yet... All I needed was another project to work on, another ocean to drown myself in" (Auster, 2009:57). The idea of losing control and struggling with reality correlates with Auster's other novels as the novel opens with a character finding himself lost in the world and then

another character enters after which events spiral in a direction that leads away from that which one expects, towards the unknown. Hector Mann, just like the Stillmans or Fanshawe or Thomas Effing, to name a few examples from other novels, is the character who introduces the main character to the liminal space and enables this character to let go of the world contained in the pages of Auster's fiction. These characters, who represent the leading members of the new social system, shift viewpoints and force the protagonists to change their lives and their ways of doing things.

David Zimmer, the main protagonist, is one of the characters who repeatedly appears in Auster's fiction. In *Moon Palace*, Zimmer is Fogg's roommate and in that novel he is represented as a saviour-type of figure who helps Fogg to regain his grip on the world and provides shelter and safety to his friend. If anything, Zimmer is represented, in *Moon Palace*, as the type of character that knows his place in the world and that would surely never lose his grip on reality. He is the type of person who accepts his life and does the right thing simply because it is what is expected. However, in *The Book of Illusions*, a story that takes place quite some time after the one narrated in *Moon Palace*, Zimmer's life has fallen apart and he no longer knows where he is going. He has lost his grip on reality and his place in the world. *The Book of Illusions* does not pick up where *Moon Palace* ended, but rather jumps forward in time, leaving gaps in Zimmer's life which can only be filled using one's imagination. This novel, like all of Auster's other novels, is about a specific event which causes chance encounters and leads one character towards the end of his fictional existence and his reintroduction into a world beyond the text.

Again, parallels can be drawn between *The Book of Illusions* and Auster's other novels. The main character becomes obsessed with the project at hand: "I had been thorough and



conscientious up to that point, but now the project was taken to a new level of intensity, a single-mindedness that verged on obsession” (Auster, 2009:27). Zimmer(just like Quinn or Fogg or Blume) lets go of his entire life, he leaves his current job and his home, to pursue Mann and uncover the mystery of his disappearance. Also, Zimmer enters a building, an apartment sparsely furnished, from which he would do his research and his writing:

Eventually, I drove across the bridge to Brooklyn Heights and took the first place I was shown – a one bed-room apartment on Pierrepont Street that had just come on the market that morning. It was expensive, dingy, and awkwardly designed, but I felt lucky to have it. I bought a mattress for one room, a desk and a chair for the other and then I moved in. The lease was good for a year. It began on March first, and that was the day I began writing the book. (Auster, 2009:27-28)

The apartment marks the beginning of Zimmer’s journey through the liminal space, just as Stillman Junior’s apartment serves as a threshold or boundary between the textual world and the liminal world in *City of Glass*. For nine months he rarely leaves the apartment and devotes all of his time writing a book about Hector Mann’s life, work and disappearance. The apartment becomes his whole world and he immerses himself in the book which he is writing:

I was in the book, and the book was in my head, and as long as I stayed inside my head, I could go on writing the book. It was like living in a padded cell, but of all the lives I could have lived at that moment, it was the only one that made sense to me. I wasn’t capable of being in the world, and I knew that if I tried to go back into it before I was ready, I would be crushed. So I holed up in that small apartment and spent my days writing about Hector Mann. (Auster, 2009:55)

After completing the book, Zimmer moves into a house in Vermont and he describes this house as follows:

It was a hospital for the living dead, a way station for the mentally afflicted, and to inhabit those blank, depersonalized interiors was to understand that the world was an illusion that had to be reinvented every day. (Auster, 2009:57)

Buildings once again imply and add nuances to the physical boundaries between a character and the fictional world. Once they enter these buildings they become distanced from the fictional world and they also begin to see that the world is not the place they had always thought it to be. This is a recurring motif throughout Auster's fiction and enhances the notion of liminality as a physical space which can be entered by a character in order to prepare such a character for reinvention and introduction in Auster's *Scriptorium*.

*The Book of Illusions*, however, is not just about David Zimmer, but rather centres on Hector Mann, without whom there would be no story to tell. From the very first paragraph in the novel our attention is focused on the mystery behind Mann's disappearance and Zimmer becomes the narrator, not of his own but rather, of Mann's story. Consider the opening passage of the novel:

EVERYONE THOUGHT HE was dead. When my book about his films was published in 1988, Hector Mann had not been heard from in almost sixty years. Except for a handful of historians and old-time movie buffs, few people seemed to know that he had ever existed. *Double or Nothing*, the last of the twelve two-reel comedies he made at the end of the silent era, was released on November 23, 1928. Two months later, without saying good-bye to any of his friends or associates, without leaving behind a letter or informing anyone of his plans, he walked out of his rented house on North Orange Drive and was never seen again. His blue DeSoto was parked in the garage; the lease on the property was good for another three months; the rent had been paid in full. There was food in the kitchen, whiskey in the liquor cabinet, and not a single article of Hector's clothing was missing from the bedroom drawers. According to the *Los Angeles Herald Express* of January 18, 1929, it looked as though he had stepped out for a short walk and would be returning at any moment. But he didn't return, and from that point on it was as if Hector Mann had vanished from the face of the earth. (Auster, 2009:1)

Hector Mann is introduced as the central figure in the novel and the reader expects, from the very beginning, that the mystery surrounding this character's disappearance will be solved. Auster

opens the novel with a silent and absent character, yet this character (Mann) is the character that has the most influence in the novel.

One of the most influential writers in postmodern literature, Italo Calvino, stresses the importance of detail in his novels. He (1998:74-75) writes in his lecture *Exactitude*, one of the five lectures compiled in the book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, that formalized language does not always convey a message as clearly as “natural” languages do and that visual images sometimes carry over a message more strongly than voiced words. Consider a passage from his novel *Invisible Cities*:

The Great Kahn tried to concentrate on the game: but *now* it was the game’s reason that eluded him. The end of every game is a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the real stakes? At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner’s hand, nothingness remains: a black square, or a white one. By disembodied his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire’s multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes; it was reduced to a square of planed wood.

Then Marco Polo spoke: “Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibres are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night’s frost forced it to desist.”

Until then the Great Kahn had not realized that the foreigner knew how to express himself fluently in his language, but it was not this fluency that amazed him.

“Here is a thicker pore: perhaps it was a larvum’s nest; not a woodworm, because, once born, it would have begun to dig, but a caterpillar that gnawed the leaves and was the cause of the tree’s being chosen for chopping down... This edge was scored by the wood carver with his gouge so that it would adhere to the next square, more protruding...”

