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Inge Birgitte Siegumfeldt

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Paul Auster's Private 'I's

Af Inge Birgitte Siegumfeldt

Over the past century, we have witnessed a decisive shift in our perceptions of reality and literature as tradition and knowledge have become questioned in new and increasingly complex ways. In *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882,¹⁾ Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. God is dead, he said, and we have killed him with our persistent questioning of his existence and the meaning of ours. But, says Nietzsche, the death of God has liberated philosophy. We are no longer restrained by the confinements of theology. Roughly at the same time, or a little later, Freud was discovering the subconscious and presented theories of the psyche which were to have an immense impact upon our perception of human life. Natural science, too, leapt forward with enormous strides.

The emergence of new theories and ideas multiplied our perceptions of the world and complicated reality in the extreme. Where, formerly, human existence was closely connected to religion, to rules and dogma, to fairly simple perceptions of the human condition, now, at the turn of the century, the Creator of the universe was presumed dead, the centre, the anchor of our world, guaranteeing truth and meaning and fair judgement in human life, irrevocably lost.

Moreover, men and women alike were supposed to have subconscious layers unknown to them, governed largely by instincts, indeed, by sexuality, and the pursuit of natural laws revealed unexplored areas of enormous dimension.

From Modernism to Postmodernism

Centuries of neatly ordered lives and simple explanations were over as we entered what was to become a turbulent era of experimentation, modernity, and breaking of the conventions. In literature modernism became the prevalent mode in the 1920s extending into the following two decades with its emphasis on 'making literature new', new themes, new forms, as we saw it initially among the British writers, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, and in the writings and ideas of the Americans, first and foremost of T.S. Eliot (who had lived in England since 1915), but also Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, later Hemingway and John Dos Passos.

The modernists recognized art for what it was, namely an artefact, rather than accurate representation of reality. They were very much aware of the fact that we no longer have a common reality, and that the world is construed, in effect invented, by the individual, and that all

¹⁾ In English it was given what today is the rather misleading title *The Gay Science*.

representation must be subjective. Therefore, traditions and conventions which had formerly dictated rules of linearity, coherence, meaning in a work of literature could and should be questioned and broken.

After modernism came postmodernism. As a term 'post-modernism' has caused a lot of trouble. How can we possibly use a term that denotes 'something after modernism' when modernism itself, or what is modern, logically speaking, is always now, always the present. Moreover, if postmodernism is a reaction, as indeed it considers itself, to modernism, rather than a continuation of it, the term is misleading. It „contains its enemy within,“²⁾ as Ihab Hassan says, and evokes what it wishes to surpass.

However, where the critics may feel uneasy about the term postmodernism, they have severe disagreements about the mode to which it refers, and some will argue that postmodernism is not even a mode, but rather, or merely, an attitude to art and life where anything goes. Postmodernism encompasses literature, psychology, philosophy, sociology, criticism, linguistics, and politics. It allows, even delights in, the merging of most of the disciplines of the humanities in writings deeply aware of their own fictional character.

A characteristic feature of post-modernism is precisely this all-inclusiveness the interweaving of ideas from widely different fields of thought and incorporation of textual material from all corners of our culture, ancient as well as modern. Postmodernism is thus interdisciplinary. It is also intertextual, in the

sense that it excels in parody, pastiche, imitation of former modes of writing and alludes to, or refers to, other texts and other writers.

Auster's Private Eyes

In Paul Auster's story „Ghosts“ from *The New York Trilogy*, there is a rather absurd scene where two detectives, Blue and Black, have been employed to follow each other. Blue has disguised himself as a bum and asks Black for some spare change. Standing among garbage cans in a dark alley - perhaps an allusion to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* - they discuss literature.

After another good laugh, Black says. And then there's the story of the time Thoreau came to visit Whitman. That's a good one, too.

Was he another poet? Not exactly. But a great writer just the same. He's the one who lived alone in the woods.

