Jaime Becerra da Costa

Paul Auster: Narrative and Thought from a Dual Consciousness

The Early Fiction

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Autor

Jaime Becerra da Costa

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e-mail: editoralabirinto@gmail.com

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For my mother and father

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of his first novel in 1985, Paul Auster has come to be considered one of America's most influential novelists. He has also, without doubt, gained both recognition and notoriety of a larger audience by his incursions into film and, sporadically, into theater.

Interestingly enough, Paul Auster's success was first more evident in Europe where he was and, perhaps, still is, considered the 'most French' of American writers. This vision does not correspond to reality; Auster belongs to the sturdy trunk of American storytelling based on the American Renaissance, the American Romantic literature of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. Indeed, much of present day *French* high culture is indebted to American thought, arts and letters. It is beyond the scope of the present study to mention the infatuation, maybe part love-hate relationship, of the French, as pointed representatives of what Europe has felt towards America. Paul Auster has been remarkably well received in Europe which has always provided a receptive ground for American letters; let us remember that Edgar Allan Poe's success and, eventual rescue from oblivion, was due to French symbolism; that Emerson both prefigured and influenced cardinal twentieth century philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida and that, in general, Walt Whitman greatly influenced twentieth century European literature from Modernism to Postmodernism.

In Paul Auster, the American letters have an example of the 'strong poet:' an ironist who approaches philosophy in the same way that Richard Rorty's philosophy salutes literature. Auster's books open their pages to a whole plethora of subjects that have as much to do with literature as with a large variety of concerns related to human existence and endeavors: history, linguistics, theology, and, above all, as we have just mentioned, philosophy. Accordingly, Auster's works are part essay and part fiction.

Since the publication of his novel *City of Glass*, Auster has offered us a vision into his 'interior exile,' a vision of that very personal immigration towards his inner self. The main works that we have selected for the present study: *The New York Trilogy*, *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night* seek to reach a point abstracted from the continuous semiosis of any linguistic attempt. At the same time, these works constitute windows on language itself and are an attempt to bridge the gap between reality and (re-)presentation. Commonsense reality is always perceived as fluid, albeit access to it is continuously perceived as limited and precarious. Auster is intent on studying the duality between reality and representation and offers us, in return, a higher ground to be accessed through a Hawthornean type of parallel world, a 'model miniature of the world' that can be submitted to scrutiny, not because of its simplicity but because of its focusing, over and over, on the aspects of reality that constitute Auster's realm of concerns.

The works analyzed in this book represent an effort on the part of Paul Auster as novelist and literary author in dealing with the complexity of the nature of writing. All of his narratives have heroes who are writers or, in some way or another, approximate the ideal of a writer. In these books there is a concern for what should be the value of inward reality and, likewise, for the value to be attributed to the external realities. It is in the coalescence of these two realms

that Auster's works come to life. It is the self, that ultimate instance, which provides sense —order— to the reality of the various voices —stories— that constitute the reality of experience. Again, one reality always leads to the other and, in their turn, they once again lead to the generation of other stories in a process that parallels that of the continuous semiosis of language. These narratives, stories, address themselves to the ultimate goal of generating genuine thought in an independent way to the specific fields of metaphysics, philosophy or science.

Likewise, Auster penetrates the surface of reality, and takes his readers to the edge of knowable reality, by stepping into the realm of thought and into the foundations of reality as depicted by language which is the same as taking us to the foundations of fiction. Auster opens the door that separates fiction from commonsense experience and, thus, shows us that it is possible to inhabit both worlds. One world is always the way to the other and vice versa. The limits are both language and reality, as well as the silence and the open questions in the form of *non-sequiturs* that lead us, as it were, to consider the Kantian *thing-in-itself*, and on to a preverbal, pre-(re)presentational reality and, therefore, out of logocentric entrapment.

For Auster both fiction and reality, or the *mythos* and the *logos*, share the same metaphorical nature. Both seek meaning out of the world of physical, commonsense reality. This is the task of imaginative license. Under this view, Auster's narrative is metaphysical. Auster seeks epistemological depth by submitting to scrutiny the surfaces of the Postmodern world and by doing this he is truly Postmodern in assessing the materials of reality, dealing with, and ultimately focusing on, the ontological aspects of knowledge.

To the fragmented reality, and to the fragmented self, correspond fragmented narratives that explore the world of possibilities, the

world of multiple voices. At the same time, Auster insists on telling us that the only knowledge possible is that of the self about itself; the self is always led to a deeper and even deeper self-knowledge.

In order to transform thought into writing, Auster's novels make use of metaphors. In this way, the process which results in the creation of metaphors is related both to thought and commonsense reality. Given their quality as entities in constant flux, these stories explain reality, giving no room for a stable, objective and final response. The narrative is perceived as a never-ending process, it is part of an Heraclitean process formed of variations from a central theme which reach in their plurality a 'unifying principle,' in the self, whose attitude could be summarized in the indeterminist aphorism 'I think therefore I evolve.'

Auster's epistemological attitude is supported by the theory of *approximate knowledge* which considers knowledge as fundamentally incomplete, and this constitutes an attitude which acknowledges some sort of failure but also an attitude that provides assurance about the need for objective knowledge. In this state of affairs, the imagining consciousness, the double consciousness, is the focal point.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE TERM POSTMODERNISM

The term Postmodernism becomes the term of choice to describe the *condition* of a wide variety of disciplines of cultural character especially during the second half of the twentieth century. Its popularity and success as a term reaches their peak by the end of the same century.

In literary studies both labels *Modernism* and *Postmodernism* were to appear first in Hispanic letters. The term Modernism was first penned by Nicaraguan poet and critic Rubén Darío in 1890 to herald a new poetry, a poetry no longer submitted to the traditions of the Spanish literary canon. By the mid 1930's, the term *Postmodernism* was again used by Spanish academic Federico de Onís[1] in order to distinguish a radical strand in Modernism, Ultramodernism, from a less radical one, Postmodernism.

The first use of the term Postmodernism by an American intellectual must be credited to Randolph Bourne who in 1916 wrote the essay "Transnational America"[2] focusing on the national identity of the USA and on its multicultural imprint. For Bourne, the term

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1. Federico de Onís, *Antología de la Poesía Española e Hispanoamericana (1882-1932)*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1934.

2. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 18 July 1916.

Postmodern insinuated the possibility of far-reaching civilizational changes that could take any country through modernity into a different stage. Although Bourne cites the case of Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912), there is no doubt that he has in mind his own country and the necessity of a radical societal and cultural transformation.

The first noteworthy[3] and influential use of the epithet Postmodernism in the Anglo-Saxon world can be traced back to the British historian Arnold Toynbee who used it as a chronological marker in his twenty-volume encyclopedic work, *A Study of History* (1947), to indicate a period of time after the Franco Prussian War (1870-1871), characterized by the emergence of the West as the undisputed source of culture and, ultimately, undisputed power. Toynbee had this phase coincide with the fourth and final phase of Western civilization; a civilization characterized by anxiety, irrationalism and helplessness due mainly to its inability to find any groundings of universal character.

In art, the first reference to Postmodernism dates back to 1945 when the architect Joseph Hudnut, writing in the magazine *Architectural Record,* used the term to classify a new form of ultramodern architecture he considered as extreme. It must be mentioned that the place occupied by architecture in the theorization of Postmodernism and, in the subsequent criticism of Modernism, is central. Architecture embodied the modernist aspiration of a conjugation of both technology and art and stood as a valid means for the proclamation of the modernist ideals of progress and, consequently, betterment of humankind through abstract reason.

3. According to the critic Charles Jencks, it had already been used before, in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 March 1993. Jencks points to the British artist John Watkins Chapman in the 1870's, and Rudolf Pannwitz in 1917 as early users of the term. Pannwitz had used the term to refer to the 'nihilism' of the twentieth century.

Postmodern criticism, consequently, finds in architecture an adequate object for the denunciation of the wrongs of Modernism and Modernity. The agreed-upon practical example and symbol of Modernist embodiment was the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

In the critical literature on Postmodernism, a singular role is occupied by the architect and critic Charles Jencks who in his *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977) uses the term "post-modern" to signal a break with the past, the end of the modernist International Style and its substitution for an architecture characterized by the appropriation of styles from different eras, what is identified by Jencks as *eclecticism*, and in literary studies as *intertextuality*. In his *What is Post-modernism?* (1986) Jencks points out two landmark events as markers of the beginning of Postmodernism: the 1968 demolition of the Ronan Point tower block in London and the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, at exactly 3:32 pm. This latter example stood for the high-modernist conception of houses as 'machines for livingin' fathered by the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier. Ironically, the reason for their demolition was that they were seen as uninhabitable.

It is worth mentioning that there is an ever-present apocalyptic sense about the idea of Postmodernism. Literary critic and writer John Barth argued at a panel on Postmodernism in Texas (1986) that Postmodernism in America began on November 22, 1963 with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Assumedly, many Americans began to realize, with an uneasy feeling of shock, that history seemed to be heading towards some "monstrous direction." Quite appropriately, in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City, some voices have been raised proclaiming the death of Postmodernism with the destruction of the Twin Towers complex.

The term Postmodernism fully enters Anglo-American critical discourse in the 1950's and rapidly becomes common currency in the 1960's. At first it seemed to indicate just a new movement in the art and culture of the period subsequent to the end of the Second World War, either indicating an extension or a break with modernist techniques and conventions. Then, as it enters into the academic discourse, it begins to be seen as the product of a new type of society, the fruit of postwar industrial development, a society which successfully shifted its productive base from one founded upon the industrial production of goods to one based on the production of information. In this new society information, knowledge, truth and power are inextricably linked.

In the literary world, the term Postmodernism was first used by the American poet Charles Olson, in 1951, in a letter[4] to fellow poet Robert Creeley to signal the emergence of a new epoch after the Second World War:

> The first half of the twentieth century… was the marshalling yard on which the modern was turned to what we have, the post-modern, or post-West.

Olson also uses the term to indicate a type of non-anthropocentric poetry, one intent on regarding man just as any other object in the world. It is a poetry of obvious Heideggerian influence, one in which the sensuous appeal supersedes the hermeneutical efforts of subject-centered reason.

Once the term Postmodernism is introduced into the academic world, it slowly starts spilling out of the literary-aesthetical context and begins a successful career as a multipurpose label valid for the description of the most varied aspects of a new industrial society

4. Letter cited by Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity, London*, Verso, 1998.

emerging after the end of the war. So much so that for critics, such as Irving Howe or Harry Levin, the term describes an experimental type of fiction, not very unlike the fiction of modernism, but very much affected by the economic and social aspects.

The most important impulse ever to be given to the term Postmodernism was due to Ihab Hassan who in his *The Dismembering of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature* (1971) popularized the term Postmodernism. Hassan used the term to describe the new type of fiction that had emerged after the Second World War and, in particular, to refer to the experimental fiction of the 60's. The term Postmodernism soon became common currency within the literary and critical discourse at large.

In 1976 Ihab Hassan invited Jean-François Lyotard to participate in the conference *Performance in Postmodern Culture*. One of the consequences of his participation in this conference was the publication of *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979) in which the French philosopher puts into question all the *grand narratives* upon which Western civilization is based, especially the idea of betterment and liberation of humankind by knowledge, an affirmation which is highly questionable according to other positions[5] but which made possible the entry of the term into the philosophical discourse.

The architectural aesthetic positioning of Postmodernism is already fully articulated in 1981 when the Venice Biennale takes place. Charles Jencks, when later writing about the Biennale and its motto *Presence of the Past*, makes very clear the ideological rift

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5. See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996.

between Modernism and Postmodernism when he enunciates some of the general features of postmodernism:

> Post-Modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism. Its hybrid style is opposed to the minimalism of Late-Modern ideology and all revivals which are based on an exclusive dogma or taste.[6]

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6. Charles Jencks, "What is Post-Modernism?," in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, Ed. Walter Truett Anderson, London, Fontana Press, 1996, p. 27.

PART I

DEFINING POSTMODERNISM

post-modern, *a.* Also **post-Modern**. (POST-B. 1 B) Subsequent to, or later than, what is 'modern'; *spec.* in the arts, esp. *Archit.*, applied to a movement in reaction against that designated 'modern' (cf. MODERN a. 2 h) Hence **post-modernist**, *a.* and *sb.*

Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Supplement (1982)

This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.

Modernday Dictionary of Received Ideas

A very bad term because it conveys the idea of a historical periodization. "Periodization", however, is still a "classic" or "modern" ideal. "Post-modern" simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind.

Lyotard

A Concept Defying Definition

Efforts directed at providing a satisfactory definition for the concept Postmodern have proved to be inconclusive and, what is worse, differing reasons make it seem close to an impossible or, at best, a slippery endeavor. Ironically, at the core of the difficulty, is its overwhelming success as a term. Presently seen as an umbrella concept of widespread use, applicable to the most varied

fields of cultural and social relevance (religion, philosophy, health, education, art, literature, anthropology, geography, economy, technology, etc.) it is also a concept valid for designating indistinctly an artistic style, a cultural condition, a critical practice and a political attitude.

If it is true that the Postmodern concept has proved to be useful in its attempt to provide a global explanation for what is perceived as a new *condition* in the approach of man to the varied universes he inhabits, it is also true that the considerable dispersal of its terms of reference and, more importantly, the lack of agreement about what those terms should be, make the task of defining Postmodernism seem close to impossible. It is precisely because of this dispersal or vast scope that, in the best of cases, to define Postmodernism implies, in the end, settling for a definition that will certainly present imprecisions and contradictions, a definition which is the fruit of a compromise and will not satisfy everybody.

In this respect, what has happened to Postmodernism with the passage of time is not much different from what has affected other terms of cultural or epochal import that in the past have attempted global explanations. Romanticism can be cited as a case in point: due to its success as a term it became so fashionable that it ended up being submitted to so much use and abuse that it eventually lost any precise referentiality and became surrounded by an aura of emptiness.

This state of affairs has led Ihab Hassan the scholar as mentioned before credited for having given the definitive push to the term, and having introduced it into the mainstream of critical and literary discourse in his now classic work *The Dismembering of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature* (1971) to affirm that the term suffers from *semantic instability*. It is precisely this instability that

prevents any prospects of secure delimitations, conceptual or historical, of the Postmodern:

> Like other categorical terms — say poststructuralism, or modernism, or romanticism for that matter — Postmodernism suffers from a certain *semantic* instability. That is, no clear consensus about its meaning exists among scholars… Thus some critics mean by Postmodernism what others call avant-gardism or even neo-avant-gardism, while still others would call the same phenomenon simply modernism.[1]

Jean-François Lyotard, as previously pointed out, former guest on a panel on Postmodernism organized by Hassan in 1971, was the first philosopher to deal with the matter of Postmodernism and was largely responsible for giving it prominence. His *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) claims that Western civilization has entered a new phase which signals its departure from the preceding age of modernity, a new phase characterized by the new centrality of knowledge now seen as a key force in the economy:

> The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word post-modern to describe that condition. The word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives.[2]

In this new society, technology emerges as pivotal, or instrumental, in the production, storage and transmission

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1. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 87.

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. XXIII.

of knowledge. The main characteristic of this new age is a generalized state of suspicion towards the major organizing principles of Western civilization, its self-justifications or "grand narratives." According to Lyotard, these metanarratives, presented with the aura of undeniable truths, have lost all their power to convince and are to be seen as social constructs whose legitimacy is not the result of empirical foundation but, on the contrary, of social convention and are dependent upon the criterion of performativity. Thus, science or knowledge, for that matter, are not concerned so much with truth but with the possible efficient practical use that can be obtained from them.

Lyotard's position reveals, above all, criticism towards the narrative as the traditional way in which knowledge has been expressed and transmitted. All forms of knowledge are inescapably presented under narrative form. For Lyotard any scientific knowledge is also essentially a narrative knowledge in that its validation by means of argumentation and truth ultimately resort to narrative kinds of expression. Given this state of affairs, scientific knowledge, like any other type of knowledge, is obtained and transmitted by means of narratives, narratives which at the same time that they reveal the world also create this world. Science is perceived as being on the same level as any other kind of discourse made up of language prompting, in this manner, Lyotard to acknowledge the inexorable link between the 'leading' sciences, the so-called 'hard sciences,' and language, and to show how language is presented with problems in the different specialized fields of knowledge. Lyotard borrows from Ludwig Wittgenstein[3] the term *language games* to refer to the linguistic *constructedness* of reality.

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3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, New York, MacMillan, 1962, sec. 23.

The Postmodernism that Lyotard defines, in probably its most famous definition ever, as *incredulity towards metanarratives*,[4] demands an historical perspective:

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define the Postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.

This incredulity that Lyotard attributes to the progress of science, needs to be seen as the result of a long process with origins in the nineteenth century philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and culminating in the twentieth century with the contemplation of the disasters of Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism. At the end of the Second World War, a new reinforced skepticism involves the intellectual world which starts a relentless questioning of the validity of the ideals enshrined by Enlightenment, most especially the faith in reason as a guiding principle towards the ultimate goal of betterment and, ultimately, emancipation of humanity. The Hegelian vision of history as the materialization of progress leading up to the goals of Modernity starts losing ground, the very foundations of Western civilization are submitted to analysis and, for the first time, the survival of the West is put into question.

In this way, in Postmodernism the idea of authority buttressed upon the idea of a single and indisputable truth, is deflated. Authority gives room to plurality and the metanarratives, in their turn, give way to a cosmos of narratives, the *micro-narratives*, characterized by their contingency and locality. This new world which gives voice to other opinions and truths, with all their salutary effects, also opens

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4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. XIV.

the door to a series of paradoxes and insecurities in which the *solace* of a single unique and incontestable truth is lost forever with no hope of return and, most surprisingly, under these new circumstances the now old-fashioned conception of truth is not missed.

It is both remarkable and logical the extent to which this skepticism towards all forms of general and assumed knowledge has come to affect the credibility, if not the reputation, of both the institutions and personalities who deal with the Postmodern question. Ihab Hassan recognizes that to a great extent the act of naming, and implicitly periodization, of events of cultural or social character (now taken as two of the casualties of skeptical Postmodernism) obeys a need of academia to receive recognition and ultimately to exert some form of 'will-to-power.' For Hassan the question of Postmodernism, the necessity of Postmodernism as a label, is first justified by the 'psychopathology' of academic life which imposes new nomenclature as an exercise of 'will-to-power:'

> In the question of Postmodernism, there is a will and counter-will to intellectual power, an imperial desire of the mind, but this will and desire are themselves caught in a historical moment of supervention, if not exactly of obsolescence. The reception or denial of Postmodernism thus remains contingent on the psychopolitics of academic life — including the various dispositions of people and power in our universities, of critical factions and personal frictions, of boundaries that arbitrarily include or exclude — no less than on the imperatives of the culture at large. This much, reflexivity seems to demand from us at the start. [5]

Steven Connor has also commented on the motivations of academia for generating discourses as a way of affirmation or

5. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 87.

will-to-power, an admission which only underlines present day suspicions and skepticism about knowledge:

> It is possible to become very cynical about this and to see the whole Postmodernist craze as being kept going Scheherazade-like by long-winded academics concerned simultaneously to perpetuate themselves and distract attention from their growing irrelevance.[6]

Ihab Hassan mentions the existence of two fundamental constitutive elements in Postmodernism: indeterminacy and immanence.[7] Hassan considers them to be fundamental for Postmodernism because it is exactly the "play of indeterminacy and immanence" that is at its base and constitutes the unity of Postmodernism. Stressing the importance of these two constitutive elements Hassan goes on to characterize the phenomenon with a new word: *indetermanence*. Indetermanence is characterized by the combination of "ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation" with a mental capacity to "generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, immediately its own environment." Consequently, Margaret Rose[8] sees in Hassan's use of the term indetermanence the intentionality of not having to define the Postmodern too precisely, something common to most theoretical approaches which prefer openness and looseness to any sort of imposition or prescription on this matter due to, what we may term as, sympathy with what

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6. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary,* Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 1989, p. 7.

7. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 92.

8. Margaret A. Rose, *The Post-Modern & The Post-Industrial: A Critical Analysis,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 51.

is perceived as the nature of the Postmodern phenomenon itself, a nature of radical openness.

Whatever the reason for the use of this concept of indetermanence, it bears, at least, a morphological similarity to the term indeterminacy, a very successful concept out of its original field of quantum mechanics. In relation to Postmodernist critical thought, indeterminacy constitutes one of the most important conceptual borrowings. In literary critical discourse, Stanley Fish uses the concept of indeterminacy as a way of attacking the notion of autonomy of the text sustained by the New Critics and by which the texts were seen as closed to multiplicity of readings, something which Postmodernism vehemently supports as necessary and desirable.

The concept of indeterminacy points to the consideration that observation, or just study, can really in some way change the thing perceived. This notion, once introduced in linguistic studies, is useful to explain the weakening of the traditional and purported relation of the linguistic sign to an external reality. Not surprisingly, this idea of indeterminacy is repeated over and over from different perspectives in criticism and at different points in time in relation to the definitorial difficulties presented by the concept of Postmodernism, indicating precisely some sort of loose connection between the word Postmodernism and any external reality. Thus, John Urry, as a sign of the times, affirms that what we have in Postmodernism is a signifier with no clear signified:

> It is difficult to address the topic of Postmodernism at all, and that it seems as though the signifier "Postmodern" is free-floating, having few connections with anything real, no minimal shared meaning of any sort.'[9]

9. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, London, Sage, 1990, p. 83.

John Frow, in his essay *What was Postmodernism?* (1991), points out that the subject of Postmodernism is incoherent and that as a consequence:

> No one can agree who actually was a Postmodernist nor agree or state clearly about whether *when* Postmodernism occurred or is occurring.[10]

All the uncertainties and discussions about the Postmodern have earned the Postmodern a companion word: debate. It must be added that, if anything, this debate has made the Postmodern even more visible. We should agree, maybe with some sort of resignation, with Steven Connor's position in his "Postmodernism and the Academy,"[11] that since there is a debate the assumption is that Postmodernism exists.

It seems now that controversy is one of the features with which Postmodernism seems condemned to live with. Even Hassan himself does not look at the passage of time as a possible means for clarifying or settling the disputes at the core of the Postmodern or for providing a clear-cut definition. On the contrary, Hassan sees some risks: we have to agree with Dick Hebdige when he states precisely that:

> There is already some evidence that Postmodernism, and modernism even more, are beginning to slip and slide in time threatening to make any diacritical distinction between them desperate.[12]

As time goes on, any illusions about a possible non-conflictive definition of the Postmodern are shed, all the difficulties remain

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10. John Frow, "What was Postmodernism?," in *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997.

11. Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 1989, pp. 3-23.

12. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. xx.

and are increased as the scope of action of the Postmodern is widened across even more fields:

> It becomes more and more difficult as the 1980's wear on to specify exactly what it is that "Postmodernism" is supposed to refer to as the term gets stretched in all directions across different debates, different disciplinary and discursive boundaries, as different factions seek to make it their own, using it to designate a plethora of incommensurable objects, tendencies, emergencies.[13]

Academic self-deprecation and contrition apart, it seems now clear at this point that any attempt at a definition is to be seen not only as motivated, but also as a discursive construct or self-justification, something not short of a *petit récit* justifying, to a certain extent, the existence of academia and, consequently, something that needs to be looked at with suspicion.

Klaus Bruhn Jensen, in a typically *Postmodern* move, directs our attention to the consideration of the status of Postmodernism as a grand narrative:

> Postmodernism is itself a grand narrative announcing the death of another narrative in its rear-view mirror.[14]

It is also worth pointing out that definitorial efforts are also frustrated by factors that have to do with the nature of Postmodernism itself. As has already been indicated above, its multidisciplinarity constitutes one of the most serious impediments for a clear and univocal, overreaching definition. It is, then, logical to think that each one of its fields of action responds to a different chronology, to different needs and, even, the essence of

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13. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London, Comedia, 1988.

14. Klaus Bruhn Jensen, *The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*, London, Sage, 1995, p. 11.

the Postmodern phenomenon may obey slightly different reasons. Clearly, what everything seems to be pointing at is the inadequacy of theory to provide a definition able to encompass all the variety and complexity existent in Postmodern practice. According to John Frow, Postmodern practice surpasses all the theory of Postmodernism which is rendered useless in any attempt at definition:

> It is clear, I think, that for both Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard the concept of the Postmodern is set against the 'modernity' of nineteenth-century capitalism, and thus includes most *modernist* aesthetic production. Jameson, by contrast, dates the Postmodern from around 1960s, but as Mike Davis notes, Mandel's concept of 'late capitalism', with which Jameson correlates Postmodernism, extends through the post-war period and *ends* with the slump of 1974-75.[15]

If Postmodernism is thus characterized by a problematic nature as a result of the dispersal of its terms of reference, Postmodernism is also characterized by having a remarkable contesting character towards all the given assumptions of Western thought, the so-called metanarratives. The first victim of this contestation is, as we have already indicated, the idea of truth as unique, all-encompassing and incontestable. Under this new state of affairs any suggestion of, or attempt at, the conquest of truth on the part of Postmodernist thought is to be looked at as a *contra natura* attempt. It is no wonder then that this skepticism should also be reflected in any effort leading to a definition of the Postmodern.

Nearly fifty years after it took off, Postmodernism has also to deal not only with a problematic and often contested nature, but also with a contested existence which has led some to resist the label 'Postmodernism' and, others, to deny altogether a movement or

15. John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 29.

school by the name of Postmodernist. If that were not enough, confusing statements regarding the features and the subject of Postmodernism from different flanks of criticism add up to this uncertainty and fuzziness enveloping the concept Postmodern. Almost since the beginning, a triadic debate has been kept by those defending the dissolution of modernity, and consequently defending the birth of a new era; a stance absolutely opposed to any such idea, and a third position that recognizes some sort of development in modernity and the preservation of the essence of its ideals in a transformed way.

As part of the recurrent academic wars, the debate of 'Moderns' versus 'Postmoderns' is personalized most visibly by the debate between the philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard explicitly focuses on Habermas, and Habermas, in turn, expresses his rejection of Lyotard's notion of the Postmodern as neoconservative in his book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985).

Jürgen Habermas' position is that Modernity is a project that demands completion since the Modern ideals of truth, objectivity and universality have never been effected to their fullest possibilities. Habermas proposes a return to foundationalism and holism. For Habermas, those who think that they have gone beyond Modernity are deceiving themselves. Modernity presents mistakes but, nevertheless, valuable lessons can be learned from them and, what is more important, a way forward in Modernity can be found:

> I think that instead of giving up modernity and its project as a lost cause, we should learn from the mistakes of those extravagant programs which have tried to negate modernity. Perhaps the types of reception of art may offer an example which at least indicates the direction of a way out.[16]

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16. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Ed. Thomas Docherty, New York, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 107.

This roadmap is precisely offered by Habermas in *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and presupposes a return to the early Hegel, to the idea of collective intersubjectivity materialized in a society based on dialogue and transparency which resorts to 'communicative rationality' as its tool in order to reach agreement in disparate positions and ultimately reaching the much sought-after goals of emancipation and progress. This communication or dialogue between opposing parties contradicts Lyotard's vision of progress in art and science as the result of *dissensus*.