The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about the ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows... (Calvino, 1974:131-132)

When discussing this passage in his lecture Calvino says that his writing has always found itself facing two divergent paths that correspond to two different types of knowledge: “One path goes into the mental space of bodiless rationality, where one may trace lines that converge, projections, abstract forms, vectors of force. The other path goes through a space crammed with objects and attempts to create a verbal equivalent of that space by filling the page with words, involving a most careful, painstaking effort to adapt what is written to what is not written, to the sum of what is sayable and not sayable” (Calvino, 1998:74). Auster follows this same pattern in *The Book of Illusions*, using visual images instead of actual dialogue to give voice to an invisible and silent character. This novel, then, is about visual language, what Calvino (1998:75) terms “natural language” and in this novel images, descriptions of gestures and body language says much more than actual dialogue is able to. The novel centres on silent films and uses these films and the actors in these films as the backdrop of the events that are portrayed. Consider the following:

Cinema was a visual language, a way of telling stories by projecting images onto a two-dimensional screen. The addition of sound and color had created the illusion of a third dimension, but at the same time it had robbed the images of their purity. They no longer had to do all the work, and instead of turning the film into the perfect hybrid medium, the best of all possible worlds, sound and color had weakened the language they were supposed to enhance. That night, as I watched Hector and the other comedians go through their paces in my Vermont living room, it struck me that I was witnessing a dead art, a wholly defunct genre that would never be practised again. And yet, for all the changes that had occurred since then, their work was as fresh and invigorating as it had been when it was first shown. That was because they had understood the language they were speaking. They had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis, and except for the costumes and the cars and the quaint furniture in the background, none of it could possibly grow old. It was thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body, and therefore it was for all time. Most silent comedies hardly even bothered to tell stories. They were like poems, like the rendering of dreams, like some intricate choreography of the spirit, and because they were dead, they probably spoke more deeply to us now than they had to the audiences of their time. We watched them

across a great chasm of forgetfulness, and the very things that separated them from us were in fact what made them so arresting: their muteness, their absence of color, their fitful, speeded-up rhythms. These were obstacles, and they made viewing difficult for us, but they also relieved the images of the burden of representation. They stood between us and the film, and therefore we no longer had to pretend that we were looking at the real world. The flat screen was the world, and it existed in two dimensions. The third dimension was in our head. (Auster, 2009:14-15)

This passage is the key with which to approach *The Book of Illusions*. It highlights visual language and that the observer (reader) needs to fill in certain gaps using his or her imagination. In a silent film the observer will, in his mind, construct the actor's thoughts and apply these thoughts to the images on the screen. What is arrived at, in the end, will be that each observer will have a unique sense and interpretation of the film, because no two observers would fill the blanks left by the silence in exactly the same way. This aspect also makes the film time-less since each observer will be able to fill in blanks using his knowledge of the world, be it knowledge of the 1920's or knowledge of the modern world we live in today. These actors are free of the burden of representation, because they leave the representation itself up to each observer's imagination. The observer is able to decide what aspects of the film are important and what can be discarded. Like the silent actors in the film, Hector Mann remains silent and we, as the readers, use our imaginations to fill in the gaps left by him. We decide what information regarding Mann is crucial to the story and which gaps to fill using our imagination.

Jim Peacock (2006:56), in his article "Carrying the Burden of Representation: Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*", writes that in Auster's novels silence provides a space for contemplation, for "unstinting attention," and allows a direct form of communication free from the debilitating influence of language. Mann's presence in the novel is powerful because of his silence, the descriptions we have of him, through Zimmer's narration, is so vivid and filled with detail that Mann becomes visible in our imaginations. We have a much clearer image of him in

our mind's eye than we do of the other characters. Consider the following description of Mann's appearance as he was seen in his movies:

BEFORE THE BODY, there is the face, and before the face there is the thin black line between Hector's nose and upper lip. A twitching filament of anxieties, a metaphysical jump rope, a dancing thread of discombobulation, the mustache is a seismograph of Hector's inner states, and not only does it make you laugh, it tells you what Hector is thinking, actually allows you into the machinery of his thoughts. Other elements are involved – the eyes, the mouth, the finely calibrated lurches and stumbles – but the moustache is the instrument of communication, and even though it speaks a language without words, its wriggles and flutters are as clear and comprehensible as a message tapped out in Morse code.

None of this would be possible without the intervention of the camera. The intimacy of the talking mustache is a creation of the lens. At various moments in each of Hector's films, the angle suddenly changes, and a wide or medium shot is replaced by a close-up. Hector's face fills the screen, and with all references to the environment eliminated, the mustache becomes the centre of the world. It begins to move, and because Hector's skill is such that he can control the muscles in the rest of his face, the mustache appears to be moving on its own, like a small animal with an independent consciousness and will. The mouth curls a bit at the corners, the nostrils flare ever so slightly, but as the mustache goes through its antic gyrations, the face is essentially still, and in that stillness one sees oneself as if in a mirror, for it is during those moments that Hector is most fully and convincingly human, a reflection of what we all are when we're alone inside ourselves. These close-up sequences are reserved for the critical passages of a story, the junctures of greatest tension or surprise, and they never last longer than four or five seconds. When they occur, everything else stops. The mustache launches into its soliloquy, and for those few precious moments, action gives way to thought. We can read the content of Hector's mind as though it were spelled out in letters across the screen, and before those letters vanish, they are no less visible than a building, a piano, or a pie in the face.

In motion, the mustache is a tool for expressing the thoughts of all men. In repose, it is little more than an ornament. It marks Hector's place in the world, establishes the type of character he is supposed to represent, and defines who he is in the eyes of others – but it belongs to only one man, and in that it is an absurdly thin and greasy little mustache, there can never be any doubt as to who that man is. He is the South American dandy, the Latin lover, the swarthy rogue with hot blood coursing through his veins. Add in the slicked-back hair and the ever-present white suit, and the result is an unmistakable blend of dash and decorum. Such is the code of images. The meanings are understood at a single glance, and because one thing inevitably follows from another in this booby-trapped

universe of missing manhole covers and exploding cigars, the moment you see a man walking down the street in a white suit, you know that suit is going to get him into trouble. (Auster, 2009:30-31)

In this extract Auster describes Mann in minute detail, and I include it in its entirety to illustrate how much attention is paid to a character that hardly features in the novel physically. It is passages such as the above which makes Mann a central figure and one of the main protagonists, because through these descriptions we have of him we form a good idea of the type of man he is and the role he plays in the novel. Mann does not need to voice his thoughts and feelings, because the descriptions provide us with enough clues to fill in the blanks left by his silence. We can get a good idea of his characteristics simply through the illustrations provided by those who observe him. Through his actions his thoughts become visible and the message he carries over, even though it is a silent message, are heard throughout the text. Auster, through Mann, explores the limits of what is “sayable” against that which cannot be said or is not necessarily voiced. In

*Exactitude* Calvino quotes a passage by Giacomo Leopardi from *Zibaldone*:

And therefore a sky dotted with small clouds is perhaps more pleasurable than a totally clear sky; and to look at the sky is perhaps less pleasurable than to look at the earth and the landscape, etc., because it is less varied (and also less like us, less of our own, belonging less to things that are ours, etc.). In fact, if you lie down on your back so that you see nothing but the sky, separated from the earth, you will have a far less pleasing feeling than if you look at a landscape, or look at the sky in proportion and relation to the earth, integrating them from the same point of view. (Calvino, 1998:62)

This passage highlights the notion that we, as readers, are drawn to detail, descriptions play an important role in the novel, because it opens the door to the reader’s imagination. In *The Book of Illusions*, Auster provides intricate and exact details about his character Hector Mann. This character, through these descriptions and through the influence this character has on others’ lives, becomes the central figure in the novel. From the very first page he is a silent character

and his physical presence in the novel only encompasses a few pages just before his death, but he is undeniably the character that demands attention and the reason why we keep on reading Auster's novel. Mann provides the mystery and suspense and even though he remains invisible in the text, in that we cannot enter his thoughts or even see him in his true element, we come to know him through the descriptions Auster provides through the narration by Zimmer.