Oh yes, says Blue, not wanting to carry his ignorance too far. Someone once told me about him. Very fond of nature he was. Is that the man you mean?

Precisely, answers Black. Henry David Thoreau. He came down from Massachusetts for a little while and paid a call on Whitman in Brooklyn. But the day before that he came right here to Orange Street. Any particular reason? Plymouth Church. He wanted to hear Henry Ward Beecher's sermon.

A lovely spot, says Blue, thinking of the pleasant hours he has spent in the grassy yard. I like to go there myself.

Many great men have gone there, says Black. Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens - they all walked down this street and went into the

²⁾ I. Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987) 87.

church.

Ghosts.

Yes, there are ghosts all around us.³⁾

The mentioning of the great fathers of the American literary canon, Whitman, Thoreau, later Hawthorne, emphasizes the intertextual aspect in Auster's writing.

„Ghosts,“ moreover, is a parody of a detective story, and utterly absurd in the sense that a number of investigators spy on each other. Mr. Blue is appointed by Mr. White to follow Mr. Black, who lives, as we have just seen, in Orange Street. Eventually he realizes that he himself is kept under surveillance by Mr. Brown, who in turn is spied upon by Mr. Black - or is it Mr. White? But who is behind this extensive network of surveillance? The point is that no one is. Everyone is spied upon in an endless chain of detectives.

Auster's choice of names for these characters, Blue, Black, White, Brown, imply their lack of authenticity, and emphasize the parodic element in the story. They are not supposed to be real detectives; they perform the function of spying, they are private eyes - or rather 'I's - investigating life. And as such, they are analogous to the author, the writing 'I', who records reality, spies on life and writes about it in his or her own subjective representations.

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

Another ghost.

Exactly.

Sounds mysterious.⁴⁾

(p. 209)

Auster's authors are private eyes who 'have no life of their own,' no real existencethey are ghosts.

This leads us back to the discussion of postmodernism and its preoccupation with the disappearance of the author. Where in 1882, Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, almost a hundred years later, Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the Author in a collection of essays entitled *Image, Music, Text*, published in 1977. After the various reductions of the authorial function in modernism, new criticism, and structuralism, Barthes in particular, but also Michel Foucault and others, finally did away with the idea that the author presides over his or her book like God presides over his Creation. A work of literature was no longer a small universe of characters, events, significance, and coherence, but a text governed by the mechanisms of language. The author, Barthes argues, cannot stand outside his creation as its inventor guaranteeing coherence and meaning to the narrative. He becomes part of his writing through writing, he is already inscribed in language. In other words, when employing language to render an event, a thought, or an impression, the writer enters the linguistic domain and becomes nothing more than the instance writing. He is part of the book.

This idea of the author becoming part of his or her own writing, indeed becoming writing is often probed in postmodern literature. An early, and very good example is found in Lawrence Durrell's *The Avignon Quintet*, 1974-1985, where we find a series of narratives within narratives, authors within authors within authors. One of these authors, strangely, is

³⁾ P. Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (New York Penguin, 1990) 207.

⁴⁾ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 209.

eaten by moths.

Towards the end of Paul Auster's „City of Glass“ also from *The New York Trilogy*, Quinn, a detective and writer, rids himself of all his clothes and possessions and sits down naked in an empty room with a red notebook. When the narrator of the story, the ‘I’, accompanied, significantly, by Paul Auster of the *Auster Detective Agency*, finally locate Quinn, all that is left of him is the red notebook. He has inscribed himself in his text. Flesh has become paper, his thoughts signs on the page, the author nothing more than language.