Postmodernism represents, in its multiple expressions, an assault on theory since theory is perceived as constituting a serious impediment towards the perception of reality. This antitheoretical line of thought leads ultimately to theses propounding the 'end of philosophy,' a position clearly postulated by Postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty. Rorty follows the Postructuralist vision of language not as a tool for objectively and unequivocally presenting reality but as tool for creating reality. Since all language leads to a re-presentation, or to a 'description' of reality, philosophy in using language cannot claim for itself a better position than all the other cultural phenomena:

> The method is to redescribe lots and lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions.[17]

Philosophy is also affected by contingency and historical *situatedness* and, therefore, is to be considered as any linguistic

17. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 9.

phenomenon with no actual basis for pointing at truth and values. Rorty agrees with Lyotard on the contingent aspect of truth; truth is just to be considered as local and historical perspective for a reality which cannot be known. The acknowledgement of the contingency of truth is reflected in a non-prescriptive methodology which suggests ways of looking at reality without any truth claims:

> This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like 'try thinking of it this way' — or more specifically, 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.' It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else.... Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look more attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.[18]

For Rorty, and on this matter, acting in a similar way to Habermas, truth emerges in free discussion but Rorty goes beyond that: he does not want to recover rationality or universalism by a mere *updating*, Rorty wants a substitution of paradigms:

> A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" ("or right" or "just") whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter. This substitution amounts to dropping the image of a preestablished harmony between human subject and the subject of knowledge, and thus to dropping the traditional epistemological-metaphysical problematic.[19]

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18. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

The philosopher, or theorist, is to be replaced by the *ironist* and the role of philosophy has to be taken by literature since it offers a new interpretation of the world and provides a possibility for self-creation through creative genius. Philosophy is to be relegated to secondary or auxiliary position, that of an epistemological function of 'reparation' of language. The philosopher is, thus, substituted by the *strong poet*, the ironist, the one who will 'redescribe' or reconstruct the world in a new language. Rorty presents language under an aesthetic scope, that of a tool for the consecution of change. This change presupposes a transition from a culture based on reason to one based on imagination, certainly a proposition much in line with the British romantic poets William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley or Samuel T. Coleridge, not to forget American literati Hawthorne or Emerson.

Examples of different confrontational and controversial attitudes on the substance and existence of Postmodernism abound. Positions like the ones held by prominent academics such as Harold Bloom, affirming his view of Modernism as a continuation of Romanticism; Alex Callinicos'[20]affirmation that there is no sharp distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism and David Harvey's[21] defending the same position from the perspective that Postmodernism represents a crisis in Modernism.

In these series of debates, Linda Hutcheon points the finger at a possible reason for the lack of demarcation of boundaries. Hutcheon identifies in Postmodernism a feature she terms as *negativized theory* which has serious implications for our perception of the Postmodern:

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20. See Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, London, Polity Press, 1989.
21. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989, p. 116.

> It is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized theory: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization. What all these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes *-dis, de, in, anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest — as does I suppose, the term *Postmodern*ism itself.[22]

This negativized character assures Postmodernism links with what it intends to deny and this is what distinguishes it from the other epochal or cultural labels, since it ends up containing that which it denies. This is the reason why what constitutes Postmodernism is not radically different from other precedent periods such as Modernism or Romanticism. Nevertheless, what makes Postmodernism different is its peculiar way of approaching reality, under the perspective offered by a "new mood" as identified by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition.*

At the same time, and now from a psychological perspective, it is also to be acknowledged that any knowledge about reality, based on the definitorial capabilities of the self and its unitary entity, is not possible anymore since the idea of *self* has been undermined and subjected to criticism since Sigmund Freud's revelation of its prismatic reality. The self would have to confront first its own reality, a reality as multifaceted and complex as the reality it attempts to define, if it were to reach any objectivity in its quest. Considering both the prismatic entity of the self and of reality, and also the vast multidisciplinary scope of action that the Postmodern encompasses, it is not only logical but also necessary to consider the Postmodern as a plural and even openly contradictory phenomenon, a phenomenon which, as we have seen above, also encompasses that which it denies. Under this perspective it is obvious that any definitorial attempt

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22. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, p. 3.

necessarily needs to pay homage to this plural and paradoxical nature. In this respect, it is most pertinent to affirm with Ihab Hassan that Modernism and Postmodernism are not "separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future."[23]

The crisis and fall of the traditional conception of the idea of truth with the advent of Postmodernism gave way to plurality and fuzziness of concepts that seriously affect the critical ability to provide a clear vision of the Postmodern. With the fall of truth, other deaths of conceptual transcendence had to follow, most noticeably those of periodization, something Lyotard equates with an obsession of modernity.

One of the consequences of this perception of the Postmodern, in relation to what may be called the locality or contingency of truth, is that, in the end, it puts into question not only the validity of practices such as those of periodization, as a practical recognition of the accomplishment of man in the succession of stages towards the attainment of Ultimate Truth, but also the practice of naming those stages is seen as a result of the exertion of power in all its extension. Truth is seen as one of the results of the exercise of power. A position sharply in contrast with that of Modernism for which the idea of evolution in the form of social, economical and cultural progress is still held as indication, and proof, of the correctness of the path taken, in the consecution of the much-heralded ultimate goals of general betterment of human conditions and liberation. If the skepticism of the Postmodern has exacerbated and opened the door to new insecurities beyond those already existent in Modernism, it has also opened the door to all the benefits of

23. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 88.

the emerging plurality after phasing out the grand narratives. It is reasonable to think that the development of *petits récits,* with its subsequent multiplications of perspectives, has been beneficial and contributed largely both to the pervading centrality of knowledge and to the centrality of the academic world.

It is precisely because of these problems, in attempting a delimitation of the Postmodern, that some critics point at the elusiveness of the term and recognize an impossibility in the task of establishing the precise boundaries of the term:

> […] the amorphous and politically volatile nature of Postmodernism makes the phenomenon itself remarkably elusive, and the definition of its boundaries exceedingly difficult, if not per se impossible. Furthermore, one critic's Postmodernism is another critic's modernism (or variant thereof), while certain vigorously new forms of contemporary culture (such as the emergence into a broader public's view of distinct minority cultures and of a wide variety of feminist work in literature and the arts have so far rarely been discussed as Postmodern[24]…

One of the clearest visions addressing the issue of the existence of Postmodernism is that of the philosopher Gianni Vattimo.[25] Vattimo's stance is based upon the premise of the recognition that in some fundamental aspect modernity has already ended since it is no longer possible to keep talking about history as a unitary identity. This being the case, there is no possibility of looking at human actions as addressing themselves towards a single ultimate goal, namely that of attaining truth or emancipation. Vattimo makes this end of modernity coincide with the irruption of mass

24. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, London, MacMillan, 1988, pp. 58-9.

25. Gianni Vattimo "Posmodernidad: ¿una sociedad transparente?," in G. Vattimo *et al.*, *Entorno a la posmodernidad*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 1994, p. 7.

communication technology in society and the advent of a new society he terms the "transparent society." This transformation heralds a new society in which the representation of knowledge, with the help of the mass media, goes on to occupy a new central role, a role that converts societies into more complex and chaotic entities. Vattimo perceives these societies as dependent on this relative 'chaos' if any emancipation is ultimately to be attained. Contrary to other previous critical positions, especially that of Max Horkheimer, the new media assist in the explosion and multiplication of new points of view, or *Weltanschauung*,[26] a world much-enriched by the polarity of views, especially those of the minorities, contributing, to a great extent, to a certain feeling of Nietzschean *fabula,* and partaking in that sense of gradual progressive erosion of the principle of reality that we now see in Jean Baudrillard. We must point out that the term *Weltanschauung* was first used by philosopher Walter Benjamin in the 1930's already anticipating some of the features of Postmodernism.

Owing to its varied and complex nature, the best way to venture a first approach to the definition of Postmodernism is by considering it as a group of assumptions in which truth still holds some validity, as long as it is characterized as something circumstantial, submitted to a term of expiration, individual, and, even, private. This position, fundamental for the perception of the Postmodern, was first enunciated by Jean-François Lyotard and makes abundantly clear all the difficulties of reaching an all-encompassing and satisfying definition.

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26. Walter Benjamin in his 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York, Ed. Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 217-251.

Hassan also provides us with some very useful hints on how to approach the Postmodern and ultimately how to approach the task of defining the Postmodern:

> Any definition of Postmodernism calls upon a fourfold vision of complementarities, embracing continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony. But a definition of the concept also requires a dialectical vision; for defining traits are antithetical… and plural; to elect a single trait as an absolute criterion of Postmodern grace is to make of all other writers preterites.[27]

As a result of the above-mentioned skepticism toward truth, Postmodernism, taking advantage of this state of *self-awareness*, comes to act very much like an instance of reflection, a reflection regarding the path taken in light of the failures of Modernity. Therefore, Modernism, as taken over by a spell of doubt, needs to reassure itself of the path taken and carries out a self-analysis which ultimately uncovers the processes by which truth has been revealed or produced in the Western civilization while, at the same time, clearly recognizing that truth is not alien to power. This presupposes an analysis which in its epistemological scope represents the first step in the departure from Cartesian and Kantian reason, a result of what Patricia Waugh sees as an acknowledgement of the "inadequacy of Enlightenment theories of knowledge"[28] and, therefore, a step into Postmodern thought.

We believe that this instance of analysis is consistent with Lyotard's view of Postmodernism as a process of *anamnesis*, in this case presupposing an analysis carried out by Modernism upon itself, a cultural equivalent to Freudian *Durcharbeitung*. Lyotard

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27. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 89.

28. See "Introduction" to *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Ed. Patricia Waugh, London, Edward Arnold, 1992.

thus understands the prefix 'post' of Postmodernism as related to the Greek prefix 'ana' which would imply a process of analyzing or 'anamnesing':

> The 'post' of 'Postmodern' does not signify a movement… of repetition but a process of the order of 'ana-', of analysis, of anamnesis, of anagogy, of anamorphosis, which works through an 'initial forgetting.'[29]

According to Jean-François Lyotard, what is important about this process is that when applied to the Postmodern it is not just restricted to being a new, albeit aware, look at the past. This *anamnesis* also implies a look at the future as a way of searching for new forms that escape evaluation by, or conformity to, pre-established rules. It resolutely represents a search for freedom in all its aspects. In aesthetic terms, it presupposes the continuation of the effort of the avant-gardes in destroying the *good* forms. Not by means of innovation and the creation of new forms, but by the displacement and warping of rules. This displacement and warping of rules is essential to Postmodernism and constitutes one of its character features in relation to Modernism. The result is the representation of the unrepresentable:

> The Postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.[30]

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29. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, Galilée, 1986, p. 126.

30. Jean-François Lyotard, T*he Postmodern Condition*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 8.

The Postmodern brings forward the repressed, brings forth what Herbert Marcuse in *On Affirmative Character of Culture* (1937) mentions as the "forgotten truths" or truths which are detached from reality. This is why the Postmodern artist finds himself lagging behind his work and the Postmodern work ends up gaining, in such manner, a strong and clear degree of autonomy. Thus, Lyotard will state:

> A Postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the texts he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the character of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their *mise en œuvre* always begins too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).[31]

We should add, following Lyotard, that there is a common position held by critics, considering that the resistance of the term Postmodern towards definition is a result of one of the fundamental characteristics of the Postmodern: a sense of self-awareness or a more general feeling of "awareness of being within a way of thinking."

Soon it becomes evident that, as Patricia Waugh[32] acknowledges, a position of detachment from which to define the Postmodern, the Kantian 'point of nowhere,' is not a possibility open to the Postmodern. In this manner, it is problematic to accept the validity of a definition when, from the start the subject of the definition, as

31. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

32. Patricia Waugh (Ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London, Edward Arnold, 1992, p. 1.

well as the agent of the definition, are submitted by and involved in the same historical process. In this respect, it is worth paying attention to the Ortegian assertion that the self is constituted by its interaction with the surrounding circumstances ("yo soy yo y mi circunstancia…") and the implication that this has in the way we perceive the world. From this position, to a Postmodern conception of reality as a construct, most notably of language, there is only but a short distance.

In defining the Postmodern, Brenda K. Marshall points precisely at this impossibility, an impossibility which by itself underscores the problems surrounding the nature of the Postmodern. For Marshall, Postmodernism is an awareness of being in a paradigm of thought and this constitutes the basis for dealing with reality in a completely new way, despite an assumed impossibility for objectivity or impossibility for detachment from any theoretical preconceptions:

> Naming must occur from a position 'outside' of a moment, and it always indicates an attempt to control. Crucial to an understanding of the Postmodern moment is the recognition that there is no 'outside' from which to 'objectively' name the present. The Postmodern moment is an awareness of being within, first, a language, and second, a particular historical, social, cultural framework. That is, we know we are within a particular framework or paradigm of thought, even if we cannot say with certainty how that paradigm works.[33]

This impossibility of a much-needed detachment from which to define the Postmodern clearly echoes Michel Foucault's position in *The Order of Things*[34] which again stresses the importance

33. Brenda K. Marshall, *Teaching the Postmodern*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, p. 3.

34. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science*s, New York, Pantheon, 1970.

of the idea of a past cultural backlog which affects any new development in knowledge, even when a position of control over that past is taken for granted.

Another important stance in Postmodern criticism directs our attention to the beginning of a fundamental shift of wide implication in Western contemporary culture. This shift, which focuses on the changes taking place in contemporary culture, signals a departure from Modernism or even a rejection of the process of Modernity. This change affects conceptualization:

> Yet the term 'Postmodern' is more strongly based on a negation of the moderns, a perceived abandonment, break with or shift away from the definitive features of the modern, with emphasis firmly on the sense of relational move away. This would make the Postmodern a relatively ill-defined term as we are only on the threshold of the alleged shift, and not in a position to regard the Postmodern as fully fledged positivity which can be defined comprehensively in its own right.[35]

Mike Featherstone summarizes the extent of this shift in three main groups of far-reaching and profound changes involving the academic world and the modes of production, transmission and circulation of culture. All these changes affect the value and meaning of culture:

> These can be understood in terms of (1) the artistic, intellectual and academic fields (changes in modes of theorization, presentation and dissemination of work which cannot be detached from changes in specific competitive struggles occurring in particular fields); (2) changes in the broader cultural sphere involving the modes of production, consumption and circulation of symbolic goods which can be related to broader shifts in the balance of power and interdependencies between groups and class fraction on both inter- and intra-societal levels; (3) changes in everyday practices

35. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage Publications, 1991, p. 3.

> and experiences of different groups, who as a result of some processes referred to above, may be using regimes of signification in different ways and developing new means of orientation and identity structures.[36]

Stressing the importance of this view on the cultural realm by Postmodernism has led certain intellectual sectors to a marked disinterest from the consideration of Postmodernism as a period or, even, its consideration as a movement. For Jean-François Lyotard, in a position which seems to run counter to his previous affirmation on the Postmodern, Postmodernism should not be understood as a break with the past but rather as part of the modern and collaborating with its renewal:

> What, then, is the Postmodern?... It is undoubtedly part of the modern. All that has been received, if only yesterday… must be suspected… A work can become modern only if it is first Postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.[37]

Taking the Postmodern always further away from any definition, and possible identification of it as a movement in its own right, Umberto Eco considers that Postmodernism constitutes a "spiritual category" that transcends chronological borderlines and is associated with a moment of crisis and the, consequent, awareness about this moment. Thus, Postmodernism would then be an aesthetic mode coexistent with the idea of historically inherited, or spawned, crisis and a phenomenon markedly concerned with the implications of this crisis at a cultural level:

> I agree with those who consider Postmodern to not a chronologically circumscribed tendency but a spiritual category, or better yet a *Kunstwollen*

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36. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

37. Jean-François Lyotard, T*he Postmodern Condition*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 79.

> (a Will-to-Art), perhaps a stylistic device and/or a world view. We could say that every age has its own post-modern, just as every age has its own form of mannerism (in fact, I wonder if Postmodern is not simply the modern name for *Manierismus* as a metahistorical category). I believe that every age reaches moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in the second of the *Untimely Considerations,* on the harmfulness of the study of history. The sense that the past is restricting, smothering, blackmailing us.[38]

From these positions, we consider that it is quite positive to conclude that Postmodernism is to be seen as a fundamental shift in human mentality, not just a mere cultural departure from Modernism. Precisely, following this line of thought, Brenda K. Marshall characterizes the Postmodern not as a movement but as a "rupture in consciousness" linked to the way we read the present and the past and, therefore, not something to be considered chronologically since 'Postmodern moments' can also be identified in the past. Countering previous critical opinions, it is precisely this reconsideration of the present and the past that makes evident Postmodernism's political involvement:

> The word Postmodernism, as I use it, does not refer to a period or a 'movement'. It isn't really an 'ism;' it is really a thing. It's a moment, but more a moment in logic than in time. Temporally it's a space. It is like Jacques Derrida's *différance* — a space where meaning takes place, or like Michel Foucault's 'event' — a moment of rupture, of change. The word 'Postmodern' is often used synonymously with 'contemporary:' Postmodernism then becomes equated with an 'anything goes', a historical, apolitical, pluralistic creed. Such a position would be, of course, socially and politically naïve and untenable. That is not what the Postmodern moment refers to.[39]

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38. Umberto Eco and Stefano Rosso, *A Correspondence on Postmodernism*, Ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 242-3.

39. Brenda K. Marshall, *Teaching the Postmodern*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, p. 5.

More than a style coincident within a certain period of time, Postmodernism is to be seen, as we have alluded earlier, more and more as a rupture or a radical change in human thought, fruit of a varied set of events of cultural impact. Not as something just related to the material order and concrete artistic production, but something more profound, a phenomenon pertaining to the psychological order, to a profound reconsideration of the idea of culture and knowledge about reality. We could affirm that it constitutes a new way of ascertaining the past in order to deal with the future.

Patricia Waugh takes a different perspective by linking this new "mood" to a spill of the aesthetic into the Kantian moral and cognitive. For Waugh, what characterizes the Postmodern is an exacerbation of the aesthetic sense, certainly a result of the Lyotardian quest for new forms or, we may consider, the *Make it New* battle cry of Modernism taken to its limits. The aesthetic permeates everything bringing about with it a sense of 'unreality.' Acknowledging this new centrality for the aesthetic, and we do agree with Waugh, does not imply that the Postmodern is in no way detached from political commitment or ethical concern:

> I have regarded Postmodernism as a theoretical and representational mood, developing over the last twenty years and characterized by an extension of what had previously been purely aesthetic concerns into the demesne of what Kant had called the spheres of the 'cognitive' or scientific and the 'practical' or moral. For this reason, it seems useful to place the current theoretical debate about the validity of such practices in a context which acknowledges the roots of Postmodern strategies in a history of aesthetic thought that can be traced back at least as far as European Romanticism.[40]

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40. Patricia Waugh (Ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London, Edward Arnold, 1992, p. 1.

The importance of this new notion of aesthetization is so crucial in the debate about Postmodernism that it has led some to the point to declare that Postmodernism is the inauguration of an era. An era in which the aesthetic occupies all facets of human activity and this change eventually leads to the erasure of the borderline between art and life. This constitutes a unique and important development in Western culture and is a clear reaction of rejection towards both Modernist alienation from reality and its elitism.

One of the consequences of the extension of the aesthetic into new terrain, is that the aura around art is removed. With the elimination of the boundary between art and reality, the notion of authority and originality disappear from the art scene and the traditional value inherent to the production of art is displaced by its reproduction. Art becomes an object of the masses, mass-produced and directed at the masses, leading to what Irving Howe terms as the "commodification of the aesthetic;" once again the role of the economy or market in Postmodernism is not to be despised. A postwar 'historic drift' for Howe makes of man "a consumer, himself mass-produced, like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs."[41] This *massification* and what we may call 'mediatization of art,' has been pointed out by some as something beneficial. According to Lesley Fiedler,[42] it serves the purpose of democratization in the arts and may "bridge the gap between high and mass culture," undoing what was perceived as the elitism of Modernism.

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41. Irving Howe, "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction?" *Partisan Review*, vol. 26, 1959, pp. 420-36, in Patricia Waugh (Ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London, Edward Arnold, 1992.

42. Leslie Fiedler, "Cross That Border — Close That Gap," in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, Vol. 2, New York, Stein and Day, 1971, pp. 461-85.

An important sector of criticism considers Postmodernism to coincide with a third and final stage in the development of Western capitalism in the twentieth century. Postmodernism is, therefore, to be considered as the product of a new society, a new society engendered by a radical shift in the productive system now based upon the production of information and knowledge and not solely on the production of goods. This change is so influential on Postmodernism that it is characterized as the "cultural logic of late capitalism,"[43] a new cultural epoch coinciding with a consumerist phase of capitalism which, in the same manner as the aesthetization of reality we alluded to above, seems to permeate everything.

For Ernesto Laclau, and from a sociological perspective, one which tries to reach an understanding of the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity does not suppose a change in the values of Modernity but, rather, it presupposes a weakening especially of its absolutist features. For Laclau, Postmodernity affects the representation of reality, everything is made to be "immediate," and, as a consequence, its perception too. This change in communication consequently reflects the Postmodern all-important preoccupation with the value of language as a social medium for the revelation of truth. According to Laclau, what Postmodernity reveals is first and foremost the collapse of the immediacy of the *given*:

> We may thus propose that the intellectual history of the twentieth century was constituted on the basis of three illusions of immediacy (the referent, the phenomenon and the sign) that gave rise to the three intellectual traditions of analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and structuralism. The crisis of the illusion of immediacy did not, however, result solely from

43. See Frederic Jameson, P*ostmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.

> the abandonment of those categories but rather from a wakening of their aspirations to constitute full presences and from the ensuing proliferation of language-games which it was possible to develop around them. This crisis of the absolutist pretensions of 'the immediate' is a fitting starting point for engaging those intellectual operations that characterize the specific 'weakening' we call Postmodernity.[44]

In all the different critical positions on Postmodernism, what we clearly observe on the part of Postmodernism is an attempt to make evident its differences from Modernism, suggesting Postmodernism as a reaction to, or as a consequence of, Modernism. In this manner, in a series of efforts, Postmodernism tries to find new forms of representation in order to supersede what John Barth considers as the "usedupness"[45] of Modernism, a move that implies trying to find some sort of new proposal for human relations and interaction with reality. This attempt at a relationship based on new epistemological grounds, highlights the ever-present problem between reality and its linguistic representation which is finally to be related to the idea of truth. What is special about this search of new forms is that it is a subversion of Modernism from within; it is part of that action of looking backwards at Modernism, and while using the very materials upon which Modernism is built, a general criticism towards Modernism is carried out. This subversion from within takes the form of parody, irony, self-consciousness, fragmentation and, ultimately, what subsumes in these practices is the sense of loss of faith in the progressive and speculative discourse of Modernity and, most particularly, the failure of reason in the face of two world armed-conflicts is brought to the forefront in the discourses

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44. Ernesto Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Ed. Thomas Docherty, New York, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 332.

45. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1967, p. 169.

of Postmodernism. Barth sees in this Postmodern subversion of forms nothing negative; it is a recognition that everything has already been said and that parody "replenishes:"

> By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the usedupness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities — by no means necessarily a cause for despair.

The fact that Barth went on to write a follow-up article, entitled *The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction*,[46] confirms the idea that for him there is a *saturatedness* of present cultural forms and styles in the sense that culture cannot constantly employ the Modernist rallying cry 'Make It New,' but this is not a cause for concern and does not mean that contemporary art is a weakened, irrelevant, and parasitic phenomenon. Since in contemporary art everything becomes aesthetic, at least potentially, this "devaluation" of art, that encompasses all experience, provokes reality and culture to become dominated by what Jean Baudrillard names as *simulacrum*.[47] For Baudrillard, the inauguration of reality as simulacrum is the product of a new society in its final stage of capitalism and is fruit of an erasure of the borderline between art and reality. We may say that art becomes reality and reality becomes art. Because of this erasure between fiction and reality, some critics have indicated that the beginning of Postmodernism is to be dated November 22, 1963, the day of the assassination of John F. Kennedy,

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46. John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp. 193-206.

47. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, Ed. Mark Poster, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 166-84.

precisely because the intervention of the media and the constant repetition on television created a sense of irreality around this killing.

Owing to the development of the mass media, especially after World War II, there is a growing perception that reality may ultimately be filtered by the media and, what is even worse, may be even created by the media. The media have come to dominate everything, especially so since technological development has made information (images or, more generally, knowledge) universally available and, manipulable. In the arts, as well as in commonsense reality, images are easily reproduced; our experience of reality becomes coincident with our experience of art, in that both of them come to us in the form of reproduction. At the same time that the aesthetic approaches reality, reality dangerously approaches fiction and an aura of simulacrum surrounds everything dominating all Postmodern culture.

Again, Frederic Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* holds a similar view, affirming that depth is replaced by surface, or multiple surfaces also known as inter-textuality.[48] The multiplication of perspectives that characterizes this post-industrial society leads to an erroneous view of reality as apparently lacking norms, an idea best summarized by the expression 'anything goes.' This negative view of reality, expressed by Frederic Jameson, points at a capitalist logic really effecting a change in the way traditional forces deal with reality:

> If the ideas of the ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of the bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm. Faceless

48. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, p. 12.

> masters continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existences, but no longer need to impose their speech (or are henceforth unable to); and the postliteracy of the late capitalist world reflects not only the absence of any great collective project, but also the unavailability of the older national language itself.[49]

In the face of the absence of any assumed collective project for the future, which is to be seen as the result of the wave of skepticism that characterizes this new type of society, the way forward is to resist by resorting to different modes of disrupting the existing commonsense reality by using, therefore, the methods of parody, irony and pastiche to describe reality. It is, no doubt, a way of demonstrating the failure of technological reason and disaffection with this world:

> In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that, alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a stature with blind eyes… the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.[50]

Among all the arts it is architecture that plays an outstanding role in Postmodernism. This must come as no surprise if we consider that architecture was the art of choice made to express some of the most important tenets of Modernism. Architecture became an example of the perfect marriage between technological innovations and art. Technology acquired transcendence in architecture, through its

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49. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8.

aesthetical presentation and seemed to materialize the results of progress in the much-desired path towards knowledge leading to emancipation.

Once again with the advent of Postmodernism, architecture was the choice of the critics when the subversion of Modernism from within begins to gain momentum. Quite surprisingly, an interest in semiotics is revealed in the work of the new architects and most visibly reflected in an appropriation of the vocabulary of the different linguistic practices. Very much in the manner of Saussurean structuralism, architecture is seen as a communicative practice in which representational (or narrative) values are obtained by the interaction and opposition between architectural elements. Most importantly, architecture passes on to use different critical tools and terminology from linguistic studies, this is an appropriation that actually turned architecture into an authentic forum for Postmodern culture by focusing on the urban connection of all the major artistic and cultural expressions. Thus, linguistic terms such as *Intertextuality* are used in architecture to indicate the exchange, appropriation or subversion of styles which characterizes Postmodern architecture in its *dialogue* with the past. The use of the term intertextuality reflects the porosity in the complex cultural context of Postmodernism and implies an important tribute to the prominence of the narrative with all its issues in Postmodernism:

> Post-Modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically double-coded and ironic, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism. Its hybrid style is opposed to the minimalism of Late-Modern ideology and all revivals which are based on an exclusive dogma or taste.[51]

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51. Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?*, New York, Academy, 1989, p. 7.