In the same lecture Calvino quotes another passage. He quotes the French writer Paul Valéry, from the text *Monsieur Teste*, who writes:

“It is nothing...much,” he said. “Nothing but... a tenth of a second appearing... Wait... At certain moments my body is illuminated... It is very curious. Suddenly I see into myself... I can make out the depths of the layers of my flesh; and I feel zones of pain... rings, poles, plumes of pain. Do you see these living forms, this geometry of my suffering? Some of these flashes are exactly like ideas. They make me understand – from here, to there... And yet they leave me *uncertain*. Uncertain is not the word... When it is about to appear, I find in myself something confused or diffused. Areas that are... hazy occur inside me, wide spaces come into view. Then I choose a question from my memory, any problem at all... I plunge into it. I count grains of sand... and as long as I can see them... But increasing pain forces me to observe it. I think about it! I only await my cry... and as soon as I have heard it – the *object*, the terrible *object*, getting smaller, and still smaller, vanishes from my inner sight.” (Calvino, 1998:66)

For me this passage epitomises Auster's characters. In his novels we are given a mere glimpse into their lives and more often than not we cannot enter their thoughts and feel their emotions. The characters merely “flash” across the pages, continuously appearing and disappearing in his texts. They are present in the text in form and body and then they disappear from the text, but remain present in the reader's mind. We cannot deny their presence and their influence, because without these characters and without acknowledging the importance of these characters there is no story to tell, there would be no event which drives the novel's plot and, finally, the characters,



themselves, would have no purpose. It is the invisible characters who keep the reader turning the page, who provide a deeper meaning behind each and every story.

Disappearance and becoming invisible is a central theme in *The Book of Illusions*. One of Mann's films, entitled *Mr. Nobody* depicts a man who becomes invisible after being given a magic potion by his friend. Auster describes the film in great detail, giving us a summary of the entire plot of the film right up to its end, which stresses the importance of the message this film carries. Little is said about the other films made by Mann. After *Mr. Nobody* Mann made one more film, but Zimmer disregards this film as it consists of random clips from failed projects brought together. For Zimmer *Mr. Nobody* is the last, and most important, of Mann's work and he believes that Mann is sending out a message about his own disappearance through the part that he enacts.

Another point which should be considered about the message contained in *Mr. Nobody* is that once the character, also called Hector, becomes visible again and sees himself in the mirror, it is as though he has become a new man. Consider the following:

Coming on the heels of that chilling blankness, the smile suggests something more than a simple rediscovery of himself. He is no longer looking at the old Hector. He is someone else now, and however much he might resemble the person he used to be, he has been reinvented, turned inside-out, and spat forth as a new man. (Auster, 2009:53)

Mann, in the film, has entered a liminal space where he has become separated from the rest of the world. After he has gone through certain phases he then becomes visible once more, but he has changed and no longer sees the world in the same light as he did before. Zimmer focuses on this last image portrayed in the film and analyses it as follows:

...once Hector breaks into that extraordinary smile, we are given a brief glimpse of what the future has in store for him. He allows himself to be born again with that smile, but he is no longer the same person, no longer the Hector Mann who has amused us and entertained us for the past year.

We see him transformed into someone we no longer recognize, and before we can absorb who this new Hector might be, he is gone. A circle closes around his face, and he is swallowed up by the blackness. An instant later, for the first and only time in any of his films, the words THE END are written out across the screen, and that is the last anyone ever sees of him. (Auster, 2009:53-54)

This brings to mind the endings of *The New York Trilogy*. Mann disappears after his reinvention just as all of Auster's main protagonists' disappear once they are able to break free of the fictional world of his texts. Mann fits into the range of Auster's main protagonists. Peacock (2006:57) writes that silence is also symbolic of death itself. Silence, disappearance and being reinvented after an event all hint at the character's transcendence from one state in one world to the next.

I shall now return to another passage quoted by Calvino in his lecture. Calvino, again, quotes Leopardi, this time from his text *Song of the Great Wild Rooster*: "...a naked silence and a most profound quiet will fill the immensity of space. So this marvellous and frightening mystery of universal existence, before being declared or understood, will fade away and be lost" (Calvino, 1998:68). Calvino's (1998:68) interpretation of this passage is that what is terrifying and inconceivable is not the infinite void, but existence. In *The Book of Illusions* Zimmer spends a large portion of his life trying to piece together Mann's story and to uncover the mystery created by Mann's disappearance. He literally travels the world to watch silent films made by Mann and leaves behind all security he has in life. The story becomes an obsession. Zimmer, like us, only has images with which to piece together the puzzle that constitutes Mann's life. He can only guess why Mann did what he did. When he receives a letter from Mann's wife informing him that Mann wants to meet him he travels a great distance, again only to arrive at the secluded location. There he finds that Mann is ill and just before the truth is revealed and Mann can tell his story, Mann dies. Some gaps are filled in by people who know Mann and live

with him and who tell their versions of his story, but Mann never speaks. His inner thoughts remain hidden and Zimmer, and also the reader, will never know what Mann's version of his life story is. Mann's last wishes are that everything pertaining to his life should be destroyed within twenty-four hours of his death and so Zimmer barely has enough time to watch one of the silent films Mann made after his disappearance before everything is burned in a fire. No proof that Mann lived so long after his disappearance remains, so Zimmer's narration, the book he writes about his journey and Mann's life after 1929, becomes unreliable. Everything related in this novel could very well only be an illusion.

One can never truly know another. One can never enter another's life and another's thoughts and know the real reasons behind the other's actions. Another person's existence, therefore, opens infinite possibilities, because we can only guess at what another is thinking and feeling and experiencing. Palmer quotes R. D. Laing who wrote: "*your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you. I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another*" (Palmer, 2004:9). Had Zimmer been successful in his endeavour to speak to Mann, Auster's readers would still have been left with a mere recollection of what transpired between the two men. It is impossible to know Mann and know what he is thinking and feeling, because we will never be able to hear it directly from him.

When reading Auster's novels it becomes clear that his novels do not just deal with the main protagonists, but that events related in these novels could also revolve around secondary, invisible characters. These characters, at first, seem to play a small part in the novels, but after closer inspection they become central to the larger scope of Auster's work and without these

characters the main protagonists would not be able to find their way through the liminal spaces of Auster's fiction and into his *Scriptorium*. The parallel experiences contribute greatly to the overall themes found throughout his work and enhance the idea that each of his characters go through certain phases, as discussed in chapter one, in order to transcend the boundaries between the fictive world and the liminal spaces depicted in his novels. It becomes clear that not only the main protagonists go through these phases, but that certain parallels can also be drawn between main protagonists and secondary characters. The secondary characters' stories are not told in as an explicit manner as the protagonists' stories are, but there are definite clues which suggest that they also transcend certain boundaries in the selected novels. It becomes the responsibility of the reader to connect the dots in order to form a complete story about these characters. Furthermore, the parallel experiences characters go through underpin the notion that Auster's novels create and span a greater fictional world than what we read about in one specific novel and that readers should pay attention to his entire *oeuvre* and regard his work as a whole.

## **Chapter 5**

### **A Metafictional Reality**

*Travels in the Scriptorium*

Metafiction is one of the central features in many postmodern texts. In Paul Auster's novels metafiction pervades from the very beginning of his *oeuvre*, and it is used to create a world that stretches beyond fiction itself. According to Nicol (2002:6) "metafiction" is the most characteristic formal practice in postmodern fiction and it is also fiction that in some way foregrounds its own status as a fictional construct and he states that "metafiction" is essentially an ironic form in that it demonstrates that we cannot accept the *reality* we are presented with in a novel at face value.