Language

This emphasis on language is characteristic of postmodernism. The interdisciplinary approach to writing, previously mentioned, is rooted in the perception that all disciplines are nothing but narrativessystems of thought and ideas presented in texts. History, for instance, deals with events recorded. Any historian, however, will inevitably select facts according to what he or she thinks is relevant and what is not, and he will try to make sense of a sequence of events by finding causes and effects. But having made choices as to which instances to include and which to leave out, the historian has already expressed an opinion and passed a verdict, and his representation of a historical event is no longer objective. So, history is no more accurate, no more real, than fiction, and the historian a person recording events as he sees them. We seek facts, explanations, and consummations, but in effect we can never be sure we reach the correct conclusions. We pass judgements, but they are not necessarily truths. In consequence,

we are all inventors of our own individual reality, in effect, we write fiction about our own lives and exist as part of our narratives.

So writing, the activity of writing, of constructing realities around us, is central in the postmodern discussion. It takes on a very concrete function in Auster's *Moon Palace*, 1989, where Marco Fogg furnishes his flat with texts. He has inherited a thousand books from his uncle packed into carton boxes, and since Marco cannot afford to buy furniture, he forms a bed, table, a couch, and even chairs out of the boxes. Later, when he has entirely run out of money, he sells the books in order to survive until his graduation from college. But not until he has read each volume. He feels he must earn the right to sell them by first reading them, and mourns his uncle in the process.

That was when I started reading Uncle Victor's books. Two weeks after the funeral, I picked out one of the boxes at random, slit the tape carefully with a knife, and read everything that was inside it. It proved to be a strange mixture, packed with no apparent order or purpose. There were novels and plays, history books and travel books, chess guides and detective stories, science fiction and works of philosophy - an absolute chaos of print.⁵⁾

The emphasis on interdisciplinarity and intertextuality is implied by the fact that the books are not ordered, but come in a mixture of all genres. Each box, as it were, is a postmodern framework of texts cutting across boundaries of genre and time.

Another instance of the merging of life

⁵⁾ P. Auster, *Moon Palace* (New York Penguin, 1989) 21.

and writing is the scene in „City of Glass.“ Quinn, the detective, has been employed to prevent the murder of Peter Stillman Jr. by his father, Peter Stillman Sr. Quinn follows his suspect through what appears to be absolutely aimless wandering through the city of New York. After a few days, however, Quinn begins to record Stillman Sr.’s routes on a map of the city, and he realizes that the hikes take the shape of letters, each day another, in order to finally form the word *stower of babel*.⁶⁾

The allusion, naturally, is to God’s confusion of the tongues, ultimately the inability of language to produce significance. And it is precisely the lack of correspondence between language and the object it is employed to describe which epitomizes Quinn’s struggles with his own writing.

In his article on *The New York Trilogy*,⁷⁾ Frederik Stjernfelt has checked Stillman’s routes on the map of Manhattan and found that they correspond only to some extent. He points out that Stillman and Quinn must have walked straight through blocks of houses, locked gates, and inaccessible gardens. So, either Auster has not done his research properly, or the lack of correspondence between the actual map of the city and Stillman’s wanderings indicates that New York is an imaginary space. After all it is referred to as the ‘City of Glass’ and as such it must be transparent.

The Tower of Babel, naturally, could also well refer to the American melting pot, to the coexistence of races, traditions, tongues, which perhaps does not constitute as homogenous a people as we would like to think. Auster could well be commenting

on the lack of communication and understanding between the various social and racial groups in America. But the passage also implies a perception of the city as writing, as text. The buildings, the architecture, the roads, the people living in it, black or white, young or old, rich or poor - everything as part of a framework, a living organism, each constituting a sign in elaborate and multifaceted the text of New York. Like the original unique language before Babel was disseminated, so is the unity between social and individual existence shattered in modern America.

Reading the City

Auster’s writing is always set in America and here predominantly in the city. His characters live, love, and die in the city, and they wander. They take endless, aimless, but highly significant walks in their city or throughout their country.

Quinn and Stillman in New York, Marco Fogg walks across the desert from Utah to California searching for his own and America’s past, and Benjamin Sachs, the hero anarchist of *Leviathan* roams all over the country blowing up Statues of Liberty in local town squares. This excessive migration in Auster’s books refers not only to meaning as something which always wanders in and between texts, but also to the quest for identity, individual as well as national.