Thus, Ihab Hassan, in *The Postmodern Turn*, refers to architects as rhetoricians of space who "speak of new 'languages' from the austere style, sharp, and pure and linear, of high modernism." Postmodernist architecture uses the term *language* as a metaphor in order to put into practice a criticism addressed against the purity of lines, against Mies van der Rohe's dictum *Less is more* and against the empire of reason and technology represented by the International Style. In opposition to Modernism, Postmodern architecture's *dialogue* with the past, an action which ends up producing a combination of architectural elements, is to be seen as a result of the openness and the pluralism of the new age of Postmodernism. This is most vehemently expressed by Mary McLeod when she states that:

> In contrast to the modern architects of the twenties, Postmodern architects publicly acknowledge their own objectives as pluralistic and historicist. The past is neither condemned nor ignored, but warmly embraced as a vital, formal and intellectual source. All period styles, whether classical or vernacular, are considered open to imitation or reinterpretation.[52]

One of the editorial landmarks takes place when Robert Venturi, Denise Brown and Steven Izenour publish in 1972 *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* as a denial of the Modernism represented by the International Style, a style that is accused of trying to impose utopian changes on the lives of humans. This manifesto of architectural Postmodernism, the result of a study visit by students of the Yale School of Art and Architecture, constitutes a critique to the principles of modern architecture exemplified by Le Corbusier, or the Bauhaus

52. Mary McLeod, "Architecture," in *The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts*, Ed. Stanley Trachtenberg, Westport CT, Los Angeles CA and London, Greenwood Press, 1985, p. 19.

architecture represented by Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, as trying to impose a *unique language*. This book embodies the accented feeling that there is a *gap* between architectural theory and experience. This failure of Modernist architecture to serve human interests can be documented by the case, already mentioned, of the Igoe-Pruitt[53] housing project in St. Louis, a project conceived as the implementation of Le Corbusier's concept of houses "as machines for living." As noted the housing project ended up being demolished as inhabitable; some critics readily chose its demolition as a landmark indicating the birth of Postmodern architecture.

Venturi and his colleagues propose a new model of architecture which they already see in practice in Las Vegas. An architecture characterized by its innovation and the use of elements from the past, *wrong elements*, an architecture that has adapted itself to the *vernacular*, and to the automobile. This adaptation to the population and its needs is done in a *pluralistic* and *ironical* way in relation to the immediate past represented by Modernism, and also in relation to other more remote past styles.

The new architecture to be developed consisted not just of space which had become to be considered as sacred, it was a type of architecture not dedicated to the purism of forms and function but to the 'iconography,' the narrative, the pictorial and the decorative that had been relegated by the International Style. It proposed, therefore, the combination of an eclectic multitude of styles (languages) from different periods (past and present) that also presuppose a mixture of ingredients from high and popular culture, as the new guidelines for Postmodern architecture. This architectural practice is also considered to reveal an admiration for the pop

53. Charles Jencks suggests the date of its demolition, 25 July 1979 (at exactly 3:32 pm) as the birth day of Postmodernism.

artists' revolt against abstract expressionism, seen as devoid of communication and, therefore, the mimicry, irony and wit of the pop artists are examples to be followed. In sum, it is perceived that the architect becomes a master jester.

Some sectors of criticism have seen a connection between this new architectural practice with high literary Modernism, for its dislike of the consumer society and mass culture, and shares with it a special interest in the work of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce as the creators of a new aesthetic language in which idioms, rhythms and artifacts associated with urban vernacular, high and low cultural environments, coexist.

Charles Jencks in his *What is Post-Modernism?* resorts to the literary work of both John Barth and Umberto Eco in order to justify his definition of Postmodernism as double coded. Thus both literature and architecture by means of their use of double codes appeal to both the 'high culture,' and the 'popular culture' segment of the population:

> To reiterate, I term Post-Modernism that paradoxical dualism, or double coding, which its hybrid name entails: the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence, Hassan's "Postmodernism" is according to this logic, mostly Late-Modern, the continuation of Modernism in its ultra or exaggerated form. Some writers and critics, such as Barth and Eco, would agree with this definition, while just as many, including Hassan and Lyotard, would disagree. In this agreement and disagreement, understanding and dispute, there is the same snake-like dialectic which the movement has always shown and one suspects that there will be several more surprising twists of the coil before it is finished. Of one thing we can be sure: the announcement of death is, until the other Modernisms disappear, premature.[54]

54. Charles Jencks, "What is Post-Modernism?," (1989), in *Fontana Post-Modernism Reader*, Ed. Walter Truett Anderson, London, Fontana Press, 1996, p. 27.

For Jencks, the homogeneity of styles is something proper to traditional societies in which meanings are part of a previously agreed 'system of signification.' In architecture, Jencks favors a system of semiotic complexity, a signification which is pluralistic and historical or contextual and eclectic. Jencks does not criticize Enlightenment, however he makes a critique of instrumental reason as applied in modernist architecture, as part of a rationalism that gave priority to the technical process. Charles Jencks in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* describes his proposal for a new architectural style as having "radical eclecticism" and as being "traditionalesque." Finally, for Jencks, Postmodernism in architecture is a style he describes as buttressed upon a "double code:"

> The present situation tolerates opposite approaches… If there is a single direction, I prefer the reader will discover that it is pluralistic: the architect must master several styles and codes of communication and vary these to suit the particular culture for which he is designing. I have called this 'ad hocism' in the past, and I use the term 'radical eclecticism' here."[55]

Postmodernist architecture presents itself as fully developed and articulated in 1980 for the Venice Biennale, subtitled *The Presence of the* Past. This architecture is characterized, as the subtitle of the Biennale denotes, by its combination and appropriation of elements from different past architectonical styles, making a combination which reveals an obvious effort of re-reading the past but which also reflects the plurality of the new societies that create and live with this architecture.

Linda Hutcheon also took the term 'double code,' as used in architecture, to describe the way in which Postmodern literature

55. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York and London, Academy Editions, 1977, p. 7.

uses Modernism to transcend Modernism itself, in such a way that Postmodernism cannot be opposed to Modernism since it relies all the time on its precepts to elaborate its particular re-reading. Thus, for Hutcheon, Postmodernism is contradictory and double coded, since it "works within the very systems it attempts to subvert."[56] Contrasting the implicit nostalgia Hutcheon sees in Modernism's intertextual employment of the past forms with the ironic distance frequently established when Postmodern works utilize similar forms, she mentions that:

> When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land,* one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in Postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity… Parody is a perfect Postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other Postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions.[57]

Parody is the key term in Hutcheon's critical work on Postmodernism and is to be seen as intimately connected to notions of Intertextuality.

56. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 4.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

PART II

ON READING AND WRITING

Reading Cities: Detecting the Riddle

The city has been one of the most important *topoi* of Modernity, despite the attraction and repulsion it has exercised on intellectuals, the city has established itself as the modern scenery *par excellence* in the arts and most especially in literature. The city has surged, most particularly in the twentieth century, as the only privileged point of convergence and as the source of multiple symbioses and exchanges that, in turn, have made it the unquestionable center of the post-industrial era to the point of concentrating all aspects of human activity.

The Hegelian conception of history as progression, or chronological fulfillment of goals, through different stages focused on the betterment of the human conditions, has been historically and intellectually linked to the city. In this respect, Oswald Spengler's[1] *The Decline of the West* with its rather romantic view of the Western civilization as the logical result of a succession of stages in human evolution was very influential in predicting an apocalyptical or,

1. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1928-29.

rather, ominous final character for the approaching times. Even when the evolution is linked to the decay that affects the centrality of nature, the city is to be seen as the culmination of an evolutionary drive that strictly presupposes in many respects the confrontation with nature and the triumph of reason over myth. It is, therefore, with the backdrop of this inherent tension that the city fights in an endless movement for the survival of its own nature, always reinventing itself, always striving to be up-to-date.

The mediaeval aphorism which regarded the city as a unique location for the development of freedom in all of its facets is still very much alive in contemporary life. The air of the city still makes those who breathe it free, if not in a political way, at least in a cultural way. Today's mass culture definitely is city-based and has acquired an undeniable metropolitan nature.

With the advent of Modernism, the city undeniably acquires a definitely more conspicuous position soon becoming the center from which all novelty emanated creating at the same time its own ways for novelty, which meant reinventing itself at all times. The city is also seen as the location in which the perfect conjugation between art and technology (science) occurs: planners and architects gain visibility when they become the spirit of renewal that envelopes this new urban centrality. New ideas about its organization, especially concerning its efficiency, deeply affect the structure of the city. The city, with its pluralism, receptivity and tolerance, fully represents the ideals of Postmodernism in one of its fundamental values, that of non-prescriptiveness. The city, we can add, also stands as a seemingly valid exemplification of Martin Heidegger's definition of *logos*:

> If we have grasped the fundamental meaning of *logos* as gathering and togetherness, then we must take notice and keep firmly in mind that:

> gathering is never a mere rounding up and heaping together. It maintains what is striving apart and against one another in their belonging-togetherness. Nor does it let them decline into dispersion and collapse… It does not allow that which reigns throughout to dissolve into an empty indifference, but by unifying opponents preserves the extreme sharpness of their tension.[2]

The city is more than just the center of economic activity in the superseding phases of capitalism on the road to progress. It should not be a surprise that since antiquity the city has been, not only the center of a whole plethora of utopian proposals, but the origin of a good number of politically motivated actions since the city represents renewal as well as action. Returning once again to Heidegger, the city as a fitting site of history is, the "*Da,* in which and through which and for which history happens." Its defining features of mutability and evolutionary change, stand as the appropriate frame of human activity, an equivalent expression of the classical labyrinth, the setting in which man has to take decisions and dramatic action in a, more than ever, confusing and, more often than not, hostile medium in which man has to disentangle and decipher the riddles of his own existence at the risk of compromising his own survival.

After the biblical episode of Babel and the ensuing divine punishment, human beings are left to their own devices to deal with their diversity. No other place makes us more aware of this hybridism and separateness in togetherness, than the city. The city as the quintessential modern labyrinth visibly stands as a riddle, a contraption that can be reduced to linguistic expression after interpretative effort, an effort that ultimately will lead to the

2. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Trans. Ralph Mannheim, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 113.

unveiling of a truth which, at the highest moment of Modernism, was seen as hidden but still 'out there' waiting to be discovered.

Returning to the idea of riddle, it should be noted that the English word 'riddle' is etymologically connected to the verb 'to read,' therefore, a riddle is something to be read and, as the etymology also indicates, a riddle is something to be interpreted. It goes without saying that a good riddle, as much as a good story, draws attention to its creator, to the Daedalus, or perfect artisan who creates and contrives stories, thus without any doubt, a riddle — a good riddle — also stands as a reflection of and, ultimately, as homage to the genius of the creator who provided it with form. It is, therefore, clear that the labyrinth in the end stands as a narrative which demands an effort on the part of an interpreter who, led solely by his own dexterity and sensibility, has to be able to disentangle a full message, a message containing precious information from, no other party than, nature itself, from human nature too, for the benefit of human beings. Nature reveals itself, therefore, as nothing more than a hieroglyphic made by the Creator from which all general rules have their origin. Under this perspective of the riddle, we have to allude to Peter Brooks[3] and his consideration of the labyrinth as a metaphor for storytelling. The labyrinth, with the displacement of Realism, points at a new perception of art and reality with which man is inescapably engaged. In a related manner, Wendy Faris[4] sustains that Stendhal's use of the mirror as the model followed in the writing of realist fiction, has been substituted by the image of the labyrinth as analogue for modern and contemporary literature

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3. See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, New York, Random House, 1985.

4. Wendy B. Faris, *Labyrinths of Language: Symbolic Landscape and Narrative Design in Modern Fiction*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 2.

and as "a model for the complex processes of living, writing and reading in the modern urban world." During Modernism the connection of the city to the classic labyrinth is extensively documented in literature by many writers and, most especially, by Modernist writer Jorge Luis Borges. Nonetheless, the labyrinth does not imply the obsolescence of the mirror. Reality can still be, and certainly is, portrayed but this reality is no longer the one offered by a *passive* mirror. The mirror now offers reality in its multiplicity and complexity, quite often, reflecting the true reality which is that of containing different realities vying for supremacy. It has as well gained autonomy from the medium and, more interestingly, it has gained control from its own master. The Modernist desire of mastery over the universe and the aspiration for the discovery of its concealed laws, still waiting for their own revelation, has given way to an, apparently chaotic, universe in which diverse and equally positioned truths aspire for dominance.

We agree that the labyrinth is revelatory about "the complex processes of living, writing and reading in the modern urban world," and due to this difficulty with the labyrinth, meaning is not easy to obtain and mystery accompanies all the efforts to get to a not-obvious written enlightenment that will bring a certain amount of order into the felt persistent tendency for chaos. This search for meaning clearly assumes for itself the quality of a Promethean quest, a quest that assumes reality as a text, albeit jumbled, and which partakes of the Modernist vision of reality as fragmented and, as Kevin Dettmar acknowledges, it is intimately associated with the idea of power:

> […] riddles assume that the world is a text open for us to read, and he who can piece together the signs, or prevent his opponent from construing them, secures power for himself. The classic example is the riddle of the Sphinx; before Œdipus answered it, the Sphinx had killed all who had come before

> her; after answering it, Œdipus became King of Thebes, and the Sphinx, vanquished, dashed herself on the rocks below.[5]

This quest for meaning and its value leads to the questioning of truth, and the validity of the rational and positivistic method as a sensible means for the discovery of truth. Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* maintains that detective stories are the epistemological genre *par excellence*: in them a detective "sifts through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a crime."[6] Thus, McHale goes on to characterize Postmodernist fiction as one in which an ontological dominant prevails over an epistemological background. Both dominants make part of a same quest for truth, leading us to consider two possibilities: either we question ourselves for truth or we question ourselves about the methods for attaining that truth, it is a quest that always keeps truth present in the background. For McHale, a change of dominants (in the fashion of recurring pendular movement) is justified in the arts whenever the right conditions are present:

> Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions — the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible.[7]

Urban settings have constituted the natural habitat of detectives from Edgar Allan Poe to Sherlock Holmes, and from Dashiell

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5. Kevin J. H. Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism, Reading against the Grain,* Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p. 65.

6. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York and London, Methuen, 1987, p. 7.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Hammett to Elmore Leonard. In the urban labyrinth of New York City, Daniel Quinn, writer-turned-detective, tries to come to grips with the reality, value and trustworthiness of the evidence presented to him. He is not hired to solve a crime, as no crime has yet been committed, but rather, he is hired to deal with the possibility of murder. This constitutes a pivotal issue in the plot of *City of Glass*, all the actions of the detective are directed at something that, given certain conditions, may possibly come to be. Thus, paraphrasing Nathaniel Hawthorne[8] in his definition of the novel, Daniel Quinn sets out at the beginning of his quest looking *not merely to the possible but to the probable*. In this role of investigator into the probable, Quinn is not aiming to fill in the gaps of a puzzle but to ponder upon all the possibilities and value that the puzzle as a system may provide. Quinn is not supposed to answer the questions of the case but to consider the questions themselves and their potentiality, while at the same time he has to deal with the materiality of the sources of information and reality, as far as their reliability is concerned.

Daniel Quinn, from his early position of total involvement in the investigation, experiences a feeling similar to a complete *abandonment* to a superior reality and such is his involvement in the case, Quinn absolutely leaves his life behind. This apparent blind over-commitment to get at the "truth" of the case leads him, in an unexpected way, to the discovery of his own mystery, to the discovery of his own self. While still in the flux of the action in which he is involved, Quinn starts an exercise of reflection (mirroring) in the way of questioning the constituent parts and demarcations of his labyrinth. The questioning attitude constitutes an exceptional

8. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1967, pp. 1-2.

break in the nature of the text of *City of Glass,* as can be pointed out with the following excerpt:

> He *wondered* why he had the same initials as *Don Quixote*. He *considered* whether the girl who had moved into his apartment was the same girl he had seen in Grand Central Station reading his book. He *wondered* if Virginia Stillman had hired another detective after he failed to get in touch with her… He *thought* about Peter Stillman and *wondered* if he had ever slept in the room he was in now. He *wondered* if the case was really over or if he was not somehow still working on it. He *wondered* what the map would look like of all the steps he had taken in his life and what word it would spell.[9] [My italics]

This attitudinal change of Quinn is not very far from that of Blue in *Ghosts*: both are led in the action of their adventures to a position of self-awareness, to the confrontation with the Coleridgean assertion that any knowledge becomes, in the end, self-knowledge. The 'know thyself' injunction of the classics, and, of course, of Ralph Waldo Emerson, comes for Blue in a moment of non-action, a true contemplation of opposites, in his task of discovering the truth. This state of self-awareness comes also with the realization that what had come before was just a limited undertaking, an experience, that dealt with the mere surfaces, a starting point to ponder and think about the facts:

> 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, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself.[10]

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9. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy (City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room)*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992. p. 129. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as *CG* followed by page number.

10. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy (City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room)*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992. p. 143.

Regarding this newly found state of awareness toward the self, it is worth remembering Lacan's view about the notion of subject as a being produced by the activity of a subject reflecting on itself and, what is more interesting for us, Lacan also notes that when the subject is fully engaged in observation he has no independent identity to that of the subject he is observing.[11] This indeed is what happens to both Daniel Quinn and Blue who, in their quasi-frenetic devoted engagement with the action of their detective quests, go through a phase of complete and utter commitment which leads to identification with the characters under investigation as it is proven by their ability to foretell moves and actions. Curiously, it is then at that moment of identification that both characters start a motion of folding into themselves. This identification can also be observed in the latter novels by Auster such as *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night* in which their hero novelists are as much engaged with their external reality as with their internal reality in a quest that, in the end, has everything to do with a search for their true identities and, above all, with the sense of their own existence and not just with the everyday labors of detective work, or of writing and reading for that matter. It is also a search that leads to the questions related to the sources of knowledge and its nature. Interestingly enough, we also observe in this movement a certain parallelism with the above-mentioned movement in the transition of the novel towards an ontological dominant, as described by Brian McHale, or David Lodge,[12] and which explains the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism.

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11. Peter Caws, "What is Structuralism?," *Partisan Review*, XXXV, 1968, p. 82.

12. David Lodge, "Postmodernist Fiction," in *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London, Edward Arnold, 1996, pp. 220-45.

Questions of Detection

The now apparent link between the detective story and the riddle, in terms of their similar nature of concealment and revelation, is brought by Kevin Dettmar to a more profound linguistic similarity, observed in their quasi-textual common reality, resultant both from their common playful character and from their ambiguity of meaning:

> The formal detective story in particular is constructed on a principle similar to that of the riddle. In the same way that the latter depends on a form of punning, a detective novel presents the reader with a set of data that either appear to be meaningless or suggest an obvious but wrong interpretation at the same time that they conceal the true one…[13]

All texts possess at their core a characteristic enigmatic nature, a nature revealed and conquered in the narrative space created by the narration. Catherine Belsey identifies the enigmatic nature of the classic realist text as one of the main forces behind it since everything is made to turn around the disclosure of the enigma and the eventual re-establishment of order and, therefore, once again, in this respect, the similarities of any realist text with detective stories are evidenced by Belsey:

> The classic realist text is constructed on the basis of enigma. Information is initially withheld on condition of a 'promise' to the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of this 'truth' brings the story to an end. The movement of narrative is thus both towards disclosure — end of the story — and towards concealment — prolonging itself by delaying the end of the story… [14]

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13. Kevin J. H. Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism, Reading against the Grain*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p. 67.

14. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London and New York, Methuen, 1980, p. 106.

This paradoxical idea of making the realist text dependent on an enigma that may very well still predominate even at the end of the novel is fully subscribed to by Paul Auster who sees in mystery one of the essential elements of any fiction. In Auster, however, mystery also gains a particular distinctness since it is considered to be a prevailing ingredient of life itself. From this recognition, it follows that life and fiction are not that different: connections and mutual influences do exist between the two real realms which lead Auster to affirm that the plausibility demanded from fiction has invaded the world of life, and because of this our perception of the power of chance in our daily lives is prevented from surfacing and being noticeable:

> The books have to do with the idea of mystery in several ways. We are surrounded by things we don't understand, by mysteries, and in the books there are people who suddenly come face to face with them. It becomes more apparent that they're surrounded by things they don't know or understand. So in that sense there might be some psychological resonance. Even though the situations aren't strictly realistic, they might follow some realistic psychology. These are things we feel — that confusion, that lack of knowing what it is that surrounds us.[15]

In an interview, Paul Auster points the finger at prevalence of Rationalism as a cause for an erroneous perception of the world as chiefly logically ordained. From this observation derives Auster's criticism, addressed at that sort of logical world that exclusively wants to see not only logical answers — as proof of its own existence — but also demands to see the world according to the results of logical questions, or methods of inquiry. Consequently, questions and methods which are 'not logical' such as the ones posited by

15. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, pp. 109-10.

other methods of inquiry, such as the mythological method, have been eliminated or hidden. Under this perspective, Paul Auster's conception of reality is quite elucidatory:

> Because reality is something we invent. We have different lenses for viewing the world, and every culture does it differently. I would say that since the 18th century, we've put a rational machine to work in deciphering the world, and it produces certain kinds of stories. And these stories are, so to speak, "realistic," when in fact they're not, they are just another interpretation of reality.[16]

Narrative Mystery

The detective, as a subject bearing the so-called Cartesian cogito, is faced with facts to which he must address his thoughts in order to reach a primal idea, a logical *organizing principle*, which will make possible an interpretation that may ultimately lead to the attainment of meaning. The submission of reality to the intellectual agency of the detective is made correspondent with that of the reader, also looking for clues in the context of the novel which is always felt as both pregnant with meaning and hiding the access to a full meaning. Paul Auster puts the reader at the center of writing. This is made clear in *City of Glass* when the narrator considers the expression 'private eye' in all its different meanings:

> The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was the letter "I", standing for "investigator", it was "I" in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer the man who looks out for himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. For five years now Quinn had been living in the grip of this pun. (*CG*, pp. 8-9)

16. Interview by Chris Pace, http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/links/secret.html

In effect, both the detective and the writer share in their activities a common goal: the unconcealment of truth. Furthermore, and more to the point, the reader is also a private eye buried in the text between its lines.

In the particular case of *City of Glass*, it is the unnamed narrator who explicitly reminds us of the similarities existing between the task of the writer and the task of the detective, both trying to make facts speak for themselves beyond their literalness, at the same time that both are always primarily dealing with a physical quality in the reality of things:

> The detective is one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eyes, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. He has become awake to the things around him, as if they might speak to him, as if, because of the attentiveness he now brings to them, they might begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence. (*CG*, p. 8)

We would also have to add that the reader must also share, to a great extent, these features of the detective and the writer when actively trying to make sense of the different data presented to him. The role of the reader is enhanced in the openness offered by — to use Barthesian terminology — the writerly text which puts all the stress of meaning on the activity exercised by the reader. One must not overlook that this emphasis on the reader is very much present in American thought as represented by Kenneth Burke's vision of language as "symbolic action"[17] or Stanley Fish's turn to criticism centered not on the meaning of a text but on the performance activity

17. See Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966.

of the text on the reader. According to Fish, fiction is modeled and directed towards an ideal type of reader he terms as *informed*:

> The informed reader is someone who (1) is a competent speaker of the language out of which the text is built up; (2) is in full possession of the 'semantic knowledge that a mature… listener brings to his task of comprehension,' including the knowledge (that is, the experience, both as a producer and comprehender) of lexical sets, collocation probabilities, idioms, professional and other dialects, and so on; and (3) has *literary* competence. That is, he is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of local discourses, including everything from the most local devices (figures of speech, and so on) to whole genres.[18]

This view about the active role of the reader could be erroneously considered as an influence of poststructuralist *Barthesianism* on a writer that has been considered by some as the most French of the American writers. Nothing is further from the truth: any affirmation on the active role of the reader fits perfectly in the American literary — and bardic — tradition if we lend our ears to Walt Whitman:

> Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical/essay — the text furnishing *the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does*. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train'd, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.[19] [My Italics]

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18. Stanley Fish, I*s there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 48.

19. Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Complete Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Justin Kaplan, Literary Classics of the United States-Library of America, New York, 1982, pp. 992-3.

Paul Auster's view on the role of the reader in the production of literary communication resembles very much Walt Whitman's stance. The affirmation of the role of the reader in the production of the literary text for Auster has to do with the withdrawal of the writer from the text, in the sense that the writer is not to overwhelm the reader with a profusion of details. In a similar way to Whitman, we feel that Auster's prose provides a framework and also some sparse hints so that the reader can be left alone to complete the book by means of his own particular reading. Thus, Paul Auster states:

> There's a way in which a writer can do too much, overwhelming the reader with so many details that he no longer has any air to breathe… Is the novelist's job simply to reproduce physical sensations for their own sake? When I write, the story is always uppermost in my mind, and I feel that everything must be sacrificed to it. All the elegant passages, all the curious details, all the so-called beautiful writing — if they are not truly relevant to what I am trying to say, then they have to go… You're telling a story, after all, and your job is to make people want to go on listening to your tale.[20]

From this standpoint, it is possible to conceive the reader as a human being with such a 'special sensibility' that will enable him to decipher the enigma presented by literature. For Paul Auster's characters, the discovery of truth can be attained after reaching a state of awareness after some trials and errors that make this quest rather similar to one of mystical quality. Therefore, since we must equate the reader to the detective and, following this line of thought, we would not see it as far-fetched to consider the possibility of regarding both as sharing, as we have already hinted, the gifts of the poet (those of the romantic poet as conceived by William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley or Ralph Waldo Emerson),

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20. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 112.

and which are translated in the power of being able to transcend the mere materiality of things and reach a deeper meaning by both the contemplation of reality and by letting it naturally speak for itself.

In *City of Glass,* despite all the evidence pointing towards its consideration as a detective story, Paul Auster paradoxically affirms, in an interview conducted by the French writer Gérard de Cortanze, that *City of Glass*, his 'most obvious' detective story, is in no way a detective story.[21] As early as 1987, in an interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster had altogether rejected the label of 'detective writer' and added: "Not that I have anything against detective fiction — it's just that my work has very little to do with it. I refer to it in the three novels of the *New York Trilogy*, of course, but only as a means to an end, as a way to get somewhere else entirely. If a true follower of detective fiction ever tried to read one of those books, I'm sure he would be bitterly disappointed. Mystery novels always give answers; my work is about asking questions."[22] We have to agree with Auster, that his novels never provide answers, at their endings. They do provide more questions and can be considered as a 'shock' addressed to that sort of reader who always expects in a novel a final explanation, in the way of restitution of order by means of a plausible explanation to its enigma. In Auster's novels we may get, partially paraphrasing David Lodge[23] on the subject of 'close endings,' an end which is false and maybe even more than that, a mocking end, because it is not satisfying and does not assume for itself any kind of finality or, rather, because an inability to obtain any sort of answers is shown.

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21. Gérard de Cortanze, *Dossier Paul Auster*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 1996. p. 85.

22. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995. p. 139.

23. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London, Edward Arnold, 1996, p. 226.

The detective novel with its epistemological capacity and with its Postmodern ontological dominant scope also draws attention towards the construction, communication and assimilation of knowledge in Western societies. The Postmodern detective story is not like its predecessors: it presents, as Kevin Dettmar mentions, the "dark side of the Holmesian dream of interpretive infallibility." Their plots are not those of the classic realist text, intent on reassuring the reader of the order of the universe and of its possible reestablishment whenever the principles of this world have been violated. In the case of Postmodern detective stories, the detective is confronted with an unsurpassable limit, the logic-rational inductive process is challenged with data that utterly defy detection and explanation or, simply stated, with data that cannot be put into words, in such way that they reach what may be termed as the ineffable. In this type of narrative, the completion of the narrative circle irremediably draws to a halt at the moment when more questions suddenly emerge. Thus, the Postmodern detective story, in its defiance of closure and in being unable to disclose the enigma at its heart, is perceived as engaged in nothing less than the disruption of Western values. It directs a pointed criticism towards reason and logical positivist science which had traditionally been granted with the duty of leading man towards liberation and the betterment of his conditions of existence. Finally, the Postmodern detective story represents the end of the optimism centered upon science as the sole guarantor for the fulfilment of the goals associated with the aspirations of modernity.