Auster undermines the conventional form of the novel when he lets it be known, in the novel, that the characters are merely characters and that the world he presents to the reader relies entirely upon the author and the creator of the text. Many of Auster's novels deal directly with the relationship between author and character. *Man in the Dark*, for instance, tells the story of an old man who, while struggling to fall asleep, creates a story about a man living in an alternate America. Consider the following:

That's what I do when sleep refuses to come. I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget. Concentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell... I put him in a hole. That felt like a good start, a promising way to get things going. (Auster, 2009: 2-3)

From the outset, the novel makes it clear that the subsequent events related will only be fiction created by a man with trouble sleeping. It therefore undermines the reality presented to the reader as the reader is, from the beginning, aware that the characters we read about and the characters we are most interested in do not actually exist. Auster then puts a twist on the story by making these fictitious characters aware of their fictionality and in order to save their world they need to destroy the old man, their creator:

The story is about a man who must kill the person who created him, and why pretend that I am not that person? By putting myself into the story, the story becomes real. Or else I become unreal, yet one more figment of my own imagination. Either way, the effect is more satisfying, more in harmony with my mood – which is dark, my little ones, as dark as the obsidian night that surrounds me. (Auster, 2009:102)

In this way the fictional and real worlds merge and characters transcend from their own space, the world created by the author, into a textual world which runs parallel to our own. Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, directly comments on this notion with the following:

The author attempts desperately to hang on to his or her “real” identity as creator of the text we are reading. What happens, however, when he or she enters it is that his or her own reality is also called into question. The “author” discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the language of the text. The reader is made aware that, paradoxically, the “author” is situated *in* the text at the very point where “he” asserts “his” identity outside it. (1984:133)

In writing himself into his own fiction the old man becomes aware of his status as a fictional character, he becomes a linguistic construct and his own reality is questioned. Auster is known to appear in his own novels, usually as a minor character, such as writer Paul Auster in *City of Glass*; one of the secondary characters’ roommate Paul in *Timbuktu*; or John Trause, ‘Trause’ being an anagram of ‘Auster’, in *Oracle Night*. In many ways the old man in *Man in the Dark* represents Auster as a writer and also explores the process involved in creating a plot for a novel when a writer starts to write his story.

This chapter consequently poses the following questions: What is the significance of the *Scriptorium* and how does this novel, *Travels in the Scriptorium*, contribute to Auster’s earlier novels, and possibly novels yet to come?

The title of the novel is highly significant, since it clearly implies that the reader should expect some or other form of musing about the writer’s process when creating a novel. A

scriptorium refers directly to a room in which writing takes place, but in Auster's novel this Scriptorium becomes a world that stretches beyond fiction itself into the very mind, and thoughts, of the author. In the novel we are represented with an old man, Mr. Blank, who finds himself a prisoner in a room and who faces his creations, i.e. the fictional characters he has created throughout his life. These characters are Auster's characters, the characters we read about in his earlier novels. The novel highlights writing as a creative process and shows us the relationship that can exist between a writer and his characters. For him these characters do not simply vanish once their stories have been told, but they have minds of their own and live lives stretching beyond his fiction.

By giving himself the name Mr. Blank, in this novel, Auster in a way hands over control of his fiction as the name suggests that he is no longer in control and that he, himself, has become one of the characters, that his destiny or life is just as dependent on his characters as they are dependent on him. These characters have been his livelihood, they have provided him with a means to survive in this world and they, in effect, have given him as much life as he has given them.

One of the dominant aspects found in metafiction is when an author writes himself into his work. As Nicol said:

...metafiction encourages us to pursue the implications of this obvious fact to their logical conclusion: fiction is fictional, but no more so than reality. The effect of metafiction is to momentarily collapse the distinction between fiction and reality by causing the *outside world* to intrude into the world of the novel, as in classic examples where the author suddenly appears *as himself*[...] the obverse also happens: the fictional world spills over into the real world. (Nicol, 2002:7)

When an author writes himself into his novel the boundaries between fiction and reality become blurred. In Auster's earlier work the narratives are permeated by metafictional elements



when characters become aware of their fictional statuses. This idea is, finally, brought to the foreground in the novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The scriptorium stretches beyond the writer to a world where fiction and reality merge, where characters and the author can converse and where the reader also becomes involved when he must use his own imagination to fill in the blanks left by gaps in the narrative. Boundaries are crossed and a new kind of reality is created in the process.

What is interesting about the novel is that even here, where it is obvious that we deal with the various characters that have disappeared in the earlier novels, the reader is not shown the fictional world Auster creates. For the duration of the novel Mr. Blank remains in one room; the door remains shut and the window remains closed, providing no view of the outside world, i.e. the *Scriptorium*:

Imagine Mr. Blank's disappointment when he peers through the window and sees that the shutters have been closed, blocking any possibility of looking out to discover where he is. Nor are these the classic wooden shutters with moveable slats that allow a bit of light to filter through; they are industrial-strength metal panels with no apertures of any kind, painted a dull shade of grey, with areas of rust showing through that have begun to corrode the surface. (Auster, 2008:39-40)

At one stage Mr. Blank attempts to break the window using one of his shoes, but the window resists all forces and seems to be unbreakable:

A normal window might give way under such an assault, but this is a double-paned thermal window of the strongest quality, and it scarcely trembles as the old man strikes it with his feeble weapon of rubber and canvas. (Auster, 2008:42)

As discussed in chapter one the author, just like the reader, is unable to enter this fictive world that stretches beyond the pages of the novels. Mr. Blank, as the author, is not allowed to go outside of the room and enter this world. The room is significant in that it embodies the liminal space in which Mr. Blank finds himself. He, too, just like all the other characters,

hastranscended from one reality into a liminal space and here he undergoes certain phases and trials before he will be allowed to enter this world in which his characters now reside. It is, however, clear that this room is actually within the world Auster (Mr. Blank) created as Quinn, at one stage says to Mr. Blank: “You picked the spot yourself. In spite of everything that’s been going on here, you’ve gathered us all in a beautiful place. I’m thankful to you for that” (Auster, 2008:137). The only way that Mr. Blank will be able to enter this world and leave the room is if he lets go of his past (which he is forced to face in the novel) and lets go of his grasp on reality and accept that fictive characters are able to exist within the reality he finds himself in. Mr. Blank thus becomes aware of the fact that even though he is the author of these characters he, himself, now is also a character within a fictive world.

One of the foregrounded aspects of metafiction is when fictional characters become aware of their fictionality. Waugh writes the following:

Fictional characters have no identity *outside* the script, and do not ultimately have identity *within* the script. One common metafictional strategy is to present characters who are aware of this condition, and who thus implicitly draw attention to the fictional creation/description paradox. (1984:120)

By incorporating metafiction into his work and by making it the predominant feature in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Auster has taken a risk, because not all readers appreciate such fiction. Where most of his novels do deal with metafiction, they do so in a much more subtle way and the worlds they represent could still be seen as fictional worlds, but *Travels in the Scriptorium* cannot be understood unless the readers grasp that this world is directly linked with the writer’s mind and writing as a process. It could very well be seen as Auster’s most experimental work up to date and it has received mixed critique over the years. Martin Butler and Jens Martin Gurr(2008:195) point out, in “The Poetics and Politics of Metafiction: Reading Paul Auster’s

*Travels in the Scriptorium*”, that the text, which from the very outset slips into a mode of self-referentiality, has led quite a few critics to disparage it as self-indulgently brainy but ultimately somewhat pointless. It is understandable that *Travels in the Scriptorium* might seem pointless to a reader not familiar with Auster’s other novels. However, when we regard his novels as a set of texts that should be read as a series instead of individual novels, *Travels in the Scriptorium* becomes the key text which gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of various characters found throughout his *oeuvre*, but it also provides a direct glimpse of Auster’s mind and his thoughts as a writer and creator of fiction. Consider the following:

I was very young the first time I saw you, wasn’t I?