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

⁶⁾ See Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, pp. 82-84.

⁷⁾ In *Fredag 3* (1991).

as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within... By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again.⁸⁾

In Auster's perception, and that very much in line with postmodern thought, any space, be it New York or the entire continent, becomes a text. The only way to keep a text alive is by reading it, by mediation. Each time a book or a poem is read, its words become reborn in the reader's mind, and Auster's characters do exactly the same with the city. They get to know it by walking all over it. In a sense, they read the city, and in the process possess it. They give it life and define it against the rest of the world, and while defining the space in which they move, they also pursue a stronger sense of identity.

So, several of Auster's stories deal with *bildung*, the process of maturing, the acquisition of experience, and the achievement of an understanding of selfhood. It is significant that the majority of his characters are orphans. The typical protagonist is a young man searching for his roots. He will get entirely lost at some point, in several cases almost starve to

death,⁹⁾ only finally to become restored to health, physical as well as psychological, and find some coherence or purpose in life. These stories fascinate and thrill. Auster has an incredible gift for adventure, mystery, and surprise.

Moon Palace

In *Moon Palace* Marco Fogg is on the threshold of adulthood, orphaned, and with no particular aim in life. After various coincidences and hardships - he nearly starves to death in Central Park - he is employed by an eccentric old man, who tells Marco the story of his life. It is very much a tale from the Wild West of gun fights, violent deaths, everlasting love, and a treasure hidden in a secret cave in the desert. We move through the American landscape with these characters who trace part of its history, while Marco finds both his father and grandfather, whom he has never known. So, the quest for origin, for understanding the past runs in two parallel stories. Marco's own family history and the history of America.

Leviathan

Leviathan is equally well-construed and full of good stories. It focuses on the concept of freedom, a central ingredient in American mythology and self-perception.

Through several misfortunes, Benjamin Sachs becomes involved in a shooting where he kills a man in self-defence. He becomes obsessed with this man's life, locates his wife, and falls in love with her. Soon he realizes that hiding from the police, having left his own family and unable to complete the novel he was working on, he has, in effect, lost his life.

⁸⁾ Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, p. 4.

⁹⁾ Hunger is a favourite theme for Auster and Knut Hamsun a favourite author.

He finds himself in that nowhere which for Auster is also a kind of freedom. The symbol of freedom becomes an obsession for him, and he begins his journey throughout the country blowing up the grand American symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty, in towns on his way. Sachs gives his life to freedom. He is accidentally blown up with one of his own bombs. Auster's point here, naturally, is the lack of correspondence between ideal and reality. Towards the end of the book, he explains that the Statue of Liberty hitherto has been a symbol immune to controversy.

For the past hundred years, it has transcended politics and ideology, standing at the threshold of our country as an emblem of all that is good within us. It represents hope rather than reality, faith rather than facts,

and one would be hard-pressed to find a single person willing to denounce the things it stands for: democracy, freedom, equality under the law. It is the best of what America has to offer the world, and however pained one might be by America's failure to live up to those ideals, the ideals themselves are not in question. They have given comfort to millions. They have instilled the hope in all of us that we might one day live in a better world.¹⁰⁾

Auster is very much an American writer concerned with the moral health of his country, its obligations, and the American experience. He is also very much a postmodern writer preoccupied with the role of the writer, the significance of literature and language. Last but not least, he is a great writer with an extraordinary gift for storytelling. ◆

¹⁰⁾ P. Auster, *Leviathan* (London Faber, 1993) 215-216.

* This article substantially reproduces a paper given at two seminars *Landscapes of Postmodern America*, arranged by Anne Kirsten Pettitt for Engelsklærerforeningen for Fyn, Odense, March 15. 1995; and in Vejle, Aug. 29. 1995, arranged by Jens Bøgh for Engelsklærerforeningen i Vejle Amt.