One more assault on the West is also sensed by William Spanos, in one of the seminal essays of literary Postmodernism, *The Detective and the Boundary*: *Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination* (1972). Spanos sees the attack on the Aristotelian model of plot as a way of attacking Western consciousness and metaphysics.

This attack has the objective of provoking a state of awareness by means of a set of strategies that must affect the reader who is consequently pushed to a situation of, what we may term as, 'estrangement' from the *status quo* which is already perceived as artificial and totalizing in the Western world:

> What I am suggesting is that it was the recognition of the ultimately "totalitarian" implications of the Western structure of consciousness — of the expanding analogy that encompasses metaphysics, art, and politics in the name of the reassuring logos of empirical reason — that compelled the postmodern imagination to undertake the deliberate and systematic subversion of plot — the beginning, middle, and end structure of representational narrative — which has enjoyed virtually unchallenged privileged status in the Western literary imagination ever since Aristotle or, at any rate, since the Renaissance interpreters of Aristotle, claimed it to be the most important of the constitutive elements of literature. In the familiar language of Aristotle's *Poetics*, then, the postmodern strategy of decomposition exists to activate rather than to purge pity and terror, to disintegrate, to atomize rather than to create a community. In the more immediate language of existentialism, it exists to generate anxiety or dread: to dislodge the tranquilized individual from the "at-home of publicness", from the domesticated, the scientifically charted and organized familiarity of the totalized world, to make him experience what Roquentin sees from the top of a hill overlooking the not so "solid, bourgeois city"…[24]

Postmodern Fictions

Additionally, Spanos in his essay 'The Detective and the Boundary' also suggests two diametrically and irreconcilably opposed ways of looking into reality and, by extension, to fiction. One pronounces reality as something rigid and completed, which is reflected in the

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24. William Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," in *Early Postmodern Foundational Essays*, Ed. Paul Bové, Durham and London Duke University Press, 1995, p. 26.

production of fiction which is ordered and fixed and, therefore, obeyant to rules (somehow equivalent to Barthes' notion of *preterite fiction*). The other, takes a different stance, it rejects this vision of the universe as one corresponding to a "well-made cosmic drama that determines the questions and thus expectations and answers," or what is the same, of causing a false perception which, in the end, leads to self-deception and does not allow for a true apprehension of reality. This second vision of the world considers the world as a product 'in the making:' it is equivalent to a Heraclitean Postmodern world of flux and mutation and reflects the uncertainty and undogmatic truths of the Postmodern world.

Once the deterministic and positivistic world model of the first way is rejected, the modern writer reacts consequently by literarily rejecting the consequences of that unconscious evasion, that Spanos best characterizes as one procuring "the ending as solution:"

> It is, therefore, no accident that the paradigmatic archetype of the post-modern literary imagination is the antidetective story (and its anti-psychological analogue), the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to "detect" and/or to psycho-analyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime (or find the cause of the neurosis).[25]

The well-made world, presented by realism that we have just seen as actually corresponding to an evasion or half-truths, is reflected in the realist text by what Catherine Belsey appropriately designated as silences. We have to admit, nevertheless, that, literature is always a mystery, there is always something beyond literary representation that demands interpretation, there is always something which is never definitely presented, solved or final. Literature, therefore, has to be conceived as an always perpetual motion that makes of reading and writing a truly Heraclitean process in that no end is ever

25. *Ibid.* p. 25.

surely and definitively reached. This, in response, leads by itself to the attraction for open-ended texts. Regarding this open-endedness of Postmodern fiction, and more particularly Postmodern detective fiction, Kevin Dettmar affirms that a detective fiction which stops short of making a revelation of an enigma should not make use of the name detective. Quite appropriately, he proposes the name *mystery*, a word which, by definition, refers to something with no rational explanation, something beyond human understanding and, therefore, unanswerable. Again, the word mystery transports us to a set of magical connotations of mythical or religious import or, at least, to the metaphysical world beyond sensorial experience:

> A detective story — or better, a mystery — that proceeds in this manner can no longer fruitfully be called a detective story. Different critics, discussing this phenomenon, have coined various names for this bastard subgenre, among them "metaphysical detective stories" (Holquist) and "antidetective fiction" (Tani). [26]

In this respect, Paul Auster's view on detective fiction is very clarifying in the interview conducted by Joseph Mallia. Auster, at the same time that he expresses his rejection of detective fiction for his *New York Trilogy* and repudiates the discriminatory treatment suffered by popular literary forms, vows to accept any sort of inspiration regardless of its sources and clearly points at what the purpose of the *Trilogy* was, a means to a different sort of end:

> In the same way that Cervantes used chivalric romances as the starting point for *Don Quixote*, or the way that Beckett used the standard vaudeville routine as the framework for *Waiting for Godot*, I tried to use certain genre conventions *to get to another place, another place altogether*.[27] [My italics]

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26. Kevin J. H. Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism, Reading against the Grain*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, p. 63.

27. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 109.

The use of the detective genre accordingly serves Paul Auster as a pretext to deal with the problem of similarities and differences of which personal identity is the fundamental aspect, as a delimitation and definition of who one actually is in opposition to others. Again, the stress falls on the *know thyself* injunction even when identity in characters, especially the ones in the *New York Trilogy,* turns out to be something very fluid or dynamic since they may assume and transit to different personalities or, in certain cases, they may don identity as a mask and clearly accept that there is a possibility to become somebody else, taking for granted that there is a lack of stability in character:

> The question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process that Quinn undergoes in that book — and the characters in the other two, as well — is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing.[28]

More importantly, in this interview Paul Auster also mentions as one of his themes in the *New York Trilogy* the subject of imagination and creativity and the transgression of the borderline between the empirical world and the fictive world. This latter world has its dangers if we consider the excess of imagination to which *Don Quixote* willingly submitted himself:

> City of Glass alludes to *Don Quixote*, and the questions raised in the two books are very similar: what is the line between madness and creativity, what is the line between the real and the imaginary, is Quinn crazy to do what he does or not?[29]

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28. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Myths Past and Myths Present

City of Glass and by extension *The New York Trilogy* suggest something more in the order of the questioning of the narrative form. The closure or, better, the end of the text is not brought about by the solution of a crime which, in fact, as we mentioned was never committed, neither is it brought about by the pre-emptive effort on the part of the writer-turned-detective who tries his best to prevent that the crime may, in the end, be committed. *City of Glass* and, as a whole, *The New York Trilogy* turn around the idea of the construction of fictive realities. *The New York Trilogy* presents realities located in a Postmodern world dominated by ontological questions that place their characters wondering about their own realities and the realities of the fictions in which they are inscribed. In this manner, the world of fiction is brought closer to the realm of philosophy and, for its part, this Postmodern philosophy, is confronted with a lack of answers, a situation that has made philosophers seek in romance or poetry those ultimate answers. This constitutes a position already delineated by Martin Heidegger at the beginning of the twentieth century and which, closer to our time, counted with Richard Rorty as one of its foremost proponents. The realm of the imagination is once again put at the forefront of human attempts at revelation in a world where logical processes and reason seem to be progressively losing all their influence.

In the Postmodern world, the concept of labyrinth gains a new vitality as the use of reason provokes more questions than answers at the same time that there is no longer any possibility of appealing to a theological organizing principle which always provided answers to the unresolved questions of reason. This is a world were human beings are left with a sense of irremediable loneliness and restlessness. In the classical labyrinth, Wendy Faris sees both the coexistence of opposing forces and the prevalence of mystery up to the point

of overwhelming its own creator. For Faris, these opposing forces are but the reflection of those which inhabit the empirical world too:

> The labyrinth pattern suggests play and terror; it expresses both our control over the environment and our bewilderment within it; it represents orderly disorder, the systematic creation of a mystery more powerful than the creator, who may subsequently become lost in it. Because the labyrinth encompasses these opposing forces — order and confusion, reason and passion, playfulness and fear — it can symbolize their combination in a work of art as well as their presence in the exterior world.[30]

Certainly, mystery that can even overwhelm the creator and 'orderly disorder' are two elements of productive capacities in the Postmodern novel. But it is precisely in this list of evidently paradoxical dualities, and in the tension generated by them, that we may also find the constitutive ingredients of the Postmodern novel: play, terror, control, bewilderment and the above-mentioned mystery represented by the lack of answers. It is exactly those opposing and paradoxical elements that are the ingredients of *The New York Trilogy*: the play, the *adventure* into the unknown, the drama of a possible adverse result of the story for the *protagonist*,[31] the pressure imposed by the ticking of the clock towards an end even when there is no closure as such, the apparent pattern of chaos or, on the other hand, the presentiment about a superior design of the plot — all these features compose this fiction about fiction which transcends itself in a search for meanings beyond the mere words.

The consideration of a link between myth and literature was one of the basic premises of Northrop Frye's study of the literary

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30. Wendy B. Faris, *Labyrinths of Language: Symbolic Landscape and Narrative Design in Modern Fiction*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 1.

31. A quick look at the etymology of this word will reveal its relation to agony and fight, the protagonist would be, thus, the first, the foremost, fighter. As for adventure, the word is related to an event which happens by chance.

phenomenon. For Frye, Western literature has its origin in both the classical Greek myths and in the Bible. From our position in time, it seems undeniable that the twentieth century has witnessed a return to the myth as faith in language as an adequate vehicle for the expression of truth, or the ordering of reality for the containment of truth, has not only dwindled but has been irremediably put into question. From this position of doubt and suspicion about the word (and, why not? The world), the myth, with its power to generate explanations and its capacity for ordering the world beyond the need of having to resort to the rational, occupies that privileged position Émile Durkheim considered as the main task of the myth: that of sanctioning and stabilizing secular ideology by constituting a new grounding for knowledge in a, more than ever, apparently chaotic and senseless world.

Despite appearances, modern society is not that far removed from the mythical societies. For Claude Lévi-Strauss,[32] Western civilization's adoption of rationalist logic does not convert it into a superior type of civilization. The so-called primitive societies with their mythical thinking do not operate differently from societies based on rationalistic logic, their differences lie in the use they make of symbols. Rationalist logic uses abstract signs, propositions and axioms and mythology uses heroes, gods and animals. For Strauss, the myth is a key organizing principle and both myth and rationalist logic try to reach some sort of mediation between opposite terms, and in this sense the two are similar. The inner structure of the myth devoted to transformation and renewal is governed according to the laws of metonymy and, as we know, metaphor and metonymy are two of the ruling principles of what we term as literature.

32. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques: Le Cru et Le Cuit*, Paris, Seuil, 1964.

Speaking in Metaphors

The world of the imagination is the realm of literature, which constitutes itself as a world of metaphors that allows us to leap into what is not, but is or might be, probable. Making use of the unifying power —ordering power— held by the imagination, the metaphor uses dissimilarity to reach similarity.

The role played by language in interacting with the external reality of the world is highly dependent on the use of the metaphor. We inexorably depend on the use of the metaphor in our daily interaction with external reality. This was made clear by I. A. Richards for whom the metaphor is an intrinsic faculty of mankind which does not suppose a substitution, a comparison, or a combination —the traditional Aristotelic view in metaphor studies— but the interaction of an underlying idea with an imagined contention that reflects two modes of thought:[33]

> That metaphor is the omnipresent principle of language can be shown by mere observation. We cannot get through the sentences of ordinary fluid discourse without it…Even in the rigid language of settled sciences we do not eliminate or prevent it without great difficulty.[34]

Be it in fiction or in common-sense reality, language is the only tool available in order to decipher the mysteries of the world. We can talk of a metaphor whenever we have an interaction of thoughts about two different things expressed by a single word or phrase. This interaction is possible by the agency of imagination that makes possible a leap from the obviousness of

33. I. A. Richards, T*he Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 96.

34. *Ibid*., p. 92.

what we may call everyday reference to a new sort of reference that redirects our perception of reality. This is basically part of the conciliation of the opposites that so much worried the poet-philosophers of the nineteenth century and this is precisely what George Steiner terms as *leap into sense*,[35] a notion that lays bare the importance of the make-believe even in the so-called literal communication. Steiner does this from a position of recognition of the inappropriateness of the verbal medium to reveal truth and the acknowledgement of its operation *on the sharp edge of silence*:

> We must read *as if* … This 'as if', this axiomatic conditionality, is our Cartesian wager, our leap into sense. Without it, literacy becomes transient Narcissism.[36]

Dwelling on the importance of the metaphor as a cognitive tool, Paul Ricœur placed the imagination at the center, as the driving force in a process of assimilation and synthesis that leads to a redescription of the world since the metaphor is considered a deviation from ordinary or literal reference. Something that Russian formalists theorized with the term defamiliarization:

> Imagination does not merely *schematize* the predicative assimilation between terms by its synthetic insight into similarities nor does it merely *picture* the sense thanks to the display of images aroused and controlled by the cognitive process. Rather, it contributes concretely to the *epoché* of ordinary reference and to the *projection* of new possibilities of redescribing the world.[37]

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35. George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, London, Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 35.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

37. Paul Ricœur, *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, Ed. M. Johnson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p. 241.

It so happens that metaphors are the primary constitutive part of fiction. In its dismissal of the referential function and the privileging of the poetic function over the other functions of communication (emotive, conative, metalinguistic, phatic, referential), Roman Jakobson's model reveals one aspect of the tension between fictive and factual realities, this tension that Ricœur terms as *référence dédoublée*,[38] presents the sense of ambiguity pertaining to all the poetical expressions, something that Jakobson dutifully acknowledges and exemplifies in relation to the usual formal commencement of all traditional Majorcan oral storytelling:

> The supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous. The double-sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, in a split addressee, and besides in a split reference, as it is cogently expressed in the preambles to fairy tales of various peoples, for instance in the usual exordium of the Majorca storytellers: 'Això era y no era' ('It was and it was not').[39]

It is also in the tension originated between the empirical world and the fictive world that the reader must be placed as always trying to establish a link between the two worlds. Once again, we are led to the consideration that the reader is not to be regarded as solely a passive spectator because he must take hold of his bearings in any labyrinth offered by fiction at the same time that he must not completely cut loose from the reality of which he is part. He must definitely be aware and remain an active part.

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38. Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 289.

39. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style and Language*, Ed. T. A. Sebeok and John Wiley, New York, 1960, p. 371.

Storytelling, a Language of Inter-action

After acknowledging in an interview[40] that the influence of fairy tales and the oral tradition of storytelling are one of the greatest influences in his work, Auster also states the reason for his interest in these two literary genres: their communication with a lack of detail and the enormous amount of communication they provide in a very short space. In oral literature the engagement and interaction of all parties in the acts of storytelling is demanded, as clearly stated by Walter Ong when mentioning that:

> The oral song (or narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung. In working with this interaction, the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer.[41]

Auster admittedly uses language as a *springboard for the imagination*. Against the grain of current novels that overwhelm the reader with information, Auster wants to activate the imagination of the reader, this language is perceived with the capacity of originating new ideas:

> The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it's the reader who writes the book and not the writer.[42]

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40. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 140.

41. W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 146.

42. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia. London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 111.

Furthermore, according to Auster, the writer suggests, and his words act upon, the imagination of the reader:

> There's a way in which a writer can do too much, overwhelming the reader with so many details that he no longer has any air to breathe… Is the novelist's job simply to reproduce physical sensations for their own sake? When I write, the story is always uppermost in my mind, and I feel that everything must be sacrificed to it. All the elegant passages, all the curious details, all the so-called beautiful writing — if they are not truly relevant to what I am trying to say, then they have to go… You're telling a story, after all, and your job is to make people want to go on listening to your tale.[43]

In this regard, we must again bear in mind George Steiner for whom art passes on to inhabit the receiver of its form, in a process in which the formal aspect of art is transcended and the receiver, when thus *indwelt*,[44] is made answerable to the habitation. For Steiner, this is a metaphorical process of mystical features if we consider his wording of this concept of *indweltness* "as in the metaphor of sacramental bread and wine."

The success of literary storytelling is made dependent on the ability of the writer to earn and captivate the attention of the reader. In a paradoxical way, the attention of the reader may sometimes be obtained or facilitated by the silence of the storyteller. This type of silence is not to be confused with that resulting from the impossibility of communication but, on the contrary, it is a silence originated by the willing command of the writer over the text. This willing act of withholding information, reflected also in the open-ended character of literary texts, is something that in Auster presupposes the recovery of the structure of the oral literary

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43. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

44. George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 35.

tradition. The interest of the story is obtained by giving the reader or listener room to add the details that were left untold, it is something that also presupposes and demands the clarity of the storyline.

In relation to this, we will have to mention that Paul Auster's novels illustrate that return of the plot, of the story, after a period of experimentalism in Postmodern poetics that can be taken as a continuation of Modernist experimentalism in its desire to break with old forms. This recovery of the plot and the storyline brings to the forefront both the fairy tale and the fable for their clarity and undeniable ability to establish and maintain communication, something that does not impede them from being fantastic rather than realistic.

PART III

LABYRINTHINE QUESTS

Identity and Difference

In order to understand the relationship between the empirical world and the fictive world in Paul Auster's novels, we should first consider Auster's claim of realism regarding his work. For Auster all the events narrated in his novels, including those motivated by chance and particularly those that make reality stranger than fiction, are part of what may be considered as commonsense reality:

> In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself as a realist. Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives.[1]

Next, we should bear in mind that Auster considers that chance is the only reality, a fact that, according to Auster, has been ignored once the triumph of logical positivism has rendered everybody unable to look at reality as a whole, in all its complexity and entirety, preferring instead a partial frame, that of logical positivism, which

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1. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, pp. 116-7.

limits reality (as much as narrative fiction) to the so-considered 'life-like' reality of verisimilitude. As Auster makes clear, then, chance may seem the only thing beyond effective (human) planning or interference and, therefore, can be made to pass as or, even, be considered as the only reality, as the only thing really authentic in empirical reality. According to tradition, or logical positivism, the world of fiction has a master in the author but this author, like any human being, has a prismatic psychological constitution and may not be aware of, or should not be made answerable for, everything he produces, even when authorial presence and control may be felt. In fact, about the subject of chance, for Paul Auster commonsense experience is to be considered absolutely opposed to 'life-like' logical positivism. Auster considers this sort of experience as a real and authentic life-like material to be used in his works:

> Life is full of such events. And yet there are critics who would fault a writer for using that episode in a novel. 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 is supposed to be.[2]

Further, to clarify and stress even more his point, Auster contends that fiction has made us look at reality with different eyes, requesting from reality the verisimilitude we demand from fiction, quoting Auster: "truth is stranger than fiction. What I am after, I suppose is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in."[3] In relation to Paul Auster's stance on storytelling, it should come, therefore, as no surprise that he declares himself a realist writer.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

3. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, , London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 117.

These considerations about chance in Paul Auster lead us to tackle the important Postmodern subject of chaos. John Barth refers to chaos in his book of essays *Further Fridays*[4] as a phenomenon with origins in the German romanticism and, most especially, linked to Friedrich Schlegel's view of the arabesque. The essential view we gather in Barth is that there is no disorder in what we know as chaos; for Barth chaos may very well be considered as 'orderly disorder.' In relation to this stance, Barth bases himself on scientific findings that prove the existence of pattern structures in phenomena that had previously been considered as chaotic, anarchic. In fact, the term chaos is quite misleading since it refers to realities which just show a seemingly chaotic reality. These new perspectives on chaos show the necessity for a different approach to reality, one which penetrates the reality of things by looking at their true natures which may not be made available to the naked and deductive eye of logic rationalism. These realities, we may say, demand the action of the gift of insight or, even, imagination as a God-given faculty. There is also the perception that reality is too complex to be understood alone by the faculty of reason; under this view the 'secrets of life' can and must be revealed by means of a comprehensive involvement of all of man's faculties under which there is no room for the conception of man just as a thinking machine. This brings to mind the conception of man expressed by William Wordsworth and his rejection of man just depending on, and making use of, a "meddling intellect which misshapes the beauteous forms of things,"[5] Wordsworth would also add, in order to make his point even clearer,

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4. John Barth, *Further Fridays: Essays*, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984-1994, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1995, pp. 286-7.

5. See, William Wordsworth's poem "The Tables Turned," in *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, Ed. John O. Hayden, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1990.

that "we murder to dissect." This position obviously leaves open a door for an idealist conception of Postmodernism and, what is more, stresses an important Romantic stream in Postmodernism, one that recovers intuitive perception in what can be perceived as an attempt to establish a true dialogue, an exchange with nature about what we may consider the nature of things.

In claiming for himself the adjective of realist, Paul Auster falls into the American literary tradition of the romance as opposed to that of the novel. We have to acknowledge Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence and vision in delimiting two modes of prose writing. In Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), the contours of these two different modes for the narrative are established, one of "very minute fidelity, not to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience," that Hawthorne terms as novel, and a rather different mode that he terms as romance and which may "swerve aside from the truth of the human heart" and is "to a great extent of the writer's own choosing or creation."[6] A year later, in *The Blithedale Romance*, again in a preface[7] to this *romance*, Hawthorne is led to criticize American letters for not allowing the romancer "license from everyday Probability" and complains about the lack in America of "such Faery Land, so like the real world, that, in a suitable remoteness, one cannot well tell the difference, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment, beheld through which the inhabitants have a propriety of their own." This latter narrative mode certainly is where Paul Auster can be placed as a writer, for whom we can identify a return to the illusion

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6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1967, pp. 1-2.

7. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1978, p. 2.

of make-believe based on the now full commonplace experience of the reality of life, at the same time that there is an incursion of elements from the real in to the Faery Land "so like the real world," that, "one cannot well tell the difference." It should be stressed here that in Auster there is an ever-present awareness about the real, empirical reality, with "an atmosphere of strange enchantment" and an acute concern over its description, as evidenced in Auster's preoccupation with its clarity of expression.

Under this framework, while according to Paul Auster, in his personal experience as writer, the empirical world is one of fantastic events, we can also observe that the world is one of secrets in which organic mysterious, concealed, correspondences do exist. It is in *Moon Palace* where this underlying order, existing in the disorder of the world, is unmistakably made clear. Initially, this is revealed by Marco Fogg's first tutor, his uncle Victor, who shows optimism in a world ruled under non-apparent mysteries and where:

> Everything works out in the end, you see, everything connects. The nine circles. The nine planets. The nine innings. Our nine lives. Just think of it. The correspondences are infinite.[8]

Later on, the hero of the novel Marco Fogg, shows his assimilation of the teachings of his, already absent, uncle. For Fogg, it eventually becomes evident that in the world there exists a secret harmony which will reveal itself to those sensitive beings by means of a willing abandonment to the rules of that spiritual reality. This is a process that will clearly lead to the revelation of Fogg's own

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8. Paul Auster. *Moon Palace*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989. p. 14. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as *MP* followed by page number.

true being in an action that will show both respect and submission to the will of Nature:

> Two years ago, for reasons both personal and philosophical, I decided to give up the struggle. It wasn't because I wanted to kill myself — you mustn't think that — but because I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me penetrate myself. The point was to accept things as they were, to drift along with the flow of the universe. I'm not saying that I managed to do this very well. I failed miserably, in fact. But failure doesn't vitiate the sincerity of the attempt. If I came close to dying, I nevertheless believe that I'm a better person for it." (*MP*, p. 80)

The words of this excerpt, indeed, remind us of the philosophy of the American Romantic, transcendentalist, philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau for whom, in the search for a self-reliant identity, or true identity, there is a pervading sense that man is part of nature and that he should submit himself to it in order to attain access to or, ultimately, gain knowledge about the value and worth of his true self. This process of identity making, of actual construction for Fogg, is made dependent on the idea of *abandonment*, one concept that we see as one of the main themes of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, and which does not suppose a 'surrendering' to things nor a passive resignation to reality. In both Auster and Heidegger, it implies some sense of serenity before commonsense reality, a certain detachment from the whirlwind of reality that will simply lead to a state of awareness of one's own being in a pattern where, after all, the enticing *mystery* of harmony prevails. This attitude is compounded with an awareness of being within a reality undergoing and dominated by a constant process of becoming. This being the case, Auster's characters procure solitude, solitude that brings them closer to what constitutes the true experience of being, by the absolute negation of the individual self which in the end, and quite paradoxically, concludes, as a process,

by fully integrating all individuals into human society, by their awareness of what the existence of the self actually is and means.

Auster's Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night* starts out in the novel with a consideration of reality similar to that of Dashiell Hammett's character Flitcraft. The world may initially, and by a superficial consideration of it, be taken as orderly, that is, under the control or the understanding of human beings, a view that can easily be shattered by a blow of (dis)fortune, the unexpected. This is what Orr concedes as narrator:

> Flitcraft realizes that the world isn't the sane and orderly place he thought it was, that he's had it wrong from the beginning and never understood the first thing about it. The world is governed by chance. Randomness stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment — for no reason at all. By the time Flitcraft finishes his lunch, he concludes that he has no choice but to submit to this destructive power, to smash his life through some meaningless, wholly arbitrary act of self-negation.[9]

For a character like Orr, intent on a quest, there are things observed that soon defy logic once surfaces are left behind. This is evident in his reflection about his relationship with Grace which directs us quite explicitly to a reality beyond surface, appearances, words and right into the unexplainable mystery of desire:

> But I want to go deeper than Grace's body, deeper than the incidental facts of the physical self. Bodies count, of course — they count more than we're willing to admit — but we don't fall in love with bodies, we fall in love with each other, and if much of what we are is confined to flesh and bone, there is much that is not as well. We all know that, but the minute we go beyond a catalogue of surface qualities and appearances, words begin to fail us, to crumble apart in mystical confusions and cloudy, insubstantial metaphors.

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9. Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 2004. p. 12. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as *ON* followed by page number.

> Some call it *the flame of being*. Others call it the *internal spark* or *the inner light of selfhood*. Still others refer to it as *the fires of quiddity*. The terms always draw on images of heat and illumination, and that force, that essence of life we sometimes refer to as soul, is always communicated to another person through the eyes. Surely the poets were correct to insist on this point. The mystery of desire begins by looking into the eyes of the beloved, for it is only there that one can catch a glimpse of who that person is. (*ON*, p. 17)

In the world of reality, whatever defies explanation does so because it seemingly lacks a recognizable or discernible pattern. In fiction, verisimilitude is that which resembles what is real, that which resembles what exists in the empirical reality because it reproduces the recognizable patterns of reality.

Paul Auster's approach to the real, the way he tackles the commonsense as sometimes a product of mere chance, makes us consider reality and its relation to fiction and the blurriness of the borderline between the two. This is a fact not to be overlooked in a writer who, as seen above, considers that our perception of reality is conditioned, framed, by the same formal considerations of fiction. It is, nevertheless, appropriate to say that in Auster the sight of commonsense experience is never lost, the existence of fiction with its rules and particular framing are never to be blindly or naively ignored.