About twenty-one, I think, Anna says.

But I kept losing you, You’d be there for a few days, and then you’d vanish. A year would go by, two years, four years, and then you’d suddenly pop up again.

You didn’t know what to do with me, that’s why. It took you a long time to figure it out. (Auster, 2008:27)

Auster, born in 1947, was already forty years old when *In the Country of Last Things* was first published in which Anna Blume is the main protagonist. If we take the above passage at face value we can deduct that Anna has been an important and developing character since Auster was twenty-one years old and so this passage highlights the process of creation and the amount of years it took Auster finally to find the right story for this character.

Should we approach Auster’s novels hermeneutically, it becomes imperative to read his entire *oeuvre* as a whole instead of analyzing each novel separately. When reading *Travels in the Scriptorium* it becomes necessary to be prepared, in a way, and to bring prior knowledge of characters’ histories to the text. This text forces a hermeneutical circle where the process of deriving understanding and meaning actively moves between a holistic understanding of an

entire *oeuvre* as well as an understanding of incidents presented in individual novels. Butler and Gurr write the following:

There are a number of further strategies of opening what at first sight appeared to be a hermetically sealed entity. One of these strategies is the frequent intertextual references and allusions which point beyond the text itself. (2008:199)

What distinguishes Auster's work from other authors is that even though each of his novels appears to tell a separate and individual story, they are linked in subtle ways, mostly through characters, and in the end culminate into a whole. All the characters that have appeared and disappeared throughout Auster's novels are now present in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Through the links found between the various novels the reader is presented with a whole community of characters and the challenge to know each of these characters and piece their lives together as it stretches over many years. When reading Auster's novels the readers become active participants in the process as it becomes necessary to find the links between the novels and fill gaps left in the narrative.

Auster's novels are known to have open endings, characters simply disappear from the text and their stories never have a final, definite, conclusion. The world we are presented with, but still cannot enter in *Travels of the Scriptorium*, is the final world which the various characters have disappeared to and we finally realise that Auster's novels, when read together, create an intricate and detailed fictional world, not limited to one novel, but a world which stretches beyond the novel itself by encompassing all of his novels.

Without prior knowledge of Auster's work, *Travels in the Scriptorium* may leave the reader frustrated much like the open endings of his earlier novels also leaves the reader frustrated. Auster illustrates this frustration in *Travels in the Scriptorium* through Mr. Blank, because in a way Mr. Blank not only represents the author of the texts, but the reader as well.

Mr. Blank finds a manuscript on the desk and he reads this manuscript as it becomes clear that it represents a piece of the puzzle of his confinement in the room. The manuscript, however, does not have a clear ending and leaves Mr. Blank frustrated:

Mr. Blank tosses the typescript onto the desk, snorting with dissatisfaction and contempt, furious that he has been compelled to read a story that has barely even begun, a mere bloody fragment. What garbage, he says out loud, and then, swivelling the chair around by a hundred and eighty degrees, he wheels himself over to the bathroom door. (Auster, 2008:84)

The frustration Mr. Blank expresses represents the frustration we experience when, as we read the ending of each novel, we realise that there is no definitive end to the adventures of these characters. They leave the text, leaving us unsure as to where they finally end up and whether their lives would be better now that they have escaped the harsh ordeals they have gone through during the course of the novels.

The gaps left by these novels, however, open unlimited possibilities when readers are able to decide for themselves what the final fates of these characters are. Even in the *Scriptorium* we are not able to get a direct glimpse of the world and so it is open for interpretation. In his article “Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist American Novel”, Carl Darryl Malmgren highlights the following notion:

The insertion of blank spaces in the text, even in the form of chapter endings, necessarily creates a gap across which the reader’s imagination must leap. If that gap serves as a transition between different times in the narrative, different speakers in the narrative, or different kinds or modes of narrative, the reader’s imagination is “thrown” into that breach to fill it with appropriate connections. (1985:114)

The open endings inevitably lead the reader to deduct that the fictional world stretches beyond the pages of the novel and that a world exists for these characters outside of the text itself. This is further emphasized when characters continuously appear and disappear in more than one of Auster’s novels and links can be found between various characters. Auster’s characters’ stories

have no endings, because their journeys could not end where we leave them, they have merely transcended through the liminal space of his fiction and entered a world beyond fiction itself. Furthermore, his novels end in such a way that it is clear to the reader that the characters have gone through a certain process of self-discovery and have transcended boundaries and that they now will have a new beginning. In effect, the novel ends with the beginning of a new journey, as I highlighted in chapter two of this dissertation. Malmgren quotes Raymond Federman who said:

To write is to produce meaning and not to re-produce a pre-existing meaning... As such fiction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a re-creation of reality; it can only be a REALITY – an autonomous reality whose only relation to the real world is to improve the world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth. (1985:14)

We acknowledge that fiction is not reality, but in order to derive pleasure from a text and obtain meaning from a text it is necessary to believe, for the duration of the reading process, that what we read is real. As Schmid states: “Fictional texts are, as a rule, not fictive, but real... Fiction should rather be understood as the representation of a distinct, autonomous, inner-literary reality” (2010:21-22). Even though we know it is impossible for characters to exist beyond fiction and carry on with their lives after the novel has ended, it is still possible as a fictional construct. Auster’s novels demand that we acknowledge these characters’ existence beyond the pages of his fiction. In *Travels in the Scriptorium* it is evident that their stories do not come to an end at the ending of the novels, but that they carry on with their lives just as, in reality, we carry on with ours. Consider the following:

Have you ever been in love, Anna?  
Several times.  
Are you married?  
I was.  
Was?  
My husband died three years ago.  
What was his name?

David. David Zimmer.  
What happened?  
He had a bad heart.  
I'm responsible for that, too, aren't I?  
Not really... Only indirectly.  
I'm so sorry.  
Don't be. Without you, I never would have met David in the first place.  
Believe me, Mr. Blank, it isn't your fault, you do what you have to do, and then things happen. Good things, and bad things both. That's the way it is. We might be the ones who suffer, but there's a reason for it, a good reason, and anyone who complains about it doesn't understand what it means to be alive. (Auster, 2008:25-26)

Anna's story does not come to a definite close at the end of *In the Country of Last Things*; years have gone by and she grew older and lived a life of her own outside and independent of the text. When Anna first enters the room Mr. Blank cannot understand why she no longer looks as young as the girl in the picture he has of her and she says the following: "Time, Mr. Blank... You understand the meaning of time, don't you? This is me thirty-five years ago" (Auster, 2008:15). After her story had come to an end and we lost track of her doings, she married Zimmer, main protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*, and they had spent a life together. Zimmer also died in the meantime which further blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction as it indicates that these characters do not live infinite lives, but a life-span similar to our own. They exist, feel, experience and inevitably die just as we do in our reality. As the character Samuel Farr tells Mr. Blank: "Do I look dead, Mr. Blank... We all go through our rough moments, of course, but I'm just as alive as you are, believe me" (Auster, 2008:87).