Literature must be seen as both dealing with the real and the imaginary, and most importantly, it must be seen in its potentiality of building bridges between the two worlds by carrying out a task of unconcealment or revelation of reality. This is something which has always been present in literature and it must not be seen as just one of the recent and, maybe farfetched or, even, mindless, developments of Postmodern literature. The Polish philosopher and critic Roman Ingarden,[10] for instance, dealt with the ontological

10. Roman Ingarden, T*he Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borders of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, Trans. George G. Grabowicz, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

problems of fiction, stressing that the fictional is, quite paradoxically, both autonomous and dependent on reality; this apprehension lead him to affirm that there is a considerable overlap between both worlds. On the other hand, the text must not be seen as an immutable mirror of an also immutable reality. At the same time, Ingarden also stresses that in fiction the constitutive *conscience* of the reader plays a decisive role, one that we must identify as an awareness of the 'reality' of fiction.

From the perspective of hermeneutics, scientific activity tends to be seen as an activity covering fields that have already been circumscribed and interpreted by the imagination; the door closed by rationalism and empiricism has been reopened. According to the views expressed by Gaston Bachelard and others, the imagination is at the forefront of scientific discoveries:

> Literature has an affinity to the *intuitive* path to reality and truth described by Pascal and Bergson, for it deals with the infinite world within the reader, a world which in many ways is more intricate and difficult to describe than the logical scientific universe that resides outside us and which we experience through our sense organs.[11] [My italics]

Milan Kundera, in dealing with the legacy of Cervantes, reminds us of the importance of the function of literature, one primarily dedicated to the unconcealment of reality:

> The sole *raison d'être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's only morality.[12]

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11. Donald R. Maxwell, *Science or Literature: The Divergent Cultures of Discovery and Creation*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2000, p. 29.

12. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 6.

Kundera stresses, therefore, the uniqueness of the purpose of the novel, the specificity of the use of language fiction makes in order to get at the true reality of things by producing a different use of language. It is important to bear in mind that it is language that allows us to have an understanding and knowledge about the reality that surrounds us and it is in relation to this organizing value, and in its capacity for making perceptible reality, that we must understand literature and its realm of possibilities. Literature is just one of the possible ways to describe the world and, as such, it behaves as any other description in relation to external reality.

Foucault, when considering *Don Quixote,* mentioned that the world of fiction is one in which this relationship between the fictional and real is based upon a set of differences and similitudes that are brought into the world framed by the text. This deserves our attention since it mentions the coalescence of two worlds in fiction and also because it identifies texts as framed by certain patterns or organizing principles which in turn make any text both similar and dissimilar to the one text constituted by what we consider as reality. Verisimilitude in fiction creates a link between the fictional and real. Nevertheless, this authentic similitude to the real also marks the borderline between fiction and reality. In a way, we may say that we only use verisimilitude to refer to fictive events that bear resemblance to the real; we use the word outside of fiction for what is probable to happen given a set of conditions. Quite paradoxically, therefore, in the world of fiction something which bears verisimilitude is something which possesses the semblance of truth but is not true, the 'true semblance' is something that only belongs to the world of fiction. This again constitutes one of the obvious paradoxes of fiction: what is to be taken as true is not true, it has a semblance of truth because it purposefully obeys a pattern and, therefore, is not the product of chance or chaos.

Non-disruptiveness

The initial view of Postmodernism as a disruptive mode in fiction writing, a mode that breaks and creates a difference with our commonly assumed ordinary perception of physical reality and which is a continuation of the experimentalism of Modernism, has been superseded. The plot, once considered as receding, has made a comeback. Many explanations for this return have been pointed out, almost all of them stressing the importance of the necessity of trying to get a very clear message across. The messages, the act of communication, has to be appealing and refer in a direct way to the preoccupations of the common man in a rapidly changing and, apparently seen as foundational, world that demands both engagement and answers. This much engagement and clarity are demanded in the face of alienation from the real that is present in most forms of experimentalism.

When referring to the return of the plot and considering Auster's predilection for fables, it is worth noting that storytelling, fables and oral literature are initially related to children's literature and presuppose clarity in their formal presentation even when they may present extra-ordinary events, always with a moralizing and ethical intent. In this respect, Allan Lloyd Smith[13] states that, especially after the seventies in American literature, we can no longer talk about two equidistant poles in fiction, with one termed realism, in which the writer tends to be invisible, and the other constituted by the writers who prefer self-consciousness (and other equivalent terms of *écriture*, fantasy or fabulation), simply because writers naturally

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13. Allan Lloyd Smith, "Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodern Writing," in *Contemporary American Fiction*, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, London, Edward Arnold Publishers, 1987, p. 39.

combine both modes of narrative writing. This presupposes both an affirmation of the world of the make-believe, of fantasy, and at the same time the fact that there is not an alienation from reality. Writers use fiction to try to shake their audiences into consciousness with their mode of putting together the fantastic with the real, something that in Postmodern writing leads to the already highlighted obliteration of the distinctions between both reality and fiction, sketching out a reality which is more and more similar to a construct. This obliteration demands an authentic reassessment of the pact of *suspension of disbelief* especially since with Postmodernism this pact is pushed to the limits in, sometimes, radical attempts to try to provoke awareness of reality and draw attention to how reality actually is while stressing that reality is always very close to a construct, if not a full construct. In his essay, Lloyd Smith considers this development as a partial "return to the techniques of romantic writing, recognition of the conspiracy between writer and reader in the service of an illusion that is itself a higher, or at least more intense, reality."[14] This is precisely what Paul Auster demands from his novels and from his readers, from *The New York Trilogy* to *Oracle Night*.

For his part, John Barth, an avowed romantic of the twentieth century,[15] with his characteristic irony mentions something extremely important in relation to the instability of literary tagging, but also in relation to this recovery of the narrative line: "Sure enough, just when I had got a pretty good idea what Fabulism was,

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14. *Ibid.* p. 40.

15. Explicitly Barth mentions: "I have come to think of my own working aesthetic, when I think about it consciously at all, as "romantic formalism," or "chaotic-arabesque Postmodernism." *John Barth, Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984-1994*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1995. p. 289.

in the 1970s the stuff began to be called Postmodernist."[16] The use of the features of the fable in a modern and non-disruptive mode, where the value of the story line is stressed, has certainly returned and emerged as appealing to an important faction of novelists of the late twentieth century.

The aforementioned feature of abandonment, or total acceptance of the nature of things brought about by the process of becoming and, a position we could consider as that of casting a look back — not a naïve one — into reality, which is implicit in all Postmodern writing, may in fact resemble, as Lloyd Smith[17] admits, the idea of romantic irony, an awareness of the work's own form within itself in the service of a larger unity or pattern. This awareness of its own being, of its own nature, is what allows, after all, fiction to attain a privileged position in relation to knowledge and reality. Reality is a construct and literature should not be considered at all as the only kind of 'fiction:' history, theology and even physics are also perceived as fictions[18] or, at least, sharing with fiction a fundamental feature, that of being narratives. All facets of human knowledge are dependent on descriptions to the point that language is now thought, unequivocally, to set the limits of our knowledge of the world.[19] Again, and as pointed out previously, it should not be overlooked that knowledge, according to Lyotard, is dependent on the narrative

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

17. Allan Lloyd Smith, "Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodern Writing," in *Contemporary American Fiction*, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, London, Edward Arnold Publishers, 1987, p. 42.

18. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London, Edward Arnold, 1996, p. 14.

19. It was Wittgenstein who stated in an epigram in the *Tractatus*: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world". *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. C. K. Ogden, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922, #5.6.

descriptions of reality. All knowledge is narrative knowledge and, in this way, some fundamental features, or conventions, considered as only proper to fiction, are also seen in those narratives exclusively concerned with what we assume simply as reality, since knowledge is such by virtue of communication. This is particularly true in the realm of history in which the narration of facts —real facts — uses the same conventions of the narration of fictive facts such as diegesis, selection, temporal pacing and employment. Thus, on his part, Raymond Williams[20] draws attention to the connection of history and fiction as forms of narrative in which creativity plays an important role. In both, the literary devices of suspense and anxiety are used. For Williams, this connection is made even more apparent if we consider that both history and story share the same etymology. From a common root, history evolved into being an account of past real events and story came to be an account of imaginary events. Present day writers and artists work with the myth: in ordering, framing and providing meaning for the reality that defies rational explanation. The labyrinth of reality is expressed in the Postmodern text in the reconciliation of opposites, making use of playful and ironic ways.

In the process of reading, the so-called dangers of the make-believe are present and the reader must not blindly assume that everything is true or, what is the same, that everything is part of the empirical reality. On the other hand, when considering a fictional text, the reader cannot afford to completely swerve to the other pole of total rejection of the world presented. Likewise, in relation to history, it would be careless, or even naïve, to believe in everything its narratives tell. One of the unavoidable figures

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20. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* New York, Oxford University Press, 1973.

to be considered in relation to the boundaries between fiction and common-sense reality is Don Quixote who, as a character, is so much seduced by the world offered by books of chivalry, ends up accepting the world of the make-believe as his own, as the only world. Still, Don Quixote is not left completely to his own devices or, better, lack of devices. Due to the loyal intervention of Sancho Panza, a thread to the world of reality is maintained, a thread that will make it possible for Don Quixote to return to the real world and recover his sanity, if by any chance it was ever really lost. Sancho Panza protects Quixote from the excesses of imagination; the secret to attaining this position must certainly be in the moderation produced by awareness of the boundaries.

True poetic language does not allow for univocal decoding, an opinion which is reiterated in the twentieth century by the leading semiotician Umberto Eco. In *The Open Work*, Eco expresses his opinion that the active participation of the reader in the work of art is a must since literary communication is, after all, always dependent on this peculiar and, above all, necessary participation characterized by an action of decoding. Likewise, Eco suggests that the withholding of information on the part of the writer and, therefore, the consequent *deferment*, as opposed to immediate communication, constitute the specificity and substance of the literary, perceived as a phenomenon which plays with the tension between the *unconcealment* and revelation of information:

> Any work of art can be viewed as a message to be decoded by an addressee. But unlike most messages, instead of aiming at transmitting a univocal meaning, the work of art succeeds precisely insofar as it appears ambiguous and open-ended. The notion of the open work can be satisfactorily reformulated according to Jakobson's definition of the "poetic" function of language. Poetic language deliberately uses terms in a way that will radically alter their referential function (by establishing, among them,

> syntactic relationships that violate the usual laws of the code). It eliminates the possibility for a univocal decoding; it gives the addressee the feeling that the current code has been violated to such an extent that it can no longer help. The addressee thus finds himself in the situation of a cryptographer forced to decode a message whose code is unknown, and who therefore has to learn the code of the message from the message itself…ambiguity is not an accessory to the message: it is its fundamental nature.[21]

According to Jacques Derrida's use of the term *différance*[22] we must understand that meaning is permanently deferred, or delayed. Meaning, therefore, stands not only in opposition to logocentrism, which presupposes fixed meanings, guaranteed by presence, but meaning is always referred to an undetermined point in the future. But more importantly, meaning is deferred and produced by its difference to other meanings; it is, above all, relational, never self-constituted. Due to the suspension of all traces of ordinary reference, the reader has to be able to get the message which is not expressed in the literalness of the text. The reader, the informed reader, has to read between the lines and since the text does not provide an easy access to its message, the immediacy of communication is delayed, or to use one expression coined by Derrida, the meaning is deferred. Taking a wider view on the literary experience, we should consider here Terry Eagleton for whom a literary work is never complete; it is always submitted to constant rewriting which leads to Eagleton's consideration of literature as characterized by its instability, always being submitted to endless change by the society and the individuals who receive it. This is not very different from the process of adaptation and mutation

21. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 195-6.

22. See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, London, Athlone Press, 1981, p. 26 f.

of language itself, especially if we consider what happens with literary works:

> All literary works, in other words, are 'rewritten', if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed, there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'. No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair.[23]

This lack of literal or immediate meaning is what characterizes the literary work of art; in it there is not a direct univocal relationship between a text and a meaning in the same way that there is not a firm and univocal relationship between a word and a physical object in the empirical reality. In literature the final meaning is deferred so as to draw the attention of the reader towards the formal capability of language in creating meaning, a meaning which is not in any way final, since it is not expressed and has to be inferred attending to the whole communication process. We have to underline that this is a communication process that is regulated by the laws of communication, existent in the empirical world at the same time as the text imposes its own rules on communication, leaving it always open to new interpretations.

In this respect, we have to consider any text as part of a process, an endless process of generation of meaning that once started will be never finished as it is always demanding new interpretations. This consideration of literature as a never-ending or perpetual process falls fully into the fold of the Postmodern world, a world characterized by the lack of fixities and lack of immutable tenets in all

23. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 12.

areas of thought. The Postmodern Heraclitean scope of Postmodern literature, far from being an endorsement of the 'anything goes' motto attributed by some critics to Postmodernism, constitutes both an admission of humbleness and of the limitations with which man, and all of his creations, are confronted with in a rapidly changing world dominated by technology and maximum performance. In this state of affairs, human beings only know with certainty that they do not possess the final word and become aware that 'the world out there' escapes their ability to communicate with it and that, consequently, reality cannot be described with certainty or, what is more important, cannot be even expressed. In the arts, this idea of the inexpressibility of reality, and the impossibility of finding the proper means to express it, is related to the romantic idea of the sublime, that something that escapes communication, a "pleasing fear," the fruit of the discovery of the unknown which marks a sharp borderline as to what can be humanly communicated. It puts us in contact with possible transcendent aspects or powers of an untouched and mysterious reality.

Incidentally, we observe precisely in Paul Auster's fiction that there is a constant suggestion, very noticeable in *The New York Trilogy*, towards the notion of meaning as placed in an undefined future time. In *Oracle Night* this deferment of meaning is gathered by Sidney Orr's evolution, from a position of denial of the possibility of the 'mysterious,' to one position of acceptance of some sort of, what can rightly be termed as, 'design' in the reality of the world. This is made clear once Orr comes to view one book, *The Empire of Bones*, as a 'premonition of things to come.' In this respect, we can affirm that his 'life's story' or the events of his existence have been framed, or patterned, by a book of fiction. Such a consideration of the narrative provides a conception of time which integrates, and makes possible, knowledge and puts forward a vision of a

possible world which is not yet part of reality. This, nevertheless, has always been the position of the novel: it has always summoned for itself the role of a quest, a journey or, more to the point, it is a true journal into the unknown where there is mystery and, at the end, there is always some possibility for a better understanding of reality, even when novels can take us, the readers, on a full round-trip to the very starting point. Whenever some sort of completion is reached, full knowledge is foregrounded as something which always escapes Paul Auster's novels.

It Was and It Was Not

In *City of Glass* Virginia Stillman's remarks about her husband's first appointment with Daniel Quinn are quite elucidatory towards the ambivalence and ambiguity of the literary message. The literary message vividly shows in a clear and simple way its openness in this respect: it must not be assumed that truth is told and, at the same time, it must not be supposed that it is a — full — lie. In the words of Virginia Stillman, as we have just mentioned above, we can see a perspective on the relation between fiction and reality:

> 'I realize', she went on, 'that most of what Peter says is very confusing especially the first time you hear him. I was standing in the next room listening to what he said to you. *You mustn't assume that Peter tells the truth*. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think he lies.' (*CG*, p. 25) [My italics]

Any consideration of the novel should evoke the well-known pattern offered by the Jastrow-Wittgenstein duck-rabbit illustration in which both figures are real and non-excluding, exactly expressing the same sort of duality as the one expressed by fictional writing in its relation to the empirical world.

Paul Auster considers detective fiction as a praiseworthy genre for precisely its capacity for engaging the reader in fiction. We may assume that this is the reason why Auster chose the form of detective fiction in some way or another for most of his narratives: always following the pattern of a quest in trying to disclose reality. This is what makes his narratives, especially the *New York Trilogy*, so easy to label as detective fictions. Paul Auster is primarily interested in their form and the way this form interacts with the reader:

> At its best, detective fiction can be one of the purest and most engaging forms of story telling. The idea that every sentence counts, that every word can make a difference — it creates a tremendous narrative propulsion. It's on that level that the form has been most interesting to me. [24]

Auster's statement has its correspondence in the fictive narrative of Paul Auster in *City of Glass* in which the detective himself is seen as open to many possibilities and meanings. It is an openness that suggests that in reality, even when it may be rife with contradictions, some sort of meaning (order) may always be discerned and, finally, be obtained. Once this meaning is perceived as something within reach, the story itself comes to the forefront and its capacity as an item to be interpreted is stressed. Any clues become twice meaningful: first for the resolution of the mystery in the investigation of the detective and afterwards meaningful for the resolution of the story which is left open until the end and, as we have already mentioned, in Auster his stories may be left open even after the completion of the story itself:

> In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so — which amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life,

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24. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 140.

> seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end. (*CG,* p. 8)

At the same time that the detective deals with facts, the detective must see 'through' the facts, getting to a deeper meaning, and make choices as to what facts are really important and therefore true to the case. The detective must select, organize, and try to deduce meaning from reality, a reality that needs elaboration and requests to be provided with some form. This is something that incidentally bears resemblance to the work of the historian or the novelist when organizing their data. In this respect, Quinn is unambiguous about his way of looking into the data at his disposal:

> "Your sexual habits, or lack of them, don't concern me, Mrs. Stillman," said Quinn. "Even if what Peter said is true, it makes no difference. In my line of work you tend to meet a little of everything, and if you don't learn to suspend judgement, you'll never get anywhere. I'm used to hearing people's secrets, and I'm also used to keeping my mouth shut. If a fact has no direct bearing on a case; I have no use for it." (*CG*, p. 25)

Quinn's approach to reality requires that he 'suspends judgement.' This expression in Quinn's mouth certainly bears similitude to Samuel T. Coleridge's *suspension of disbelief* in that they suppose a willingness to suspend doubt; a contrivance that makes possible the acceptance of the imaginative world, one of explanatory hypotheses, by the reader or, as Coleridge puts it "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."[25] It becomes quite obvious

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25. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," in *English Critical Texts*, Ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 191.

in the latter part of the novel that it is not by logic alone that 'Quinn's case' will be sorted out. The tool that Quinn first ignored is the one which offered a different approach to reality, that of 'romantic co-existence' with reality and which goes beyond the mere reality of things and goes on to consider metaphysical suspicions.

The detective must *suspend judgement*, as much as the reader, and must suspend disbelief in order to bring all the possibilities of the book into life. To find out the truth is, in this way, made to be the explicit goal of both the writer and the detective and, it must be added, this is always accompanied by a similar pact and effort on the part of the reader. The detective has to adopt a stance of impartiality, *suspending judgement*, and searching for what is really fundamental and not accessory to this quest for truth. The writer also has to use language in a way that implies a certain detachment from its literal expression since he has to try to pretend that what he is writing is true even when he is aware that it is not. At the same time, the writer has to make it possible for the reader to *suspend disbelief*: the writer has to narrate things as if they existed out of the linguistic reality of the text. In addition, the reader needs to do so willingly, and to some degree, suspend his relation to the empirical world so as to accept the fictive world of the make-believe. These are the great paradoxes of literary language and what these operations ultimately imply is a stress on the gap existing between the sign and reality which is connatural to the dominion of literature.

In their different tasks of collection (re-collection) and of contemplation, of data or 'facts,' for a posterior analysis, both the detective and the writer come close to being committed to the same task of positivistic approach to reality. We are always explicitly reminded in the three books of the *New York Trilogy* of the similarities between the task of the writer and that of the detective. We are also reminded, as we have already seen, that the function of the reader is also that

of a detective, trying to make sense of the written truth which is represented by a book, and this task is not that different again from that of the reader.

Coming this far, it is necessary to state that literature is placed between the 'YES' and 'NO' of the traditional Majorcan storyteller which we see again repeated in *The City of Glass,* in the words of Virginia Stillman telling him "You mustn't assume that Peter always tells the truth. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think he lies." This same way of presenting reality is again repeated by Peter Stillman Jr. right at the beginning of telling his story, his own exordium:

> You sit there and think: who is this person talking to me? What are these words coming from his mouth? *I will tell you. Or else I will not tell you. Yes and no*. My mind is not all it should be. I say this of my own free will. But I will try. Yes and no. I will try to tell you, even if my mind makes it hard. Thank you. (*CG*, pp. 15-16) [My italics]

The spirit of the Majorcan story-teller exordium is present in the words of Peter Stillman Jr. which immediately makes us consider the ontological status of fiction at the same time as we appreciate a certain irony in the situation. Thus, Stillman's affirmation "I say this of my own free will" makes us consider its paradoxical value, if we bear in mind the narrator's first description of this character in which Stillman is seen moving as mechanically as a puppet. The uncertainty provided by storytelling, as far as its referentiality and value in relation to the empirical world is concerned, is further stressed in the ensuing dialogue between Virginia Stillman and Daniel Quinn:

> Anyway, Mrs. Stillman blushes and says "I just wanted you to know that what Peter said isn't true."
>
> What I'm interested in are the other things Peter said. I assume they're true, and if they are, I'd like to hear what you have to say about them."

> "Yes, they're true." Virginia Stillman released her grip on the chair and put her right hand under her chin. Pensive. As if searching for an attitude of unshakable honesty. "Peter has a child's way of telling it. But what he said is true." (*CG*, p. 25)

The seemingly final statement in the dialogue: "But what he said is true" does not close the questions about the trustworthiness of Peter's presentation of the case, nor does it provide unquestionable trust in Virginia's words. The narrator, abandoning any stance of neutrality, just adds, referring to Virginia's body language, that she was pensive: "As if searching for an attitude of unshakable honesty." According to ordinary language usage, it is certainly not clear what Virginia Stillman is trying to say. Her affirmations about Peter Stillman are obviously contradictory and we may, therefore, conclude that they do not make *sense*. Going through the dialogue, we read that first she tells us that what Peter said was not true, then, after the intervention of Quinn, she neutralizes what she has said by saying that it is true but, then, she adds, we are told by the narrator, as if looking for an excuse: "Peter has a child's way of telling it." Still, we do not know what those other things are that Peter said and which are presumably true; it might have been a commentary about their sexual behavior as a couple, but then, as if to shed some more confusion about this interview, Virginia finishes it off by kissing Quinn.

Labyrinthine Quest, A Point of Nowhere

In one of the foundational essays of Postmodernist literature, *The Literature of Exhaustion,* John Barth refers to the symbolism of the labyrinth and to the dramatic point in which the Theseus must confront the Minotaur:

> A labyrinth, after all, is a place in which ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction in this case) are embodied, and — barring special dispensation like Theseus' — must be exhausted before one reaches the heart. Where, mind, the Minotaur waits with two final possibilities: defeat and death, or victory and freedom.[26]

All the action of *City of Glass* points towards a final confrontation of Daniel Quinn with the nature of his own existence in the case. A case which, like the Minotaur of mythological tradition, possesses a hybrid nature. Despite the gathering of momentum towards this expected confrontation, Quinn is not able to trick the creator of the story he is living in. Nor is Quinn capable of victory over the story, over that progression represented by a movement through different stages, which has given him life. In not being able to defeat the, also hybrid, creature of fiction — a composite of reality and fiction — Quinn has confronted the paradox of language, created by human beings and, yet, controlling human beings by creating reality. In *City of Glass* the hero represented by the ordinary man/writer-turned-detective Daniel Quinn is never granted access to the climax of the drama, therefore for him there is no reward for victory or damnation for defeat; he is not gratified with an epiphany or plain elucidation about his situation in the story. Quinn just reaches the limit beyond which he is no longer able to interpret the facts of his existence and that of the things that go on happening around him and, more importantly, he is not able to be "awake to the things around him" and ultimately he is not able to elicit their meaning.

In fact, Quinn is never given a chance to confront in dramatic action the Minotaur and proclaim himself as victorious. Quinn is challenged by the hybridism of the creature of his own particular

26. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1967, p. 34.

labyrinth and the materials out of which his labyrinth was built: language. More to the point, in literature narratives may have intertexts and, as Catherine Belsey acknowledges, the writer may not have full authority, neither a full autonomy, over everything he writes. Belsey mentions as a paradox of authority that writers may, in the end, somehow be controlled by language:

> Thus the author's autonomy is to some degree illusory. In one sense the author determines the nature of the story: he or she decides what happens. In another sense, however, this decision is itself determined by the constraints of the narrative.[27]

This paradoxical aspect of language is contemplated in Quinn's *dialogue* with Peter Stillman Sr. in which Stillman, making use of literature itself by means of a literary work as *Alice in Wonderland*, reveals both the paradoxical nature of language and also the paradoxical nature of fiction. Humpty Dumpty is alive without being part of this world, like a literary work he can speak out of his *fictionality*:

> Humpty Dumpty: the purest embodiment of the human condition. Listen carefully, sir. What is an egg? It is that which has not yet been born. A paradox, is it not? For how can Humpty Dumpty be alive if he has not been born? And yet, he is alive — make no mistake. We know that because he can speak. More than that, he is a philosopher of language. (*CG,* p. 81)

The importance of the labyrinthine Greek myth in the world of literature is made more evident if we consider William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* in which we are served one of the most eloquent — and quoted — definitions of imagination. Theseus, as the successful killer of the hybrid monster of the labyrinth, a being half

27. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 106.

human, half bull or, if we will, half real and half imaginary provides us with the definition:

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And, as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.[28]

Theseus' bride Hippolyta also mentions another valuable aspect of fiction which is not to be overlooked: fiction is not an 'airy nothing' but something which bears connection with reality. Again, the ball of thread, like Sancho for Don Quixote, is Theseus' only means of salvation, his sole guidance as it constitutes his single connection to reality in the deceiving walls of the labyrinth, and, thus Hippolyta replies to Theseus:

> But all the story of the night told over,
> And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy's images,
> And grows to something of great constancy,
> But, howsoever, strange and admirable.[29]

According to Hippolyta the creations of the imagination are not divorced from life; the imagination accomplishes the essential mission of providing insight and may have influence on the events of commonsense reality. This idea appeals to contemporary philosophy, as much as it appealed to the romantic poets of the nineteenth century intent on revealing the true reality of things with the help of imagination. Imagination is accordingly considered as a sixth sense

28. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, vi 12-17.

29. *Ibid.*, vi 23-7.

which, during the romantic period, achieves a non-excluding parity with reason as an outstanding epistemological tool. In contemporary philosophy the voices of those against rigid boundaries, between the world of reality and the world of the imagination, are loud and clear. Since the nineteenth century a noticeable change in thought has been operating, accompanied by the contention that there is no privileged standpoint from which to consider reality or, what is the same, that probably the Kantian point-of-nowhere is gone and that even the works of philosophy have not been free from criticism. Philosophy has, therefore, withdrawn from its privileged position and has, by the force of circumstances, opened a new door in favor of the creative realm implicitly acknowledging and heralding a solution for this impasse:

> In the modern condition, philosophy had claimed the position of privileged metanarrative, claimed to be the discourse which might discover that final vocabulary which would ground the very conditions of knowledge. Post-modernists now claimed to have cut away this final ground in recognizing there were only ever vocabularies to invent.[30]

Unlike Theseus, who is granted the security of a magic ball of thread to counter the misleading form of the labyrinth, Quinn does not count on the help of an Ariadne, and is not granted an opportunity of 'authority' over his own fate. Daniel Quinn lacks a thread to secure himself to the ground of reality which would allow him to see reliably the reality of the labyrinth. Quinn's personal and initial approach to the 'case' did not allow for the use of imagination as a means of making use of reality and conquering, thus, higher (explanatory) ground. There is no point outside language

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30. Patricia Waugh, "Postmodernism," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. XI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 292.

for this Theseus, his attitude of taking both as granted and real the reality around him has led him to a *cul de sac*. Quinn's quest for truth, consequent on making use of a rational positivistic method, has borne no leads into the mystery of the story of which he is part. Daniel Quinn is left to contemplate the riddle of the labyrinth of which he himself is also part. At one point his only link with 'reality' was the intervention of a writer, Paul Auster, who, on the one hand does not take a very effective stance in helping Quinn out of the riddle and, on the other, is not explicit enough for Quinn in his advice, even when it is to be assumed that fiction cannot be taken too seriously, or that there is danger in unconsciously crossing the boundary into madness. The moral of the interview with Auster is that the borderline between fiction and reality must not be violated and a balance between both, similar to that between reason and imagination, must be preserved at all cost.

Cognitive Wanderings

We have already mentioned that it is precisely on the boundary between fiction and reality, and precisely on their point of confluence, that Postmodernism exists. In the novels of Postmodernism, the borderline between fiction and reality tends to be very fuzzy, we are confronted with characters and events that belong to the world of commonsense reality — to the so-called empirical world at the same time as they are in the fictional framework of a narrative. This establishes a link between the real and the fictional, a link that not only breaks the traditional boundary between art and reality but at the same time affects our perception of reality, making it appear somewhat as fictitious or, at least, story-like.

Like Maeander, Daniel Quinn acts as a wanderer, a *flaneur* too happy to immerse himself in the reality of his labyrinth to worry

about things that were not the case itself. Thus, initially, he never questioned the reasons of his hiring despite the fact there were certain things which defied both understanding and acceptance. Daniel Quinn, in the first stages of his adventure, acts of his own freewill, revealing that getting involved in the case was not an imposition. Nevertheless, it did turn out to be a necessity when mere involvement gave way to a search for answers, in relation to the nature of the case and the character's own involvement with it.

In Modernist imagery, it is precisely the stroller or *poète flaneur* who enters into contact with a multitude of signs, those signs that for Modernists appear without any clear or apparent referents in a world which is perceived as confusing and in constant mutation. This stroller assumes a role of certain detachment from a reality which is produced for, and by, the city as a modern day labyrinth. It is a reality perceived as senseless and fragmented. In Auster the following fragment from *City of Glass* seems to reflect those same perceptions of a *poète flâneur*:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt *as though he were leaving himself behind, 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*. The world was outside 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. Motion was the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. 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*, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (*CG*, pp. 3-4) [My italics]

Mike Featherstone[31] observes two opposite movements in the approach of the artist towards reality: one that corresponds to a distanced voyeuristic attitude, which he exemplifies with the stroller in the large cities "whose senses are overstimulated by the flood of new perspectives, impressions and sensations that flow past him;" and another movement of *de-distantiation* or immersion in the objects of contemplation which amounts to some sort of casting a new glance at the objects of our everyday existence. The latter movement corresponds to the de-familiarization of the Russian formalists and presupposes an openness to a new range of sensations. Since the times of Romanticism, the mind of the poet has alternatively oscillated between these poles, and here we may think of William Wordsworth and his *Intimations*, penetrating "the film of familiarity," engaging with reality in order to read something beyond simple perception, or just creating a new Nature into which the poet's "feelings, apprehensions, are projected," and, thus, converting Nature into a mirror. Wordsworth's effort to "choose incidents and situations from common life" was commented on by Samuel T. Coleridge as a means to "give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us…"[32]

The labyrinth comes to represent an enclosed place for movement very much like a book or a city. A site where language is unified while time in constant movement leads to an ending point, an end that indirectly points at termination or, even, death. Characters in Auster are always shown to be hard pressed for time, hard pressed to get

31. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage, 1991, p. 71.

32. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ""Biographia Literaria," in *English Critical Texts*, Ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 191.

to a point of arrival, conscious of an impending end that will quite probably place them exactly where they had started:

> 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. (*CG*, p. 104)

Quite paradoxically, however, no language is ever complete, no city or book ever stops developing after its end. Umberto Eco refers to signification as a process resulting from 'unlimited semiosis,' produced when signs refer to other signs in a never-ending process in which reality comes to have no objective referents. In this vicious circle, signs are "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else," thus:

> […] the process of unlimited semiosis shows us how signification, by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes *cultural units* in an asymptotic fashion, without even allowing one to touch them directly, though making them accessible through other units. Thus, one is never obliged to replace a cultural unit by means of something which is not a semiotic entity, and no cultural unit has to be explained by some platonic, psychic, or objectal entity. Semiosis explains itself by itself: this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows communicational process to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world.[33]

Both the detective and the writer attempt to reach a certain detachment from their own realities, both their efforts point at a desire for objectivity in portraying the true nature of things. This is one of the premises of the classical realist text, and one that

33. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 198.

reminds us of the efforts directed to the dehumanization of art; theorized from different perspectives by T. S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset in a clear attempt to sanitize the arts of any traces of personality, and reach closeness to an ideal point of nowhere, free from the intervention of subjectivity. The writer and the detective are presented as wandering in the mist of unknown reality and making choices that will determine the story in an apparently multicursal labyrinthine path represented by the constant flux of life.

Daniel Quinn uses his own movement, and the one evidenced by movement of the streets, to transcend time and space: to be nowhere, to reach emptiness, to reach that state of nothingness and awareness that we mentioned earlier. It is only through this state of being in loneliness that a paradoxical union with reality may take place, a union that demands abandonment to the world and an almost total depletion in order to find the true self by trying to reach the essentials that mark a truthful existence. At this stage, the process of walking is not just a process accompanied by thought, it is a desire to be beyond and unaffected by the real. This passage reminds us of one in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in which this philosopher considers and relates the process of thinking to that of walking, where walking is the same as advancing in thought:

> But [does] "Now I can go on"… mean the same as "Now the formula has occurred to me" or something different?... We do say: "Now I can go on, I mean I know the formula," as we say "I can walk, I mean I have time"; but also: "I can walk, I mean I am already strong enough"; that is, when we are contrasting *this* condition for walking with others. But here we must be on our guard against thinking that there is some *totality* of conditions corresponding to the nature of each case (e.g., for a person's walking) so that, as it were, he could not but walk if they were all fulfilled.[34]

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34. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, New York, MacMillan, 1962, § 183.

In order to be able to deal with commonsense reality, Quinn's labors for the breathtaking conjunction or synthesis of both his intellectual capacity and his bodily capacity, which as a process presupposes a progressive and slow process of becoming mentally apt to anticipate whether his efforts will lead to any results at the end. His walks are not a simple abandonment to the external flow of reality: they require mental concentration at the same time that Quinn needs to train his body before he can make use of his mind to properly think and reflect. Quinn's initial basic preoccupation is just concerned with recording all, absolutely all, he can about Stillman's movements before he can get to know what is in his mind:

> His excursions through the city had taught him to understand the connectedness of inner and outer. Using aimless motion was a technique of reversal, on his best days he could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness. By flooding himself with externals, by drowning himself out of himself, he had managed to exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair. Wandering, therefore, was a kind of mindlessness. But following Stillman was not wandering…For he was obliged to concentrate on what he was doing, even if it was next to nothing. Time and again his thoughts would begin to drift, and soon thereafter his steps would follow suit. (*CG*, p. 61)

Fittingly, American philosopher Stanley Cavell[35] connects Wittgenstein's idea of movement to communication. According to Cavell, thoughts are to be considered as steps forward. In like manner, we can affirm the same about the process of writing, writing is a movement of thought which is then made available in a novel that repeats the same movement-thought advance. Daniel Quinn progressively, in a step-by-step evolution, engages both mind and body in his work as detective. From mere walking without

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35. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Living Batch Press, 1989, p. 23.

thinking, Quinn ends up integrating the activity of writing to his walking, from writing will surge all the results of his quest. At first, for Quinn, writing is just a recording of data, then it becomes the basis for true contemplation or reflection on the reality about him, a reflection which in its final stage leads him to procure an ideal 'point of nowhere,' evidenced by his progressive isolation and detachment from reality. It is only after Quinn's reflection on his own recordings that he discovers the secret meaning of Stillman's wanderings, wanderings which are revealed as thoughts and questions in Quinn, an aspect we can connect to a metaphorical way of referring to all sorts of writing and fiction:

> He wondered if Stillman had sat down each night in his room and plotted his course for the following day or whether he had improvised as he had gone along. It was impossible to know. He also wondered what purpose this writing served in Stillman's mind. Was it merely some sort of note to himself, or was it intended as a message to others? At the very least, Quinn concluded, it meant that Stillman had not forgotten Henry Dark. (*CG*, p. 71)

Present in this evolution on Quinn's part is an all-pervading duality between what is physical and empirical and what is empyreal and spiritual and constitutes the object of thought. The true realities coexist again because one is inherent in the other. Walking is thinking in the same way that the point of nowhere becomes best represented by the empty room in the Stillmans' apartment. Again, the mind and the body must be brought to interaction, as two inseparable parts in balance, before any real thought can be produced.

Narrative Knowledge

Truth and objectivity are no longer absolute values in Post-modernism; this is especially evident after Jean Baudrillard's proclamation of the *death of history* stemming from the assumption

that the real is no longer differentiated from simulacra, “Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible.”[36] To put it another way, for Baudrillard it is a fact that the world of fiction may not only anticipate the world of empirical reality but also the world of imagination can affect the empirical world. In American letters, we may cite some examples of mutual interference between these two realms indicating porosity: early in the twentieth century, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) provoked a government investigation into the meat packing industry which culminated in a radical change of legislation; we can also cite how a change of names in the American Government nomenclature, the denomination of Department of War was abandoned in favor of Department of Defense, provoked by the publication of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). In this respect, the effort of Postmodernism to erase the borderlines between art and reality should be mentioned as one of the causes why empirical reality and art can go undistinguished. This is obvious in Truman Capote’s use of the factual in the fictive world of his novels of *New Journalism*:

> We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth […] we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth.[37]

We are thus made aware that it is not just the physical reality of the world of commonsense experience that affects novels. The process can be inverted, it can work the other way around.

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36. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 38.

37. Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Ed. Colin Gordon, New York, Pantheon Books, 1972.

One extreme position would be that of solidified metaphors which are taken as 'truths,' and affect the real world since they become part of it; they structure our ideas and thoughts as any other metaphors, and lead us to act according to them. It is quite logical to think, then, that by using metaphors, by provoking the defamiliarization of reality, we may desautomatize our perception and become aware of reality in a different way, and that we may gain control over it by changing our way of relating and being in the world.

It would be worth observing with Richard Rorty that even though the world is independent from its descriptions, it is only knowable through them and that only our descriptions of reality are right or wrong. This position places the stress on the use of language; our misperceptions of reality are provoked because of a wrong use of language. But, what is more important, this independence of the world stresses the fact that there is a gap between the world and the linguistic expression of it: what is right or wrong, true or false is so by the grace of the descriptions made by language:

> The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own — unaided by the describing activities of human beings — cannot. [38]

There is, in this sense, no singularity in fiction since whenever there is any sort of description there is a gap. The breaking of the borderline between the fictive and the factual, with the subsequent relativist approach to truth, has also led many philosophers to embrace the literary as a valid means to their goals. Thus, as already mentioned, Rorty proposes a new approach to reality obtained by its re-description in new vocabularies:

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38. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 5.

> The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate forms of non-linguistic behavior.[39]

Cognitive Focus

Concerning the treatment of the goals of fiction, the narration of the *City of Glass* can be divided into distinct parts of approximately the same extent. The first one fulfils all the premises of the classical realist text and the second part is the result of a change operated at both a formal and a philosophical level. The story changes its guiding principle and terminates as a Postmodern text in which what is offered is a reflection on both the nature of the text and its reality. It is a change of focus which, in the end, compels its readers to a reflection upon the essence of reality itself by having to consider a reflection on fiction. This same change, in general terms, is also reflected in the transition from the Modernist to the Postmodernist perspective on reality: a change which presupposes that the nature of reality must be questioned at all times, and it is this questioning that comes to occupy the center of the narrative as an attempt at explaining reality. The novel *City of Glass* passes on to represent the conflict between the imagination and reality by exploring the possibilities for meaning contained in the term reality.

Revisiting what we have already mentioned earlier we can properly say, using Brian McHale's terminology, that the 'change of dominants' in this novel reveal a full-fledged interest in the constitutive nature of the novel which, in its turn, reveals and corresponds to a genuine and similar sort of preoccupation with

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39. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

common sense reality. Daniel Quinn's passive attitude of submission to the superior reality of the *case* takes a turn when he decides to question the reasons for his meanderings. This action reminds us of the inauguration of modern philosophy made by René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) when Descartes starts questioning himself about what he can know with certainty. St. Augustine's naming, and Blue's way of ascertaining the reality carried by naming objects in *Ghosts*, coincide in this same task of questioning the true nature of reality; by drawing attention to the tools we use in order to know the world, it clearly constitutes an attitude that brings into reflection the limits of cognition and the possibility of attaining true knowledge:

> Blue looks around the room and fixes his attention on various objects, one after the other. He sees the lamp and says to himself, lamp. He sees the bed and says to himself, bed. He sees the notebook and says to himself, notebook. It will not do to call the lamp a bed, he thinks, or the bed a lamp. No, these words fit snugly around the things they stand for, and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has proved the existence of the world. (*G*, p. 148)

This is the simplest procedure, just a first step into a different type of knowledge concerning the surrounding reality. It is an effort on the part of a thinking subject, the Cartesian *res cogitans,* to make sense of the clues offered by reality. Both Quinn and Blue ultimately become set on questioning the center of consciousness, the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. Blue tries to believe that words reflect reality one on one. Correspondingly, Blue needs the reassurance that reality is properly represented by language and that, ultimately, reality can be shown to be dominated, or more to the point, to be expressed by language. Accordingly, we are told, Blue "feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has proved the existence of the world." Quinn, on the

other hand, parallels the action of enumeration by reconsidering his knowledge in relation to simple notions of time and space:

> It's June second, he told himself. Try to remember that. This is New York, and tomorrow will be June third. If all goes well, the following day will be the fourth. But nothing is certain. (*CG*, p. 104)

It is exactly with the same words of *City of Glass*, "until now," that the point of inflection begins for Blue. In *Ghosts* it is also a point of re-consideration of the past but, instead of considering the external reality, Blue's epiphany is focused on the 'world inside him' towards his unexplored self. At the same time we are told that he had been a man moving around the "surfaces of things," everything for him until then had been clear and distinct:

> *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, *unexplored and therefore dark even to himself.* He has moved rapidly along the *surface of things* for as long as he can remember, fixing this attention on these surfaces only in order to *perceive them,* sizing up one and then passing on to the next, and he has always taken pleasure in the world as such, *asking no more of things than that they be there.* And until now they have been, etched vividly against the daylight, distinctly telling him what they are, so perfectly themselves and nothing else that he has never had to pause before them or look twice. (*G*, pp. 143-4) [My italics]

For Quinn, his change of mood comes when he reconsiders the past by starting to reconsider its circumstances or the motivations by which he was drawn into the reality of his case:

> *Until now, he realized, he had never seriously questioned the circumstances of his hiring***.** Things had happened too quickly, and he had taken it for

> granted that he could fill in for Paul Auster. Once he had taken the leap into that name, he had stopped *thinking about Auster himself*. If this man was as good a detective as the Stillmans thought he was, perhaps he would be able to help with the case. Quinn would make a clean breast of it, Auster would forgive him, and together they would work to save Peter Stillman. (*CG*, p. 91) [My italics]

This passage signals the decisive point of inflection in the narration of *City of Glass*, it can be translated into what we may term as an awareness of being; Quinn's new look on the reality of things makes him consider the case with different eyes. From an attitude of a passive character who never made a serious attempt of trying to understand his existence in the action he is involved with, Quinn reaches a breakpoint in relation to the nature of his involvement in the case. From being quite happy getting lost "within himself" — whenever he is not occupied with his chores of writer, it must be added — Quinn transits to a stage of personal growth, marked by his progressive questioning and search for reasons.

The turning point in *Ghosts* takes place with the restaurant episode, in which Blue has to revert to an imaginative re-construction of the entire scene which is not present to him. Blue has to fill in the gaps of the episode in a way that is coincident, as we know, with Paul Auster's views who, as already indicated, is not in favor of overwhelming the stories narrated with details:

> Blue detects a look of great sadness in Black's face, and before he knows it the woman seems to be crying. At least that is what he can gather from the sudden change in the position of her body: her shoulders slumped, her head leaning forward, her face perhaps covered by her hands, the slight shuddering along her back. It could be a fit of laughter, Blue reasons, but then why would Black be so miserable? It looks as though the ground has just been cut out from under him. A moment later, the woman turns her face away from Black, and Blue gets a glimpse of her in profile: tears without question, he thinks as he watches her dab her eyes with a napkin and sees a smudge of wet mascara glistening on her cheek. (*G*, p. 154)

Without any doubt, it seems that presence is not enough, surface knowledge of reality does not reveal reality and, while entertaining these thoughts, the discovery of truth can take place by considering the cognitive processes centered upon the self. Blue, by looking at Black, discovers his own self; his own person is reflected back unto him. Blue becomes aware of himself; life has slowed down and he is accordingly able for the first time to see things that previously had "escaped his own attention:"

> The trajectory of the light that passes through the room each day, for example, and the way the sun at certain hours will reflect the snow on the far corner of the ceiling in his room. The beating of his heart, the sound of his breath, the blinking of his eyes — Blue is now aware of these tiny events, and try as he might to ignore them they persist in his mind like a nonsensical phrase repeated over and over again. He knows it cannot be true, and yet little by little this phrase seems to be taking on a new meaning. (*G*, p. 144)

Once Daniel Quinn turns to questioning the strangeness of his hiring, he starts looking at the amazing reality of the labyrinth in which he is — inscribed — and indirectly comes to grips with the ultimate reason, the authority over the labyrinth. This is a first step towards truthful knowledge, one which begins and ends with self-knowledge. According to Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, a being which questions its own existence (*Sein*) by means of language becomes aware of its *Dasein* (existence in the world) and this is precisely what Quinn is led to do after this point of inflection.

As it is the case for *Don Quixote*, an openly assumed source of inspiration for Auster, the process of adventure is also transformed into a process of self-discovery, which parallels the main quest of the adventure. The hero is necessarily confronted with his own limitations, both intellectual and physical, and the quest becomes

as much an external quest as one in pursuit of an inward objective, in which the confrontation of both mind and matter proves, in the end, that these two realms are quite inseparable in the human condition. Everything in the narrative leads to a point, a final point, in which the hero is stripped of the accessory and is finally confronted with his own being in the task of contemplating reality, but according to different parameters. This whole process of metamorphosis, of the nature of the quest, resembles that of a mystical progressive advancement until a final point of enlightenment, and encounter with the self, is reached by assuming a condition which sets reality in a perspectival or relativistic way:

> Night and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition. At any given moment, it was always both. The only reason we did not know it was because we could not be in two places at the same time. (*CG*, 127)

Labyrinthine Authority

In a way quite reminiscent of Miguel de Cervantes's, *Don Quixote City of Glass* also turns around the idea of authorship. If Cervantes hid himself and did not want to assume authorship over the manuscript of *Don Quixote*, in *City of Glass* we have a replication of this situation in an also labyrinthine effort to make unclear the idea of authority. Not only because there is a character by the name of Paul Auster who happens to be a writer who talks about authorship in Cervantes, but also because the characters in this narrative (Stillman Sr., Stillman Jr., and Daniel Quinn) share the same nature as fictive characters revolving around the idea of authorship. If there is an ambiguity about the man who is the main character in *Don Quixote*, because he either is Quixada, Quesada or Quexana, in *City of Glass* the reader is confronted with Daniel Quinn who creates

other characters (Max Work, William Wilson) to disenfranchise himself from the books he writes and who in his turn goes as far as assuming the identity of Paul Auster, an unknown private detective.

More directly on the question of authority, *City of Glass* presents a 'speculative essay,' Auster's version of Cervantes's book within a book, an essay which stresses the fact that *Don Quixote* and, indirectly, *City of Glass,* depend on a manuscript either to be translated or edited. In the particular case of *City of Glass*, there is no certainty over the reliability of the editing, as the self-claimed 'editor' himself recognizes by stating:

> I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. (*CG*, p. 132)

The narrator's claim of being just coincidental editor to the story of *City of Glass* is difficult to accept unless the 'editor' is perceived as one who acts in the same way as a narrator, making the text as readable as a novel by, among other things, filling gaps and acting as an omniscient narrator. The hidden identity of the author of *Don Quixote* can be made coincidental with the Renaissance perception of God as withdrawn or, progressively, withdrawing from the center of human activity. Once the *telos* is removed, the creator is separated from his work of art. Reality only seems real if there is no human creator; an ultimate cause for keeping the action is lost for Quinn. The author withdraws in favor of polyphony, the novelist is no longer the center of the novel, he assumes a role at the sidelines. Authors no longer control the action of the novel and give the floor to the polyphonic orchestration of the novel.

Quinn questions Auster about his essay on *Don Quixote*. Auster not only mentions his interest in the matter but points out that it has to do with the idea of authorship created by Cervantes for this book

and the conversation drifts into the consideration of Cervantes's intention: a warning against the dangers of the make-believe or the dangers of imagination, since the make-believe has to pass as real in order to affect the world of reality:

> Exactly. Because the book after all is an attack on the dangers of the make-believe. He couldn't very well offer a work of the imagination to do that, could he? He had to claim that it was real.

Cervantes is a man bewitched by books as much as Quinn and, we can risk affirming, as much as Auster, as an empirical writer, who reveals what is the essence of being in fiction through Quinn. In *City of Glass* it is Quinn who makes an important identification which obtains agreement from the Auster imbedded in the novel:

> Still, I've always suspected that Cervantes devoured those old romances. You can't hate something so violently unless part of you also loves it. In some sense, Don Quixote was just a stand-in for himself.

The 'speculative essay' within *City of Glass* expresses the idea that *Don Quixote* was written to save Don Quixote from madness by holding a mirror up to him. In a further instance we read this action as an act by Cervantes holding a mirror up to himself. For the same reasons this is an assumption that we could also apply to Paul Auster. In relation to *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*, Stephen Gilman states:

> Both the *Quijote* and *Madame Bovary* are novels about addicted readers: a desperately bored hidalgo and a desperately dissatisfied housewife who cannot swim to the shore of their provincial existences. They and others like them are hooked on one of the two varieties of "volupté" that according to Albert Thibaudet, were unknown to the ancients. The other — at that time — was tobacco, as Pierre Louys had pointed out.[40]

40. Stephen Gilman, *The Novel According to Cervantes*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 2-3.

We can certainly agree on the dissatisfaction of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, but there is also a craving for adventure, for the appealing danger of the make-believe, a flight from whatever is unpleasant, a transportation to a different sort of reality and, for this purpose, there is only one tool that allows the reader to step into a different sort of world: the imagination which provides a valve for escape. Daniel Quinn is, in this respect, not different from other heroes of Auster's novels. Quinn actually steps into that world of adventure and in doing so he acts as the reader, he is the private eye of the trilogy of meanings. Sidney Orr and David Zimmer, attracted by the strength of fiction, which presupposes a different interaction with the world, try to reinvent themselves by regaining authority over their lives and enroll in a journey of self-discovery, of self-Enlightenment.

Filling the Gap

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof. (*Genesis*, 2:19)

In any literary work there is an Adamic intentionality led by the writer in creating a new reality with his language; this creation, at once, also re-creates language and fills in the gap existing between language and reality. This effort, by itself, constitutes a particular restoration of the Adamic unity, carried out by assuming that there is a deeper spiritual value hidden in the vehicle (metaphor) provided by the motivated sign which eliminates the distinction between form and substance (between the signifier and signified). We can observe

that this constitutes the preoccupation of Peter Stillman Sr. in *City of Glass* who views language both as imprecise and false because:

> It hides the thing it is supposed to reveal. And if we cannot even name a common, everyday object that we hold in our hands, how can we expect to speak of the things that truly concern us? Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost." (*CG*, pp. 77-8)

At a deeper level one of the important preoccupations of *City of Glass* is to demonstrate that the figurative use of language can also be perceived as motivated in a way that literal reference is not. At this level the preoccupation is to show that a 'spiritual meaning' in the lapsarian language can also be found: this is a meaning which transcends the level of literal expression and that plays with the arbitrariness itself, existing between the signifier and signified. The "Fall of Man" is signified by a linguistic rupture: the separation of sign from referent enforced by the post-Babel division of language into tongues. The only possible redemption, after the fall, is to be attained through the Word of God. The divine punishment after the incident of Babel carries with it not only the disruption of unity between the world and the word but also the division between speakers:

> Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (*Genesis*, 11:7-9)

The man-made ontological difference between the physical signifier and the transcendental signified, constitutes a gap which is known precisely by Derridean term *différance* (difference), which easily gives itself up to play by stressing their differences and similitudes. In Western civilization, Christianity is thought to provide a linguistic paradigm (redemption) that will lead man to paradise by means of a language that is truthful, revealing the essence of

things, and that eliminates the gap between signifier and signified. In the words of *City of Glass*, after the Fall from the Garden of Eden, "names became detached from things; words evolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God."[41] Despite the fact that the Expulsion from Paradise and the Fall of Babel are episodes of negative import, both are seen in *City of Gl*ass as markers of human independence from God. We are told that the Tower of Babel "stands as the last image before the true beginning of the world."[42] Furthermore, Nimrod and Prometheus, the two humans who stole the creative fire from the Gods, are put side by side in their challenge to the idea of authority. George Steiner[43] affirms that Babel leads to insight, an insight obtained non-verbally. This is precisely what is obtained by Daniel Quinn who becomes aware in a metaphysical way. "What is seen can be transposed into words but what is felt may occur at a level prior to language and outside it." For Steiner, and surprisingly coinciding with Peter Stillman Sr., language declines after the Age of Milton. Steiner mentions about a "recession form verbal statement" after the revolution that took place with Leibnitz and Newton which made modern science no longer language dependent and, therefore, the new science became not paraphrasable into ordinary language. Spinoza tried to make from the language of philosophy a verbal mathematics but language, it is to be assumed, yields nothing except a further language of itself and reality is perceived as not translatable into linguistic expression. At the same time that this perception came to be obvious, there is a realization that there are things beyond language and expression, a group of realities that can be sensed but not properly communicated by language.

41. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 43.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

43. George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, London, Faber & Faber, 1985, pp. 55-75.

For both George Lakoff and Mark Johnson[44] the metaphor is a conceptual organizer that helps man to situate himself in relation to the world. In a consequential way, both advocate the abolition of boundaries between discourses in terms of the literal and metaphorical. The status of the relationships between fiction and reality, art and reality has attracted the attention of the critics; as Mike Featherstone points out[45] the definitions of Postmodernism are keen to emphasize the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday experience. Featherstone fleshes out three ways in which this collapse of the borderline can be present; as a challenge to the aura of art; as a way of enlarging the self by aesthetic experience; and as a consequence of the massive flow of signs and images which characterize everyday modern society. In aesthetic terms, this presupposes the negation of Modernist aesthetics as represented by the theorist Clement Greenberg, which led art to be severed from the empirical reality and from the experience of life and this is, as we mentioned in the introduction, one of the features of Postmodernism.

The Humpty Dumpty episode during Quinn's second encounter with Peter Stillman Sr. reveals the value of the metaphorical use of language, at the same time that it clearly stresses the idea of control over meaning on the part of the literary creator when using metaphorical expressions, and the apparent paradoxical result if these expressions are considered just at a literal level:

> Humpty Dumpty: the purest embodiment of the human condition. Listen carefully, sir. What is an egg? It is that which has not yet been born.

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44. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980.

45. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage, 1991, p. 65.