It becomes clear that not only main protagonists of earlier novels feature in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, but secondary characters also obtain an important status and become central figures in this world. Samuel Farr, as discussed in chapter two, is a secondary character in *In the Country of Last Things*, but one of the protagonists in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Some

characters still do not break their silence, but their presence in this world is made known through means of photographs left on the desk in Mr. Blank's room:

He looks at another ten pictures with the same disappointing results. An old man in a wheelchair, as thin and delicate as a sparrow, wearing the dark glasses of the blind. A grinning woman with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, wearing a 1920s flapper dress and a cloche hat. A frighteningly obese man with an immense hairless head and a cigar jutting from his mouth. Another young woman, this one Chinese, dressed in a dancer's leotard. A dark-haired man with a waxed mustache, decked out in tails and a top hat. A young man sleeping on the grass in what looks like a public park. An older man, perhaps in his mid-fifties, lying on a sofa with his legs propped up on a pile of pillows. A bearded, scraggly-looking homeless person sitting on a sidewalk with his arms around a large mutt. A chubby black man in his sixties holding up a Warsaw telephone book from 1937-38. A slender young man sitting at a table with five cards in his hand and a stack of poker chips in front of him. (Auster, 2008:45)

From this paragraph we recognize quite a few of Auster's characters, including Effing, Kitty Wu and Barber from *Moon Palace*; the secondary character Ed Victory from *Oracle Night*; and Willy G. Christmas from *Timbuktu*.

*Travels in the Scriptorium*, in this way, gains a lot of significance for avid Auster readers, as it provides intimate details of characters' lives after they have left the preceding novels. Calinescu (1993:238) writes that on a *naive* level reading a piece of fiction is playing a game of make-believe and that the reader's interest in the game is at least in part akin to that of a recipient of gossip, of one who is made privy to the secrets of other people – imaginary people in the event. He expands on this idea as follows:

By its very nature, a *normal* fictional text promises to make certain significant disclosures about certain interesting inhabitants of a fictional world. The logic of the novel is in a way analogous to the logic of disclosing secrets, but whereas in reality we know the people whose secrets excite us when they are revealed to us, in literature we must first get acquainted with them, since we usually are not interested in the secrets of people whom we do not know. The writer's art consists to a large



extent in making such imaginary beings and their world present to the reader's mind. (Calinescu, 1993:239-240)

The very fact that characters disappear and then continuously reappear throughout Auster's *oeuvre* gives these characters an important stature. We come to know them and we come to expect to find them in some form or another in his work and when they do not feature in one novel it comes as a disappointment; their absence is felt. The effect is that these characters become familiar and we feel that we develop actual connections with them, much like we develop connections with the real people in our everyday lives. Each time the characters reappear in a novel we receive a small part of their secret lives, we regard this part as a piece of "gossip" and these characters, albeit imaginary beings, become real presences in our, the readers, minds. An example of this is when Mr. Blank has a conversation with Sophie, Fanshawe's wife in *The Locked Room*. For the first time Sophie speaks her mind about what happened after Fanshawe vanished from the novel and we get an idea of what she went through and what emotional turmoil it caused her. She says:

Fanshawe was an extremely troubled person. So many good qualities, so many fine things in him, but at bottom he wanted to destroy himself, and in the end he managed to do it. He turned against me, he turned against his work, and then he walked out of his life and disappeared. (Auster, 2008:105-106)

Sophie, who is only a secondary character and remains silent throughout *The Locked Room*, gains a voice in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. This is the first time we regard her as an actual human being who must have gone through very hard times after her husband left her alone to take care of their baby. *Travels in the Scriptorium* therefore acknowledges Sophie as a character who deserves some attention and who deserves to be known. We can no longer disregard her as unimportant, because she now has a presence that demands attention. This is only one example of many which can be found in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Even those characters that still

remain silent are brought to the foreground in this novel, as we now begin to think about them as real figures in a real world instead of only fictional constructs functioning within a fictional realm. They gain a persona of their own and break free of the textual bonds imposed on them so that, in the end, they no longer function only as words on a page, but as physical beings in our imaginations. When reading *Travels in the Scriptorium* without any prior knowledge of Auster's oeuvre the reader is merely presented with random facts about random characters and it would hardly seem significant that, for instance, Anna married David. The novel would seem pointless. However, with knowledge of these characters' histories as portrayed in previous novels, the information Auster provides in *Travels in the Scriptorium* becomes highly relevant and sought after by the reader.

*Travels in the Scriptorium*, however, does not merely enlighten the reader on characters' development and their lives beyond the pages of fiction, but also explicitly provides the reader with links between the various characters. As one character at a time enters Mr. Blank's room in order to confront him about the "quests" on which he sent them. During this confrontation much is revealed about this particular character and this information could easily have been overlooked on the first initial reading of the novels. An example of this is found when Daniel Quinn, main protagonist of *City of Glass*, acts as Mr. Blank's lawyer and the following is revealed in his conversation with Mr. Blank:

You sent me on more missions than anyone else, Quinn says. Do you remember the Stillman case?

A little, Mr. Blank replies. Peter Stillman. Junior and Senior, if I'm not mistaken. One of them wore white clothes. I forget which now, but I think it was the son.

Exactly right. The son. And then there was that strange business with Fanshawe.

Sophie's first husband. The madman who disappeared.

Right again. But we mustn't forget the passport either. A small point, I suppose, but it was tough work just the same.

What passport?  
 My passport. The one that Anna Blume found when you sent her on her mission.  
 Anna? Do you know Anna?  
 Of course. Everyone knows Anna. She's something of a legend around here.  
 She deserves to be. There's no woman like her in the world.  
 And then, last but not least, there was my aunt, Molly Fitzsimmons, the woman who married Walt Rawley. I helped him write his memoirs.  
 (Auster, 2008:133-134)

Walt Rawley is the main protagonist in Auster's 1994 novel *Mr Vertigo* and on an initial first reading of *Mr Vertigo* one can easily overlook the fact that Quinn helps Walt to write his memoirs. In the above-mentioned conversation Quinn recaps his appearances in Auster's various novels and if readers had neglected to discover these links on the first reading of the novels, they would be tempted to retrace their steps and reread Auster's novels in order to verify that such links exist. Calinescu calls this process *rereading for the secret* and explains:

The suspicion that the text is double, that it has a manifest content but also, like a suitcase with a false bottom, a hidden one, will direct the reader's attention to structural or strategic aspects of the work. ...a good reader will always also reread for the secret, that is, will always try to discover what a read text may hold away, conceal, or veil, and for what reasons. Rereading, in other words, is always also reading between the lines, reading to uncover something hidden. (1993:242-243)

Upon a first reading of Auster's novels many of the links between characters can be missed and even the reappearances of these characters can be overlooked as they often appear in such a subtle and seemingly insignificant manner. The characters in *Travels in the Scriptorium* demand that readers retrace their steps and reread Auster's novels. As the reader you would want to uncover as much as you can about these characters and *Travels in the Scriptorium* does not provide you with all the information, but rather, in a manner of speaking, provides you with the key with which you can unlock the code of Auster's fiction. It is still the reader's responsibility to go back to earlier novels and try to connect the dots which represent these characters' lives.