> A paradox, is it not? For how can Humpty Dumpty be alive if he has not been born? And yet he is alive — make no mistake. We know that because he can speak. More than that, he is a philosopher of language. '*When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less. The question is, said Alice whether you can make words mean so many different things. The question is, said Humpty Dumpty, which is to be master — that's all.*' (*CG*, p. 81) [My italics]

Since 'resemblance is not perfect' there is a demand for imagination to intervene at the level of creation and at the level of reception; only by imagination the two realities (literal/metaphorical) may merge producing meaning. The artist can certainly be seen as the madman, the man who at first glance is able to find resemblances where there are seemingly none. Michel Foucault gives us a thought-provoking view of what is at the base of creativity by considering *Don Quixote*. According to Foucault, *Don Quixote* is the first modern novel for two reasons, reasons, which despite the obvious distances, we also see as present in *City of Glass*: first because it both plays with identities and differences and also because it is able to highlight the rupture of the relationship between things and words. In this state of affairs, only two types of individuals are possible: the madman, the one who is not able to see the analogy in difference, and therefore is out of step with reality and out of tune with the language that represents that reality; and the poet who is capable of rediscovering the buried kinships between things and their scattered resemblances:

> *Don Quixote* is the first modern work of literature, because in it we see the cruel reason of identities and differences make endless sport of signs and similitudes; because in it language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature; because it marks the point where resemblance enters an age which is, from the point of view of resemblance,

> *one of madness and imagination*. Once similitude and signs are sundered from each other, two experiences can be established and two characters appear face to face. The madman, understood not as one who is sick but as an established and maintained deviant, as an indispensable cultural function, has become in Western experience, the man of primitive resemblances. This character, as he is depicted in the novels or plays of the Baroque age, and as he was gradually institutionalized right up to the advent of the nineteenth-century psychiatry, is the man who is *alienated in analogy*. He is the disordered player of the Same and the Other… At the other end of the cultural arena, but brought close by symmetry, *the poet is he who, beneath the named, constantly expected differences, rediscovers the buried kinships between things, their scattered resemblances.*[46] [My italics]

We have to add that the kinship, similitude or unity, in things of different nature is common both to the motivated sign and to the metaphorical view of language[47] and obeys precisely to a Godly perception of uniting what is different; the poet is seen as acting as God in his use of language since he is able to perceive similitude in difference. In theological terms this is what Christ represents: unity in diversity. We must add here, in relation to the metaphor, that Lakoff and Johnson express their view that there is no clear difference between the metaphorical and the literal levels of expressing reality.

The poet tries to reach unity in his expression of reality. In the use of language, it is commonly accepted that there is more *poiesis* than *mimesis*. The use of language is a God-like attempt to provide unity and, therefore, order to reality. In relation to creativity and the revelation of primitive resemblances by the madman, Auster mentions that there also seems to be a blurred frontier between

46. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Vintage, 1971, pp. 48-9.

47. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980.

imagination and madness, between the world of fact and the world of fiction:

> *City of Glass* alludes to Don Quixote, and the questions raised in the two books are similar: what is the line between madness and creativity, what is the line between the real and the imaginary, is Quinn crazy to do what he does or not? For a time, I toyed with the idea of using an epigraph at the beginning of *City of Glass*. It comes from Wittgenstein: "And it also means something to talk of living in the pages of a book."[48]

The biblical beginning of the world made possible the knowledge about the other side of reality. Perception became fragmented and ungodly, but there was also the need for the creation of a new (man-made) order resulting from the divine punishment. The fruit of the tree of knowledge made possible man's knowledge of good and evil, and the apparition of the idea of being in relation to temporality through the existence of death. In this respect, the considerations of Martin Heidegger[49] concerning time as the marker of human experience, are of importance in relation to the ontological aspects of being, especially when they are transferred to narrative fiction which is also distinctly delimited by the idea of beginning and end.

We may assume man was initially God-like. Before the Fall there was an identity between God and man: God made man in his image and after his likeness we are told. It is gathered from the *Book of Genesis* that the language Adam devised was an echo of God's creative word, the *Logos*; it differed from it only in degree and operation. Therefore, Adam's consciousness of being, attributed

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48. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Faber and Faber, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 110.

49. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, p. 38.

to his partaking the divine power of naming the universe with the proper word, is just one step removed from the *logos*. It is a recreation in the finite consciousness of the first realm of infinite consciousness; this is exactly what the romantic poet Samuel T. Coleridge tells us about the imagination:

> The imagination then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The Primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.[50]

In this definition of imagination, there are two elements that must be properly assessed, the idea of inherent deviation and also the vision of perception as depending on the imagination as prime agent.

Each instance of discourse, each new form of language, is an attempt to do what is impossible, to join once again that primary Edenic state of representation when nature came into being through discourse.[51] These discourses are the various means at man's disposal for interpreting the world, with the metaphors playing, as already mentioned, an essential function as conceptual organizers that bridge the gap between reality and its expression.

Quinn's activity is that of the explorer-detector of unity between the signs to rebuild a yet unknown pattern. But his activity as detective is also reminiscent of that of the writer, especially concerning the mastery of a writer that has to unite all the different materials in order to achieve a homogenous work from the fragments that are put into the structure of a story. Both Quinn's and Stillman's

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50. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," Chapter 13 (1:304), in *Collected Works*, vol. 7, pts. 1-2, Ed. James Engel and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols., 1983.

51. See, Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et Les Choses*, Paris, Éditions du Minuit, 1965.

actions are directed to the language of discovery, of skeptical inquiry into the (broken) objects, symbols, which resemble free floating signifiers. In his effort to reconstruct the *language of God*, the existing language before the fall, Peter Stillman Sr. also assumes the task of a detective gathering from the debris of material objects any evidence or leads that would allow him to accomplish his difficult task:

> Of course, for the time being I'm merely collecting data, gathering evidence so to speak. Then I will have to coordinate my findings. It's a highly demanding work. You wouldn't believe how hard — especially for a man of my age. (*CG*, p. 75)

The key for both Stillman and for Quinn is first to find a *theoretical first step* that will put them on the right track of their walk or way of thinking; it is nothing but a first step that will put the story together, that will unify the data. Only the writer is endowed with this possibility. For Quinn it is a *modus operandi* that starts just by reducing its scope of action to the tangible, fragmented, reality. But it is also a manner of action that ultimately places itself beyond language, and of which we know about through nobody else but by means of the narrator's statement that meaning is "not for the story to tell:"[52]

> That's it, exactly. The principle of the principle, the method of operation. You see, the world is in fragments, sir. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the language whereby we can speak of it. These are no doubt spiritual matters, but they have their analogue in the material world. My brilliant stroke has been to confine myself to physical things, to the immediate and tangible. My motives are lofty, but my work now takes place in the realm of the everyday. That's why I'm so often misunderstood. But no matter. I've learned to shrug these things off. (*CG*, p. 76)

52. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 3.

Concerning imagination, Ihab Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn*[53] offers an interesting passage from "The Decay of Lying" (1889) by Oscar Wilde in relation to an episode in the life of George Washington which Wilde perceives as a literary hallmark. Poetic license can be considered, in an extreme, to offer just lies if they are not properly interpreted by some sort of conversion or translation into commonsense reality. Fictions if interpreted at a literal level are nothing but lies:

> The crude commercialism of America, its materializing spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adapted for its national hero a man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.

Not agreeing with Wilde, at least in formal extent of terms, Stillman takes the same story to explain the power of myths, to explain reality by means of the power of metaphorical expressions that even when not stating the 'truth' may help in revealing the essential truths:

> These stories are crucial events in American history. George Washington chopped down the tree, and then he threw away the money. Do you understand? He was telling us an essential truth. Namely, that money doesn't grow on trees. This is what made our country great, Peter. Now George Washington's picture is on every dollar bill. There is an important lesson to be learned from all this. (*CG*, p. 85)

Metaphorical expressions do express reality, again if taken at a mere literal level they are just nonsensical. There is, therefore, an

53. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 123.

initial obvious opposition between the literal, factual, expression of reality and a metaphorical, imaginative, expression of reality. This opposition is most obvious in *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*; in both the 'detectives' have to go beyond the factual and enter the realm of the imaginative in order to make sense of reality.

Quest for Unity

Daniel Quinn contemplates the riddle of the labyrinth from the same common ground shared by the detective and the writer in search of the "thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them." The thought or principle that will put the language together in narrative-like existence in the story: this is the task of Peter Stillman Sr. The quest, which we may term as Romantic, is in the end part of the search for unity, for meaning and this is one of the prevalent ideas present in Auster's work. We do know that this is the case for Auster who recognizes that it is a quest for a univocal expression that characterizes his poetry; this quest has not been left unattended since, in heteroglossia, the unity is in the orchestration of different voices, we may say that there is unity in plurality:

> My poems were a quest for what I could call a uni-vocal expression. They expressed what I felt at any given moment, as if I'd never felt anything before and would never feel anything again. They were concerned with essences, with bedrock beliefs, and their aim was always to achieve a purity and consistency of language. Prose, on the other hand, gives me a chance to articulate my conflicts and contradictions. Like everyone else, I am a multiple being, and I embody a whole range of attitudes and responses to the world. Depending on my mood, the same event can make me laugh or make me cry; it can inspire anger or compassion or indifference.

> Writing prose allows me to include all of these responses. I no longer have to choose among them.[54]

The concept of heteroglossia, according to Auster, also serves as one of the defining features of the novel; the novel is exactly the plurality of expression in one form which is complex and at the same time can be perceived as a whole:

> Of all the theories of the novel, Bakhtin's strikes me as the most brilliant, the one that comes closest to understanding the complexity and magic of form.[55]

This unity of the text surges in the act of reading, where the multitude of voices of a text is orchestrated in the unity of the receiver who is aware of the diversity. Mikhail Bakhtin provides one of the most acute and clear definitions of heteroglossia as an internal stratification: once again stressing the unity of the text as a composite material:

> The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite of the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes (/polyphony/), the totality of the world objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types (/heteroglossia/) and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions (dialogism).[56]

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54. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 133.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

56. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist, Austin University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 262-3.

What should deserve our attention in this definition of dialogism is the fact that it is considered a prerequisite of the novel as a genre since it creates a type of narrative that reaches unity by difference. We can say that Auster's indebtedness to Bakhtin's pluralism is more than evident. The book — any book like any city — unifies different voices, unifies, erases the differences of what is dissimilar and provides an image of finished contours. Again, at this point, we can draw a line and see a parallelism with Bakhtin's concept of polyphony that sees the novel as an orchestration of different voices; we could call them threads if we use Barthes' term of text. Strands with different origin but which begin to blend and to be woven under the direction of the novelist. The task of the novelist is to organize the materials:

> The prose artist elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding objects into an image that has finished contours, an image completely shot through with dialogized overtones, he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia.[57]

In *City of Glass* Stillman's task of restoring language to its previous fullness of expression is one centered upon the city, the modern sign of plurality and diversity:

> My work is very simple. I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap. It suits my purpose admirably. I find the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things. (*CG*, p. 78)

Located in an urban setting, the mutability of reality proper to cities, feeds the imagination of the writer and makes him feel

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

the reality of the city with the curiosity of a child. The capacity of the ever-changing urban landscape to summon up associations, resemblances and memories feeds the curiosity of the stroller in the crowds. It is no surprise, therefore, that Featherstone should consider the city as the adequate medium for the artist, a human being who works with resemblances and differences and who is able to depart, detach and converse with it by providing it a metaphorical or metonymical value:

> We therefore have to consider the position of the artist and intellectual as a stroller, moving through the new urban spaces and taking in the shocks, the jolts, flows of the crowd and dream-worlds we have talked about.[58]

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit (either represented as wind or fire) is the repository of universal sense, a sign of the universal original, prelapsarian, language of Eden. We have to be reminded here that Stillman Sr. once identified himself as the burning bush, a biblical symbol of knowledge (light) and eternity, never being consumed at the same time that provides truth (light). The Burning Bush stands for the Logos, the word which is always used and never worn out.

Playing with Identity

From the very beginning, in the first novel of the *New York Trilogy,* the importance of assumed identities is made plain. For instance, Daniel Quinn, while waiting for action to be offered to him, listened to a complete opera: not surprisingly this opera was *The World on the Moon*, whose theme is the subject of confused identities. Furthermore, we can indicate that the word 'identity' is related

58. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*, London, Sage, 1991, p. 75.

to the Latin word *identitas*, which means literally 'sameness' or a set of definitive features that arise from the notion of something remaining always the same or always being "itself" (vs. Heraclitus). In fact, despite appearances, the characters of *City of Glass* share an odd sameness in their nature as fictions, to the point that they may be seen as stroboscopic reflections of the same character. The same could be stated about the other characters of Auster's fiction. As a proof that personality is all the time under construction, characters exist in time and change in time; changes of identity are common in the *New York Trilogy*, immutability is not possible if characters only know themselves in time. Only then the possibility of any sort of narration can really take place as something connatural to existence.

The previously mentioned essay, *The Literature of Exhaustion*,[59] dedicates some attention to the assumption of identities in Cervantes; identities in *Don Quixote* have to do with the creation of the make-believe, stepping into some other personality or pretending to be somebody else as a way of disclaiming authorship. Again, identity is what distinguishes one human being from another; only by contemplating the other is it possible to know one's own true identity and only in so doing can true knowledge follow, knowledge that we must understand as the result of the intersection or fusion between mind and matter, subject and object.

For George Steiner, the recognition of the sense of identity, or, actually, the recognition of the self against others, is fruit of a very complex procedure. Concerning this, it is to be assumed that the experience of the other can be formed from an imaginative projection:

> The enormously intricate procedures of recognition and delimitation which allow me to say that I am I, to experience myself, and which, concomitantly,

59. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1967, p. 168.

> bar me from 'experiencing you' except by imaginative projection, by aninferential fiction of similitude' — evolved slowly perhaps over millennia, before culminating in the Cartesian cogito.[60]

One finds and becomes aware of one's identity by communication, by means of dialogue with the "Other." The motto becomes: 'I communicate therefore I am,' and not: 'I think therefore I am' which indicates separation of the thinking subject from the thing observed, and, ultimately, from the reality one inhabits. Communication suggests communion, somehow union, by sharing information with the other. Human reality or identity is dependent on conversational exchange. Language, in the end, reveals all the features of personality. The importance of Socratic dialogue is stressed in the quest for truth which is a quest which eventually leads to the unconcealment of both inner personality and, likewise, also leads to the confrontation (i.e. meeting head on) with the 'other:'

> I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another…every internal experience ends up on the boundary…The very being of man (both internal and external) is a profound communication. *To be means to communicate… To be means to be for the other;* and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary…[61] [My italics]

There is a possibility for the unity of the self (as awareness of the connection created by self with the medium and their meanings) in interdependency; the same sort of interdependency that exists in any text, always suggesting the connectedness of the different

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60. George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language of Revolution*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972, p. 63.

61. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Trans. and Ed., Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1984.

threads that make it up. After all, in the twentieth century, we have already witnessed the decentering of the self which provides an all-new perspective on the being and its connection, not only with time, but with everything else that constitutes the world of life, as a general perspective of life. The oral use of language permits the breaking of the frontier between two egos. Regarding this, it is worth mentioning Martin Heidegger's appreciation for a purer form of dialogue: the *dialegesai*, proper to the pre-Socratic Greek civilization founded on a more genuine approach to communication. Afterwards, Bakhtin is the one to stress that language, like communication itself, presupposes both a sharing and interaction based on the use of the same rules:

> Discourse is not the possession of a single individual. Meaningful language is the product of social interdependence. It requires the coordinated actions of at least two persons, and until there is mutual agreement on the meaningful character of words, they fail to constitute language. If we follow this line of argument to its ineluctable conclusion, we find that it is not the mind of the single individual that provides whatever certitude we possess, but relationships of interdependency. If there were no interdependence — the joint creation of meaningful discourse — there would be no "objects" or "actions" or means of rendering them doubtful. We may rightfully replace Descartes's [sic] dictum (Cogito ergo sum) with *communicamus ergo sum.*[62] [My italics]

For Auster, the idea of self is a concept that results from a monologue, a type of interior monologue that presupposes the apprehension and awareness of our own 'story.' Nevertheless, the telling of this narrative to ourselves makes of this telling a true dialogue:

> What it boils down to is the old mind-body problem. Descartes. Solipsism. Self and other, all the old philosophical questions. In the end we know who we

62. Kenneth Gergen, *Reality and Relationships: Sounding in Social Construction*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. viii.

> are because we think about who we are. Our sense of self is formed by the pulse of consciousness within us — the endless monologue, the life-long conversation we have with ourselves. And this takes place in absolute solitude.[63]

It is correct, therefore, to say that, for Auster, stories exist and are told because they are something connatural to man. Stories, or personal stories, mark our identity and help to define it. Identity is all the time configured by confrontation or comparison with the other and we could add, mentioning Emerson, the *Not-me*. Thus, the narration of stories is part of human nature and human identity:

> Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, has made some astute observations about such things. Every whole person, he says, every person with a coherent identity, is in effect narrating the story of his life to himself at every moment —following the tread of his own story. For brain damaged people, however, this tread has been snapped. And once that happens, it's no longer possible to hold yourself together.[64]

In *City of Glass* the *story*, for as such it is known to be, seems to have been made available by means of a notebook of whose existence Paul Auster, as a character in *City of Glass*, and an unnamed friend, the narrator, come to know about. Interestingly enough, a notebook in Quinn's hands is very similar to the journals of the transcendentalist tradition, in the way that they provide a reflection and investigation on daily occurrences for its authors. They constitute a mirror for their writers and provide a particular space of reflection for the author thus creating the adequate and necessary room for literature and its goals. As reflections, personal or

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63. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 143.

64. *Ibid*., p. 144.

intimate, and, sometimes daring in their natures, journals may also constitute part of a process of occultation of personality and, as such, the one used by Cervantes is used by the author of this novel. We are constantly reminded of how much the birth of the modern novel owes to the exhaustion of the most popular form of novel at the time of Cervantes, the chivalry novel. Cervantes took an exhausted model and, by parodying it, provided us with not only the best chivalry novel but also with a reinvigorated novel: the modern novel.

In *City of Glass,* all three characters (Daniel Quinn, Peter Stillman Sr., and Peter Stillman Jr.) represent the same sort of entrapment in the linguistic labyrinth, or framework of fiction, they are living in. Critics have suggested they unfold or collapse into just one personality, that of the literary creator. In this respect, John Barth affirms that stories can disturb us metaphysically "when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they're in, we're reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence."[65] We can affirm that this is the point of *City of Glass* since its characters are drawn to the consideration of the ultimate meaning of existence, at the same time that they are brought into contact with the awareness about the idea of writing, and with the idea of what writing presupposes as far as existence is concerned.

Stillman's no frills approach in recuperating language is limited to the empirical and tangible; his detective or writer-like task of recovery of language is very similar to other documented efforts in the same direction. Most notably William Wordsworth's efforts towards attaining in his poetry the "language of the common man" or to the Modernist effort of reaching a language of true expression

65. John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1967, p. 169.

should be considered here. The power of language as a valid tool for salvation will only work if language obeys human needs and not the other way around. Language is to be considered a mutable entity at the service of man and, therefore, put at the center of human activity:

> It's more than interesting, sir. It's crucial. Listen carefully, and perhaps you will learn something. In his little speech to Alice, Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs, Humpty Dumpty was a prophet, a man who spoke truths the world was not ready for. (*CG,* p. 81)

These considerations on language and human activity, interestingly enough, constitute part of the realization of what Martin Heidegger sensed as the oneness of being and language. We have to point out that it is also something that Heidegger considered as already existing in the thought of the pre-Socratic Greeks. The problem for Daniel Quinn, then, is that, unlike Theseus, he has no thread leading him, or connecting him, to reality, a link to commonplace existence, to guide him in the labyrinth; Quinn cannot escape the fiction that has given him life and, consequently, feels that he is always being put back to square one and is, ultimately, left with a lack-of-completion feeling. Nevertheless, the paradox here is that this situation also constitutes a beginning. Quinn's rejection of a world of non-disbelief creates a good starting point; Quinn can then act as a new Adam starting from scratch like the biblical counterpart, albeit this new start is one without innocence. This is a point of inflection, a starting point for Quinn in which he questions the nature of his existence and, in a way, it is also a change marked by the notion of an impending end which is already

inscribed into his new being. Quinn, we can affirm, is aware of his entrapment in the duality of fiction/reality:

> 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. (*CG*, p. 104)

The new situation spells out an indirect allusion to the self referentiality of language and literature, something from which there is no escape. In this respect, we can say that the existing, or created vision of language, is that of a gallery of mirrors that prevent any possibility of a direct contemplation of reality. In this way, it can also be affirmed that any intellectual quest is always brought back to its point of departure, a point of departure that may at any instance direct the attention to the nature of reality and to the means that are brought into play in discovering reality. This is of extreme importance in the context of *City of Glass* because once Quinn turns into questioning the strangeness of his hiring, Quinn looks at the amazing reality of the labyrinth in which he is, and indirectly searches for or somehow perceives the author of the labyrinth. This being the situation, the only way forward is to redescribe reality as Richard Rorty has maintained. The writer must assume the role of unifier, builder of a new Babel in which language is never to be rejected since it is impossible to abandon language. Under these circumstances, the only power of the writer is to be able to "freeze" a moment of full correspondence between language and reality and, in this manner, preserve his linguistic construction out of Heraclitean flux. It is in this position that Patricia Waugh affirms the value of 'conversation' as dialogue between parties:

> Postmodern uncertainty thus replaces modern (pre-emptive) doubt. If it is impossible to move beyond and outside our instruments of interrogation

> (primarily language) in order to make contact with truths in the world, then dialogue must replace dialectic (Socratic) or Hegelian and hermeneutic 'conversation' must be substituted for the rigours of Cartesian 'method'.[66]

In the so-called *classic realist text*, the paradox of the language can be identified when it transgresses the limits of its realism by precisely not being 'that' realistic and is allowed to leave important information out. Catherine Belsey in her *Critical Practice* identifies these omissions as caused by the intervention of ideology:

> Literature is a specific and irreducible form of discourse, but the language which constitutes the raw material of the text is the language of ideology. It is thus an inadequate language, incomplete, partial, incapable of concealing the real contradictions it is its purpose to efface. This language, normally in flux, is arrested, 'congealed' by the literary text.[67]

For Belsey, the classical realist stories are, nevertheless, a "plea for science;" they reflect the widespread optimism of positivist science, they constitute, so to speak, an apology for the rational method of interacting with the world. Thus enigmas, mysteries, riddles when followed by disclosure, echo the success of science in relation to the unveiling of the unknown nature of reality. Reality is reduced, that is 'submitted' to language and translated into facts of verisimilitude.

The idea of the sublime can be seen as the direct predecessor of the concept of *defamiliarization,* brought to theoretical attention and recognition by Russian Formalism and which already had practical and theoretical significance at the hands of writers such as Samuel T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth. These two Romantic

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66. Patricia Waugh, "Postmodernism", in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. XI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 297.

67. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 107.

writers make the sublime not dependent on a grandiose object, typically a natural one, but, rather, on a moment of interpretation; thus, a small and insignificant object is taken out of ordinary and commonplace existence and is provided with a new 'light' that makes it possible to see, through the film of reality, things that had been never noticed before. When the light is lost the poet becomes aware of his limitations which are betrayed as silence or mental blockage. This impediment to see through the film of reality can very well be related to the Postmodern attitude of making room in the arts for the common place, in an effort to desacralize the aesthetic experience. In this manner, the process of ordinary referentiality is broken up, demanding a second level or order of interpretation that can reach the meaning. An obvious consequence of this is that the reader has to be aware of the mechanics of the process: language is not only foregrounded in the act of interpretation but it is taken out of the circuit of immediate communication. The result of all this is that interpretation is something variable and personal that may sometimes fail and be considered as unproductive.

Returning to the idea of the sublime, and to the possibility of being confronted with that which cannot be expressed, the work of art in a self-referential way may lead to the consideration of its boundaries and limits in relation to human experience. The first dialogues between Virginia and Quinn, and the previous ones between Quinn and Peter Stillman, put us for the first time, in *City of Glass,* in contact with a concern for the instability of the word and of the act of communication. We must be aware of the fact that in Postmodernism the word is considered to be submitted into a process; that there are intervening parties that change and adapt the word according to their interests and, most especially, we have to admit the fact that words also depend for their meanings on

the notion of authority. This is made evident every time a word passes on to mean whatever people, who somehow hold power over it, want it to mean. This is a fact which is not overlooked by Peter Stillman Sr. when meeting Quinn for the second time and which possesses Wittgensteinean hues. It is, therefore, no surprise that Stillman considers Dumpty a philosopher of language:

> Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs, Humpty Dumpty was a prophet, a man who spoke truths the world was not ready for. (*CG*, p. 81)

We must remember that previously, in this dialogue, Stillman had pointed at the paradoxical status of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: an egg which is alive without having been born, a paradox which is the reflection of the paradox of language. The paradox that nothing can be abstracted from language, even language itself when considering its own imperfections.

In a more transparent way, the preoccupation with the Heraclitean process which affects language is present again in Peter Stillman's concern with the corruption of words and his attempt to recover the status of language existing in prelapsarian times. Interestingly, words, according to Stillman, are not stones:

> Most people don't pay attention to such things. They think of words as stones, as great unmovable objects with no life, as monads that never change.
>
> Stones can change. They can be worn away by wind or water. They can erode. They can be crushed. You can turn them into shards, or gravel, or dust. (*CG*, p. 75)

In considering the impermanence or permanence of words, there is something which is quite inescapable and abstracted

from this world of flux and which is known, quite paradoxically again, as: The Word. The Word is that something which is beyond the Heraclitean process. Syllogistically expressed in the *Book of Genesis* as always itself, I AM that I AM. The Word indicates that point of nowhere, out of the paradox of language, and which is revealed, at the same time, as something quite beyond human understanding or description. Again, Daniel Quinn admits that he is not a man 'to beat around the burning bush.'[68] This position out of flux, and consequently, out of corruption, is stressed when Peter Stillman Sr. identifies himself as the 'burning bush.' It obviously is a clear allusion to the idea of divinity: always equal to itself in its immutability and out of any sort of contradiction. So much so even when the 'burning bush,' as immutable language or, on the other hand, literary language, may be perceived as paradoxical.

Memory Subverted

If the oral word, as expressed in the dialogues, is not reliable for the purpose of a narration of truth, the written word is in no better position. There is no fixity in this form of expression, despite claims to the contrary, there is no possibility of truthful linguistic presentation, what is always obtained with the use of language is at best a representation. Incidentally, *City of Glass* starts transcribing an excerpt taken from Marco Polo's *Travels*:

> We will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication. And all who read this book or hear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth. (*CG*, p. 6)

68. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 79.

Marco Polo's claim of truth about the narration of his life in the Far East, presented in the form of a journal of memoirs, far from being a convincing and truthful account, opened the door to fantastic literature. This fantastic literature is one right on the borderline between fact and fiction and where the truthfulness of a subject, who presents his first-person narration of things witnessed, is put quite beyond question because of impossibility of proof. At the same time, these narrations put to test the faith of their readers in perceiving the text as a truthful account.