Another example of a secondary character who gains importance in *Travels in the Scriptorium* is the character James P. Flood. His role in *The Locked Room* was so limited that it could easily have been overlooked. The only mention made of Flood in *The Locked Room* is in a chapter outline of a story, *Neverland*, written by Fanshawe in which Flood supposedly has a dream. This one sentence in *The Locked Room* brings Flood into existence, but this is also where his story ends since the contents of *Neverland* are never revealed and Auster never explores Flood's role in that fictional and embedded novel. Flood now confronts Mr. Blank and tries to find out what the dream, which caused him to come into being, is about. Mr. Blank replies that it should not matter as this dream is merely an element in a work of fiction, to which Flood replies: "It's important to me, Mr. Blank. My whole life depends on it. Without that dream, I'm nothing, literally nothing" (Auster, 2008:59). This passage is important as it highlights decisions authors have to make during the writing process. Auster could easily have explored Flood's role further in Fanshawe's novel and provided Flood with a life and a story, but it would not have served any purpose in *The Locked Room* and so Flood became one name mentioned in one short sentence. This passage comments on the possibilities which authors face and from which they then have to choose in order to determine in which direction they are going to take their stories. In *The Locked Room* Flood is insignificant and one can read over the sentence without even realising that a new character has been created. This character is discarded without a second thought, but in *Travels in the Scriptorium* he is given a voice and when one then goes back to *The Locked Room* his presence in that novel stands out and can no longer be ignored. This can change the initial meaning derived from the novel and change the analysis made during a first reading.

Auster effectively uses a metafictional device which Waugh calls “flashforward” in that time has elapsed between his novels and the writing of *Travels in the Scriptorium* and in this later novel attention is brought to certain details found in previous novels which was overlooked upon a first reading. Waugh explains the significance of this device as follows:

The device of the “flashforward” gives importance to apparently contingent details which are normally passed over in a first reading of a detective story. Such details normally only become significant in the light of knowledge of the ending, during a second reading. (Waugh, 1984:83)

An insignificant character such as James P. Flood gains significance when attention is drawn to him in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The novel Fanshawe writes, in a similar fashion, gains importance after it becomes clear that Flood’s story is located in this novel. This proves that detail is of utmost importance and it also further suggests that when reading Auster’s novels one must not disregard any of the characters, but pay attention to all of them, even though they might at first seem insignificant. His characters form a community in which each and every member serve a specific function and in order to derive meaning from the text and arrive at a holistic interpretation of these texts, one is obliged to regard each character, no matter how insignificant they may seem, as central and pivotal in the broader scheme of his work. This is ultimately the “game” Auster plays with his readers. He leaves a trail of clues which we need to locate ourselves and link together in order to arrive at a meaningful whole.

The fact that many of these characters are absent rather than present in his texts is also highly significant, since it contributes to the parallels that can be drawn between the world Auster creates and our own realities. As Waugh writes:

It is ‘because’ symbols are not reality and do not embody any of the actual properties of the world that they allow us to perceive this world, and ultimately to construct it for ourselves and be constructed within it. Writing necessitates “absence”... (1984:57-58)

In the novel what is divulged to us about a certain fictional world centres on what is necessary for the reader to understand the character's role. It is impossible to encompass all elements, all characters and every single detail of this world, because then, surely, a novel will stretch on into infinity. The author needs to decide what information is important regarding the story he wants to tell and this information is emphasised. We, however, construct a world using this information, but also a world that stretches beyond the information given in our minds. When a character enters a room and then leaves again we follow this character in our minds even when the author stays in the room. We fill in the blanks using our imagination. For us, the readers, these characters are not merely fictional constructs; they exist and have lives similar to our own. We identify with the characters we read about and, more often than not, the novels we value most are the novels in which the characters have personality traits and problems similar to our own.

Characters make us feel less alone in this world, they give us hope and they motivate us to work through difficult times, because we believe that if they could make it through their difficult situations, then so can we. We read books, go to the movies, watch television shows and theatre productions, not just to pass the time, but to understand the world in which we live and to gain some sense of what life is all about and what it means to be a human being. Telling stories is a human tradition that began long before writing was invented and writing, itself, was invented in order to tell stories and make it a more permanent fixture in our world. These characters become important in our lives. If we take Greek and Roman mythology into consideration and look at the way these nations hero-worshipped these characters, their gods, it is evident that a fictional character can obtain a real and important role in a person's life. We do not value an actor because of his personality and because of his life off-screen, but rather

because of the roles he plays on-screen. Characters become as real to us as if they actually exist in this world and this is even more so for the author who creates them, because it is his responsibility to bring them into this world, present them to the world and make them believable.

Auster succeeded in this and brought it to its pivotal role with *Travels in the Scriptorium*, because once you have read this novel these characters are no longer merely names on a page, but people with feelings and expectations and lives. As the author enters the text itself, these characters' world spills over into our own and though they remain invisible, we cannot deny them their existence, as is stated at the end of the novel:

Without him, we are nothing, but the paradox is that we, the figments of another mind, will outlive the mind that made us, for once we are thrown into the world, we continue to exist forever, and our stories go on being told, even after we are dead. (Auster, 2008:144)

And just like they will outlive their creator, so too will they outlive us, the readers. They carry forth the significance of storytelling, they are an emblem for the roles characters fulfil in our lives and they do embody beings in our world and our reality, even if only in our thoughts and our imaginations. It begs the question of whether the awareness of these characters influences the interpretations of the novels? Most definitely.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**



Auster's fiction presents us with a unique literary world, a world which stretches our imagination and forces us to acknowledge the unknown and include it in our framework of a possible reality. In *Notes from a Composition Book (1967)*, included in his *Collected Poems*, Auster (2004c:203) writes: "There is no world except the human world. (By *human* I mean everything that can be seen, felt, heard, thought, and imagined.)" If we can imagine a world, such as the one Auster creates, in which characters exist beyond the pages of fiction and are able to function, much as we function in our reality, then such a world exists. It exists in our thoughts, in our minds and in our perceptions of it in our imaginations. Auster also states that "...the world has no objective existence. It exists only insofar as we are able to perceive it. And our perceptions are necessarily limited. Which means that the world is limited, that it stops somewhere. But where it stops for me is not necessarily where it stops for you"(2004c:203). We cannot deny Auster his fictional world and we cannot prevent him from creating a world which stretches beyond fiction itself, because each of us has an understanding of the world which is unique and in each of our worlds exist some elements which might not exist in others' worlds. If I were in Auster's position I would also choose to create a world for my characters, a world where they could live freely and where they would not be limited by fictional constraints imposed upon them. A place where they can rest after the emotional and physical turmoil I have put them through in my novels. Auster's characters endure hardships, but along the way they have become his companions and he knows them as friends, knowing each intimate detail about them, and so he gives them a final home where they are rewarded for everything they have done for him. For what would an author be without his characters?

Even before Auster began writing novels he was preoccupied with language and the lack thereof to accurately convey meaning and worlds. This can be seen in various essays and poems

written by Auster during the years before he started focusing his attention on novel-writing. Mere actions and words cannot carry over what he, finally wanted to say and write about. In one of his early compositions, entitled *White Spaces*, published in 1979, he writes the following:

In the beginning, I wanted to speak of arms and legs, of jumping up and down, of bodies tumbling and spinning, of enormous journeys through space, of cities, of deserts, of mountain ranges stretching farther than the eye can see. Little by little, however, as these words began to impose themselves on me, the things I wanted to do seemed finally to be of no importance. Reluctantly, I abandoned all my witty stories, all my adventures of far-away places, and began, slowly and painfully, to empty my mind. Now emptiness is all that remains: a space, no matter how small, in which whatever is happening can be allowed to happen. (Auster, 2004c:160)

Auster does, in fact, write about characters that go on enormous journeys through space and he does write about cities and deserts and mountain ranges stretching farther than the eye can see. This, however, is not what his novels are about. He uses these spaces to interact with the inner worlds within his characters, the inner journeys they undergo in order to finally disappear from the text. Liminality is one of the most prominent and most important features in Auster's work, because each character enters a space which turns out to be empty. These spaces need to be filled as events unfold and as the characters evolve into new beings, i.e fictional beings who become aware of their fictionality and who face the possibility of disappearing forever into a void of nothingness. His spaces, even when they do encompass an entire desert, reflect the inner turmoil of each character and become a canvas which depicts their journey towards rebirth and reintegration into a society beyond the world we read about in his novels.

Auster's poetry, just like his novels, resonates with silence and disappearances. Consider his poem *Shadow to Shadow*:

Against the facade of evening  
shadows, fire, and silence.  
Not even silence, but its fire-

the shadow  
cast by a breath.

To enter the silence of this wall,  
I must leave myself behind. (Auster, 2004c: 84)

The wall represents a boundary which needs to be crossed, much like the boundaries Auster's characters transgress when they leave the liminal spaces of his fiction and in order to do so they, too, need to leave themselves (their earlier versions) behind. This transcendence was illustrated using Turner's (1974: 38-41) four phases of public conflict, which include a breach of regular, norm-governed social relations; a phase of *mounting crisis* which widens this breach; the phase of *redressive action* or *escalation*; and, finally, the *rebirth* or *reintegration* into a society. These journeys the characters embark upon are usually instigated by an event and usually another character sets this event in motion. In *White Spaces* Auster explores this idea when he writes the following:

A man sets out on a journey to a place he has never been before. Another man comes back. A man comes to a place that has no name, that has no landmarks to tell him where he is. Another man decides to come back. A man writes letters from nowhere, from the white space that has opened up his mind. The letters are never received. The letters are never sent. Another man sets out on a journey in search of the first man. This second man becomes more and more like the first man, until he, too, is swallowed up by the whiteness. A third man sets out on a journey with no hope of ever getting anywhere. He wanders. He continues to wander. For as long as he remains in the realm of the naked eye, he continues to wander. (2004c:158)

This passage, written quite a number of years before the publication of his first novel, resonates with the themes and plot-lines we find throughout Auster's fiction. While reading this passage we can, in our mind's eye, see Quinn meeting Peter Stillman and following Stillman Senior aimlessly through the city; we can see Anna Blume as she writes a letter which she has no way of sending; we see Black at his desk writing words we will never be able to read; Effing who

embarks on his journey in the desert; Zimmer who tries to find Mann; and the narrator of *The Locked Room* on his quest to find Fanshawe and who, finally, becomes Fanshawe. All of these characters are finally swallowed by white spaces once they reach the end of the text.

It therefore becomes clear that Auster's fiction does not revolve around these events and the locations as much as it revolves around the specific characters. Some spaces could even include the minds of characters, as we see in *The Locked Room*, where attention is paid to the inner details of these characters' lives and their thoughts and emotions are central to the story. The physical environment, here, does not actually pose a barrier between one character and society, but the mind of this character becomes the barrier and how this character perceives the world becomes a barrier which we observe in the text. The characters link these texts and combine the various novels into a whole. The characters are the key features in the novels and demand attention. They provide the links with which to uncover frameworks that not only include one setting and one world contained within one novel, but that expands until it reaches far beyond what we can grasp and that which we read about.

Once you discover that not only the main protagonists, but also the secondary characters, play an important role in the novels, you cannot help but try and uncover the links these characters provide. It becomes a game between the reader, the text and the author and the end result is to connect the dots until a final holistic reading can be arrived at. This takes effort on the part of the reader as he should continuously go back to earlier novels and identify characters that he might have overlooked upon his first initial reading. The characters that provide these very important links often fade into the background as main protagonists dominate the novel and one tends to focus only on these protagonists and disregard the secondary characters. A secondary character, however, can obtain importance and the stature of a main protagonist in

another novel and thus each character should be remembered and each character's link to another should be taken note of.

As soon as the links between the characters are discovered, certain parallels can be drawn between these characters and their various journeys through the spaces of Auster's fiction. These parallels include the four phases leading to their reintegration into society; the spaces which are directly affected by these characters' inner turmoil and shift as each character draws closer to the boundary between the liminal world and the final fictional world outside of the text; the realisation that they are merely fictional constructs and that the world they thought to be real is merely a representation of a world created by an author; and, finally, the continuing disappearance and reappearance of fixed characters throughout Auster's *oeuvre*.

Once these parallels are discovered and one begins to pay particular attention to characters undergoing similar journeys, one discovers that a novel does not merely tell the story of the main protagonist, but also contains the stories of some of the secondary characters. Some protagonists, in this way, are camouflaged by the text, but do emerge once the reader knows what to look out for. Auster writes: "It comes down to this: that everything should count, that everything should be a part of it, even the things I do not or cannot understand" (2004c:161). In his novels the smallest details can be significant and can contain important information regarding future novels, and so everything does indeed count and forms part of the larger framework of his fiction. Even when, at first, you do not understand how one piece fits into the bigger picture, it will start to make sense in the end.

Metafiction, then, plays a crucial role in Auster's fiction as characters become aware of their status as fictional constructs and Auster enters his texts on a regular basis. When we read *Travels in the Scriptorium* we find an old man, representing Auster as author and creator,

confined to a small space from which he cannot escape. This old man embodies the author's involvement with his characters and allows our reality to spill over into the fictional reality so that these two worlds finally merge and become one. It instigates a transgression of boundaries, eliminating the boundaries in the process, so that the framework of Auster's fiction ultimately encompasses not only the world contained within his texts or the fictional world he creates for his characters, but our world as well. Similarly, in *White Spaces* Auster writes:

I put one foot in front of the other, and then I put the other foot in front of the first, which has now become the other and which will again become the first. I walk within these four walls, and for as long as I am here I can go anywhere I like. I can go from one end of the room to the other and touch any of the four walls, or even all the walls, one after the other, exactly as I like. If the spirit moves me, I can stand in the center of the room. If the spirit moves me in another direction, I can stand in any one of the four corners. Sometimes I touch one of the four corners and in this way bring myself into contact with two walls at the same time. Now and then I let my eyes roam up to the ceiling, and when I am particularly exhausted by my efforts there is always the floor to welcome my body. The light, streaming through the windows, never casts the same shadow twice, and at any given moment I feel myself on the brink of discovering some terrible, unimagined truth. These are moments of great happiness for me. (Auster, 2004c:159)

This passage is very much like what we read about in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, with the author trapped in a small room from which he cannot escape. The scriptorium, as I've mentioned, is a room in which writing takes place and in this case it is the mind of the author in which he creates the characters and stories which he then converts into novels. Again metafiction is highlighted as Auster explores writing as a process and the author's relationship with the world and the characters he creates.

This dissertation, then, has argued that invisible characters, as they appear in Auster's novels, serve a very specific function within the interpretative framework of a text and that they should be considered in order to arrive at a holistic interpretation, and analysis, of Auster's

*oeuvre*. As I have explored the various novels and other writings that date before Auster started to concentrate on novel writing, such as his poetry and other musings, it becomes clear that from the very beginning of his writing career Auster wanted to convey in his texts something other than what can be merely stated or shown through actions and settings. The characters in Auster's fiction, then, become the key figures that provide links between various novels and change the various interpretations which one can arrive at. Should one novel be read separately, the interpretation will vary from the holistic interpretation arrived at when reading his entire *oeuvre*. These characters are thus included in the novels as part of Auster's narrative technique, serving specific functions and contributing to the structure of his fiction in a postmodern genre.

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