The Travels of Marco Polo can be seen as a collection of fables, which represent the first stage of Humanist curiosity about the world; a curiosity which departs more and more from any, so to speak, interference of the divine and which consequently leaves man alone in the world trying to find explanations for himself. This new situation for mankind can correctly be expressed by the concept of solitude that, as we have already seen in Auster's characters, is perceived as a quest and a journey, the record of which is termed as a journal or diary: terms which reveal and state synchrony in the diachronic movement of evolution. Their record is placed in time but refers to a concrete point in time in each one of its possible entries. Each entry is submitted to a process of becoming but, at the same time, is placed out of it since each entry refers to just one link that forms part of a chain of events that forms a system or coherent narration. In this respect, this concept of the journals also shares its part in the paradoxical makeup of literature, and of language, that we mentioned before but, more importantly, this also constitutes the strongest point for literature since this is what brings literature closer to a philosophically sought placement, the 'point of nowhere.'

Memory in *City of Glass* partakes of the autotelic design and potentiality of words in the Heraclitean process of their existence

since the human brain manipulates the data it stores, "remembered things subvert things remembered," or, put a different way, words subvert and reflect other words:

> Later, when he had time to reflect on these events, he would manage to piece together his encounter with the woman. But that was the work of memory, and *remembered things*, he knew, had a tendency to subvert the *things remembered*. As a consequence, he could never be sure of any of it. (*CG,* p. 13) [My italics]

In this excerpt, not only does the narrator deal with the problem of subversion but also with the remittance to a future time, a sign of the above-mentioned deferment which is one aspect in which *City of Glass* is recurrent and, most especially in relation to its characters, it is made clear. Basically, we should consider Werner Heisenberg, admitting that thinking about something warps that something. Facts are always subverted and there is no place for attaining the *noumenon* or the thing-in-itself.

Furthermore, memory, as a prelinguistic repertorium, stores a personal narration of events but is not to be seen as something reliable as far as its veracity to the factual events is concerned. Memory, or our own account of past events, is obviously not the real event, it is just what we preserve in our mind with all the limitations and manipulations, conscious or unconscious, of our mind. Memory, as a fruit of apparently factual organization and as an ordering in narrative form of a past event, is put into question. Memory is just like words or, for that matter, language. Words no longer present an external reality, they create the external reality. Or, if we may state this idea in a different way, language is not a window on the world but a reflection of the world dependent on the intervention, or on the inflection of reality, carried out by the glass in which reality is reflected. This issue of the reliability of memories is well known to the narrator of *Leviathan* when he states:

> […] I have nothing to rely on but my own memories. I'm not saying that these memories should be doubted, that there is anything false or tainted about the things I do know about Sachs, but I don't want to present this book as something it's not. There is nothing definitive about it. It's not a biography or an exhaustive psychological portrait, and even though Sachs confided a great deal to me over the years of our friendship, I don't claim to have more than a partial understanding of who he was. (*L*, p. 22)

Ultimately, reality as made by words, is about words which refer to themselves acting like a hall of mirrors. In the end, all aspects of human activity including language and reality itself are to be seen as a hall of mirrors in which the thing reflected is lost forever in endless repetition. This loss of the real has certainly to be thought of as one of the preoccupations of Postmodern literature. John Barth's fascination with mirrors is well known, and we should also consider Jean Baudrillard's world of simulacra and remember Cervantes's passion for mirrors and the loss of the sense of reality as well.

For a character like Blue, in *Ghosts*, there is just a moment, right at the outset of his adventure, when he feels fully confident of his ability to report reality as a succession of events. At that moment, Blue feels that words can fully represent outward facts, Blue is about to write the first report and *words tallied exactly with the thing described*. This conception about language obviously matches an Adamic conception of language, a conception of perfect correspondences and perfection in linguistic communication: one in which there is a clarity beyond doubt of the univocal relation of words and the things out there. These words also point at the debate about literary realism, particularly the critical debate which considers Modernism as a definite departure from it. Accordingly, we are told that artists feel abandoned by language or are left unable to use it, because of a whole new plethora of perspectives available and artists, therefore, cannot make sense of reality and see it as

fragmented or broken. Artists, of all sorts, then concentrate not on sensorial reality but on the means and tools by which that reality may tentatively still be represented. Thus, in *Ghosts,* the narrator informs us how at that moment Blue contemplated verbal communication:

> Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never even seemed to be there. Oh, there have been moments when the glass gets a trifle smudged and Blue has to polish it in one spot or another, but once he finds the right word, everything clears up. (*G*, p. 146)

But soon, in the elaboration of this first report, Blue discovers that he cannot depend on the old procedures, those that constitute the basic *modus operandi* of a detective: clues, legwork and investigative routine. His relationship with language has also irreversibly and unmistakably changed. Words, instead of materializing the facts they describe, seem to be disengaged from reality, they no longer seem to make facts visible, or "draw out the facts," words no longer seem able to make facts materialize "making them sit palpably in the world." Words, in referring to reality, "have induced them to disappear," words hide facts, and they appear as hiding reality constituting and impediment, rather than a tool, for the presentation of reality. This change is even more dramatic if we consider what the narrator tells us about Blue's style in writing the reports, that there is "paucity in detail" and that Blue's different reports confine themselves to "known verifiable facts, and beyond this limit it does not try to go." That is, the reports limit themselves to facts of the verifiable, to what we can consider the field of action of positivist logic. But the case, the events, in *Ghosts* demand a different approach, an approach that takes the report to the limits of factual narration right into the borderline of what Blue terms *excursions into the make believe*. For the first time, Blue

is not satisfied with his *style* of factual approach to the reporting of his investigative effort. There is something beyond words that cannot be expressed by words:

> He says to himself: what happened is not really what happened. For the first time in his experience of writing reports, he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say. (*G*, p. 147)

We unmistakably deduce that for Blue words are no longer acting as a transparent window pane on reality, they obscure things and in being *factual* they do not reflect what really happened. He is tempted by the "perverse temptation" of taking a different path, of deviating from factual narration to a new, more comprehensive, type of narration:

> Blue sets his typewriter on the table and cast about for ideas, trying to apply himself to the task at hand. He thinks that perhaps a truthful account of the past week would include the various stories he has made up for himself concerning Black. With so little else to report, these excursions into the make-believe would at least give some flavor of what has happened. (*G*, p. 147)

Blue, therefore, needs to go above and beyond reality in order to put together a logically ordained report that he can identify with. In this, the feeling, or flavor, of what really happened can be enhanced by the little fictions that he has made up, stories that are actually digressions from his tail job. Nevertheless, he fights off this idea of taking these "excursions into the make-believe" into the report because, in his words, he believes that: "This isn't the story of my life." In this manner, the reporting of what really happened is made to draw into itself by the little narratives that Blue has made up during the tail job and, most importantly, these necessary additions for a comprehensive rendition, are surprisingly

constituted by, and reveal something of, a very different order: Blue's life, Blue's self and his own personality. This new perspective involves the admission that any knowledge indirectly entails, in order to be correct and complete, self-knowledge, a development that is also valid for the description of the psychological evolution of Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass.*

Since reality is limited to facts that are present through sensorial experience this would be rather reassuring, still this is not enough for Blue. This acknowledgement or stance on his part underlines both the role of the imagination and of the human subject who is in possession of its power. Words by themselves do not work: "the paucity of detail" which is the main feature in Blue's attempt at factual reporting does not really express reality by itself. In sum, what is needed is a leap of faith, a leap into the make-believe, to go beyond the expression of reality offered by words in order to get to what the case is really all about. Clearly, the world of the make-believe would make the report more complete since factual reporting is not enough to report reality. Again, Blue is not happy with his "accurate account:" he needs to go beyond reality in order to put together the report of the case. Blue hopelessly tries to reassure himself that words can still work, that they refer to a fleeting physical world that provides proof to words, and to itself, of existence. Nonetheless, the fact is that words also refer to things that do not make part of the physical or sensorial experience. From a stance in which Blue is led to distrust the data provided by sensorial experience, and comes face to face with the limitations of the knowledge provided by this type of knowledge, we are led to consider, and drawn to assume, an attitude of criticism towards the all-pervading metaphysics of presence:

> Then he looks out across the street and sees Black's window. It is dark now, and Black is asleep. That's the problem, Blue says to himself, trying to find

> a little courage. That and nothing else. He's there, but it's impossible to see him. And even when I do see him it's as though the lights are out. (*G*, p. 148)

Blue reaches a maximum point of self-assurance which apparently allows him to know for sure what Black will be doing. This admission is what allows Blue to adventure further away from Black and discover a reality of his own. We can affirm that, at this stage, Blue can 'read' Black and, at the same time, Blue can start his own quest independently of his own reading:

> Black takes advantage of the weather to wander farther afield than previously, and Blue follows. Blue is relieved to be moving again, and as Black continues on his way, Blue hopes the journey will not end before he's had a chance to work out the kinks. As one would imagine, he has always been an ardent walker, and to feel his legs striding along through the morning air fills him with happiness. As they move through the narrow streets of Brooklyn Heights, Blue is encouraged to see that Black keeps increasing his distance from home. But then, his mood suddenly darkens. Black begins to climb the stair case that leads to the walkway across the Brooklyn Bridge, and Blue gets it into his head that he's planning to jump. Such things happen, he tells himself… (*G*, p. 148)

We can also clearly identify, as we did in *City of Glass,* a concrete point in the narrative of *Ghosts* which constitutes its point of inflection in the psychological development of Blue. Blue is trying hard to know himself: he is no longer observing reality without interacting with it and perceiving it. This is a development that parallels that of Quinn that we have already mentioned, nonetheless here, the references are to the value of literature in helping to perceive reality, a reality which starts and ends by the knowledge of the self, seem more obvious:

> 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, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself. He has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember, fixing his attention on these surfaces only in order to perceive them, sizing up one and then passing on to the next and he has always taken pleasure in the world as such, asking no more of things than they be there. (*G*, p. 143)

As we have already pointed out, not only does Blue observe reality with new eyes and interacts with it in a new way, Blue reaches a point in which he ultimately identifies himself with the 'thing' observed, Black:

> There are moments when he feels completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what Black is going to do, to know when he will stay in his room and when he will go out, he need merely look into himself. (*G*, p. 156)

But Blue, in an indirect way and as a consequence to his activity in dealing with reality, also reflects upon himself. The dissolution of (Cartesian) dualism, mentioned above, brings him closer to himself before he can reach knowledge about the external reality:

> He finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before, and this, too, has begun to trouble him. If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term — speculation, for example — would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself. Life has slowed down so drastically for him that Blue is able to see things that have previously escaped his attention. (*G*, p. 144)

Minute details, the trajectory of the light in the rooms, the beating of his heart, the sound of his breath, the blinking of his eyes;

all draw his attention to his own physical entity compounded also by a mental or spiritual one:

> Day by day, the list of these stories grows, with Blue sometimes returning in his mind to an early story to add certain flourishes and details and at other times starting over with something new. (*G*, p. 145)

Suspension of Reference

According to Paul Ricœur, one of the fundamental points of metaphorical reference is the suspension of ordinary (descriptive) reference. This is fundamental in order for imagination to carry out its work which leads to a fracture in the communicative axis. The linguistic sign in fiction possesses a double edge; it has a double reference in 're-describing reality,' the fruit of the relation of the work of fiction with the empirical world of ordinary reference. This ambiguity of the poetic sign gains the capacity to provide insight in relation to the world outside the text.

Fictions are intrinsically ruled by the same logical laws of metaphors in that they suppose a substitution but they have an umbilical cord with reality which provides them with grounding and necessary fixity. Ricœur[69] draws our attention to the fact that metaphors are to be thought of as fictions. The "it was and it was not," of the Majorcan storytellers, rules both the split reference of the metaphorical statement and the contradictory structure of fiction. But at the same time, and as Lakoff and Johnson,[70] point out,

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69. Paul Ricœur, *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, Ed. Mark Johnson, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p. 242.

70. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980, p. 12.

human communication and interaction with the world is highly dependent on metaphors; this dependency leads them to affirm that metaphors are so deeply ingrained in human life that they form part of our conceptual system and, in order to exemplify this, they mention the use ordinary language makes of idioms which are metaphorical in their nature.

The use of metaphors in ordinary language demonstrates that literal communication is a myth; metaphors are deeply ingrained in all sorts of language usage as a necessary tool in organizing experience, at the same time that they condition our perception of experience. If cognitive or true statements depend on metaphors then the borderline between fiction and reality no longer makes sense. This paradox is also what characterizes language. Narratives help us to construct, not only to organize and perceive the reality around us, but they are also fundamental in creating our sense of identity. Metaphors always help us to think of, and to perceive, the unknown by a comparison with the known. For Lévi-Strauss, both the narrative and the myth share the same power of generating knowledge; this is the reason why Strauss does not see a difference between mythical and scientific knowledge.[71]The factual and the fictional share the same rhetorical devices. That is why Stillman's use of history and perversion of what is assumed as history is not so obvious.

71. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 230.

PART IV

THE RETURN OF REPRESENTATION

Engagement with the World

If, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new linguistic conscience was brought about by a generalized perception that human communication had entered a crisis and that language was no longer seen as a "window on the world" but as a tool for the construction of reality, in the second half of that century, with the explosion of the mass media and cold war propaganda, that crisis was made even more conspicuous.

Having, therefore, assumed both that reality escapes any effort at re-presentation and that reality is linguistically constructed, engendering a *distrust in the act of communication*,[1] the writer or, for that matter, the artist in general, is confronted with two possible ways of dealing with his craft: either furthering the modernist redeployment from reality and, therefore, reinforcing the self-reflexive attitude proclaimed by Greenbergian aesthetics or, on the other hand, proposing a return, albeit wary, to representation.

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1. George Steiner's term in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language of Revolution*, London, Faber and Faber, 1972, p. 63.

As we have seen, for Paul Auster, it seems clear that the path taken is that of realism: a realism which consists of letting life and the paradoxical complexity of the world permeate the novel which in turn provides the American novel the much sought-after questioning force:

> There's nothing in the world that is not material for a novel. I think that's been the glory of American writing, as opposed to, say, European writing: the fact that we've allowed things in. It gives a kind of flexibility and questioning force to a lot of the American fiction that I admire. I feel that I want to stay open to everything, that there's nothing that can't be an influence. Everything from the most banal elements of popular culture to the most rigorous, demanding philosophical works. It's all part of the world we live in, and once you begin to draw lines and exclude things, you're turning your back on the reality — a fatal mistake for a novelist.[2]

This return to the path of representation, despite some adventures with experimentalism due to the, initially quite evident, iconoclastic spirit of Postmodernism, seems to be the path most often taken by American fiction and about which Peter Currie has also identified a key ingredient, what he terms "a rhetorical view of life:"

> American postmodernism may be seen to endorse a rhetorical view of life which begins with the primacy of language… The fictions of Pynchon, Sukenick, Abish, Gass and Federman certainly refer to a reality outside the text, but they privilege language as constitutive of this primary objective reality, not merely superfluous to it. Their work questions the nature of our perception of the real referent by demonstrating that human consciousness does not experience the 'real' material world directly but only through discourse, through social convention and context. Through the forms of the ideological environment.[3]

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2. Conversation with Mark Irwin, http://www.paulauster.co.uk/denverquarterly.htm

3. Peter Currie, "The Eccentric Self: Anti-Characterization and the Problem of the Subject in American Postmodernist Fiction," in *Contemporary American Fiction*, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, London, Edward Arnold, 1987, pp. 64-5.

Quite to the point, and as corresponds to a fiction that offers a rhetorical view of life, this sort of fiction does not lose the opportunity to point at the linguistic, and therefore, constructed nature of reality and, more particularly, it draws attention towards its own linguistic reality in what is a sign of a socially generalized awareness of the 'meta' levels of discourse which objectify the relationship between the conception of the linguistic system and the world. We believe that this conception of the linguistic system, as Patricia Waugh points out:

> […] also reflects a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality'. The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own meanings. … 'Meta' terms, therefore, are required in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world *of* fiction and the world *outside* the fiction.[4]

As a final result, what is stressed is the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, a perception long born out of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics which sees meaning deriving not from the empirical reality but from an internal opposition between linguistic signs within a system. This position may evidently be perceived as an assault on the metaphysics of presence; one further attack to what Rorty has termed the "Plato to Kant axis," which is assumed to be one of the foundations of Western thought and civilization. In American literary history, this attack on what can, once again and more generally, be perceived as Western values was initiated by Charles Olson's decision to write a new

4. *Patricia Waugh,* Metafiction, London, Methuen, 1984. p. 3.

sort of poetry of Heideggerian quality that considered man as a being radically situated in the world like any other thing and which marks, we may assume, the starting point of conceptual literary Postmodernism. This placement of the human being on a level with the world, presupposes an attack on Cartesian dualism,[5] which, on the other hand, had already gained some visibility and predicament in Romantic thought. This attack on the ways commonly accepted to know the world was furthered in the twentieth century with a series of Copernican Revolutions initiated by Freud's decentring of the self and with Saussure's decentring of language, from which the act of decentring the author, most notably carried out by Roland Barthes, is but a logical consequence.

Inscribed in what may possibly be termed as the return of the narrative, Paul Auster's writing is an attempt to engage the reader in the awareness of both fiction and reality, and, more precisely, it is an attempt to create awareness about what both fiction and reality share in their constructed natures. It is also a writing style which, in its engagement, puts forward an interrogative quest centered both on writing and on empirical reality. In this respect, we can say that Auster transcribes into his fiction the view Roland Barthes expresses on the author as a being who transforms the world into questions through writing:

> […] the author is a man who radically absorbs the world's *why* in a *how to write*. And the miracle, so to speak, is that this narcissistic activity has always provoked an interrogation of the world: by enclosing himself in the *how to write*, the author ultimately discovers the open question par excellence: why the world? What is the meaning of things? In short,

5. According to Charles Olson, it is "a peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation call objects." See "Projective Verse," *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, Ed. Robert Creeley, New York, New Directions, 1996, p. 24.

> it is precisely when the author's work becomes its own end that it regains a mediating character: the author conceives of literature as an end, the world restores it to him as a means: and it is in this perpetual inconclusiveness that the author rediscovers the world, an alien world moreover, since literature represents it as a question — never, finally, as an answer.[6]

According to the above excerpt, literature is conceived as an end. In Auster's case, this end would primarily be that of telling a story and only then this task would be transformed into one of interrogation in which, what would ultimately be questioned by the narrative, would be the world of facts or commonsense reality. In relation to this, it is worth mentioning Eberhard Alsen who points at viewing, in Postmodernism, an important streak of realism which leads him to identify the presence of visible romantic-idealistic attributes. For Alsen, Postmodernist fiction has an essentially realistic attitude, one that stresses the narrative line against the *unreadable* character of what he identifies as the other tendency of Postmodernism: the experimental fiction which he terms as "disjunctive fiction:"

> This near-unreadability is the major reason why it does not make sense to say that the work of the disjunctive writers represents the mainstream of postmodernist fiction. How can we consider these texts the mainstream when only very few people outside of the universities actually read them? And the only reason why these texts are read in the universities is that influential critics — mostly friends of the disjunctive authors — keep insisting that these stories and novels are what is most important in contemporary fiction. In short, it is the critic-friends of some of the disjunctive writers and not the audience at large who have determined what the mainstream of postmodern fiction is.[7]

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6. Roland Barthes, "Authors and Writers," *Critical Essays*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1972; Barthes Selected Writings, p. 187.

7. Eberhard Alsen, *Romantic Postmodernism in American Fiction*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1996, p. 12.

The task of questioning the world is a task made possible above all by privileging the storyline. Auster is interested in establishing a clear channel of communication (a word, communication, which etymologically means to put in common or to share what is common) with the reader because according to Auster it is "the reader who writes the book and not the writer." It seems clear that Auster is conscious not only of the need to establish communication with the reader but of the need to keep the communication alive, of maintaining the interest of the reader so that authentic, or explanatory, narratives can effectively be built. Thus, the text must primarily and necessarily be intelligible for the reader, it must offer its reader some sort of familiar ground so that it presents itself as a coherent piece of information that the reader can assimilate and, therefore, make his own. This is what Jonathan Culler terms as a process of "naturalization," more precisely according to him: "to naturalize a text is to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible."[8] This 'naturalness of literary style' is what characterizes Auster, for whom the act of creating stories is something natural for the human being, although stories are only told, as Auster states in one of his interviews, by those who are willing either to take that challenge or know how to tell them. For Auster, that sort of self-storytelling is related, in the end, to the creation of a "coherence of identity." This is one of the fundamental points of Auster's narrative poetics: self-storytelling is only psychologically possible by those individuals who are aware and know the reality of their own selves, and it is something which is made dependent on the notion of memory and sanity. Auster alludes to this point in this interview

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8. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975. p. 138.

with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory[9] when he states that, for brain-damaged people, once the thread of the self-story line is snapped, they are no longer able to hold themselves together.

For Auster, in this respect, there is no better example of a fluid and captivating narrative than the style of children's literature. In 1995 during an interview, Auster straightforwardly affirms that the greatest influence on his writing has been not only fairy tales but also the oral tradition of storytelling:

> What fairy tales prove, I think, is that it's the reader — or the listener — who actually tells the story to himself. The text is no more than a springboard for the imagination. 'Once upon a time there was a girl who lived with her mother in a house at the edge of a large wood.' You don't know what the girl looks like, you don't know what color the house is, you don't know if the mother is tall or short, fat or thin, you know next to nothing. But the mind won't allow these things to remain blank; it fills in the details itself, it creates images based on its own memories and experiences — which is why these stories resonate so deeply inside us. The listener becomes an active participant in the story.[10]

This preference for storytelling is something which Auster quite often mentions as one of his guiding lines in his writing. To this preference for clear and engaging stories we should also mention, as this is literally corroborated by Auster's fiction, his appreciation and indebtedness to the fathers of American literature: Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson and Thoreau who, in their writings and terms, stressed both the importance of the communication of ideas as well as the clarity of exposition.

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9. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 143.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Thus, Auster's character David Zimmer, the university professor turned-academic-writer and narrator of *The Book of Illusions*, is confronted with the paradox of narrative fiction and the paradox of film: too much reality constitutes an impediment for any possible representation. An aid, if we may, for abetting the imagination must be granted to the viewer, or to the reader for that matter, and a certain distance must be offered; a distance that, once made, highlights the illusion of reality created by the medium which, in its turn, stresses the re-presentation quality of fiction. Zimmer seems to agree with Auster's above-mentioned idea that literature must only provide a 'springboard for the imagination' when he states that:

> No matter how beautiful or hypnotic the images sometimes were, they never satisfied me as powerfully as words did. Too much was given, I felt, not enough was left to the viewer's imagination, the paradox was that the closer movies came to simulating reality, the worse they failed at representing the world — which is around us. That is why I had always instinctively preferred black-and-white pictures to color pictures, silent films to talkies. (*BI*, p. 14)

Nevertheless, for Auster, the typical novel of the past two hundred years has been crammed full of detail, descriptive passages, and local color — things that might be excellent in themselves, but which often have little to do with the heart of the story being told. By affirming this Auster puts emphasis on text:

> I'd certainly agree that novel-writing has strayed very far from these open-ended structures — and from oral traditions as well. The typical novel of the past two hundred years has been crammed full of details, descriptive passages, local color — things that might be excellent in themselves, but which often have little to do with the heart of the story being told, that actually block the reader's access to the story. I want my books to be all heart, all center, to say what they have to say in as few words as possible.

> This ambition seems so contrary to what most novelists are trying to accomplish that I often have trouble thinking of myself as a novelist at all.[11]

Details do not say much about the heart of the story, which is beyond it as in some sort of transcendental dimension. It is precisely this that the narrator of *City of Glass* tells us, as we pointed out earlier: “The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell.”[12] Again, Auster insists that meanings transcend the mere materiality and form of their expression, the meaning is placed somewhere else. In other words, the message is beyond the story itself, the words must disappear, so that meaning can emerge. Detail is opposed in this way to the heart and Auster’s stories, avowedly, are all heart. This is exactly what attracts Auster to the fairy tales, their condensation and lack of verbosity: they are loquacious by other means.

The problem of rendering, what we may consider the ‘full reality’ or, in other terms, ‘nothing but the (full) truth’ and its effects, is something with which Auster’s character Nashe has to contend with in *The Music of Chance*, as he is confronted with the urgent necessity of telling the prostitute girl his story so that he can get help. Paradoxically, for a ‘story’ that happens to be actually ‘true,’ we are told that Nashe uses passion and sincerity to no avail for he is taken for “a prankster, an oddball with a gift for making up wild stories, and instead of telling him to drop dead… she smiled at the trembling supplication in his voice and played along as if it were the funniest thing he had said all night.”[13] Definitely, the transparency

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11. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 141.

12. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 3.

13. Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991. p. 198.

of the medium, be it film or language, seems to obscure reality and make it unreal. This brings to mind Baudrillard and the phenomena of simulacra in which a discredit of reality takes place by too much insistence upon it.

Likewise, Zimmer, on his part, and while carrying out his research, found that the attributes of reality, like sound and color, had a counterproductive effect by precisely their capacity of giving too much. Fiction is to be enhanced by allowing room for imagination by creating that distance, or deferment, in communication which is so characteristically intrinsic to art. It can be said that old films stressed their nature of artistic creations by being removed from reality, due to what we may view as a technological gap (mostly the lack of color and sound) which, in its turn, made possible a certain amount of self-referentiality, which might have been not really sought, but which stressed their condition as artifacts. Once again and under these conditions, the viewer is left with enough room to play his own part with his mind's eye:

> 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.[14]

Considering the American Romantic tradition as an influence on Auster, the stress on imagination as a builder of meaning in a wider sense is not very far removed from what Walt Whitman had already seen as the essential nature of the written forms which

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14. Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*, p. 15. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as BI followed by page number.

demand the active role of the reader in their construction[15] and to which we have already referred.

In the interview mentioned above, conducted by Gregory McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, it is Auster's opinion that by cramming fiction with detail, as seems to be the tendency for some novelists, fiction is prevented from being "inhabited by the reader." It is Auster's intention as a writer to counter this tendency by resorting to a narrative style which is devoid of detail, background and explanation; the same type of what Auster considers 'barebones narrative' present in children's tales and the oral tradition of storytelling:

> In the end, though, I would say that the greatest influence on my work has been fairy tales, the oral tradition of story-telling. The Brothers Grimm, the Thousand and One Nights — the kinds of stories you read out loud to children. These are bare-bones narratives, narratives largely devoid of details, yet enormous amounts of information are communicated in a very short space, with very few words. [16]

Adding to this choice for incompleteness, it is also important to mention that Auster's novels are more often than not open ended, not closed by a final word and offer possible room for continuation or further questioning, providing an eerie sense of incompleteness. For instance, we often have characters who gain knowledge about their own true identities; characters gain a more profound knowledge, insight, about who they really are and what their real condition is. This can be seen most clearly in the closing scene of

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15. See, Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Complete Poetry and Prose*, Ed. Justin Kaplan, Literary Classics of the United States-Library of America, New York, 1982, pp. 992-3.

16. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 140.

The Music of Chance where there is a more than probable crash with a truck but we do not know anything further than that and Auster would later mention that it is a book that "ends before the end."

The result thus obtained is that of total uncertainty about reality, a reality which is always mediated by other fiction in which chance, probability and credibility are put into play and, at all moments, questioned. In them, the ultimate result is that of a game of parody and self-referentiality proper to Postmodern fiction. To a certain extent, we have a selection of elements from commonsense reality that become 'strange' by the frame provided by fiction and, thus, it is a reality that has become denaturalized and, therefore, is very similar to Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum: For Baudrillard, culture operates as a logic of making everything "more real than the real," this is the logic of "hyperreality." The image as a reflection of external reality follows a process of transformation in different stages, from first masking and perverting reality to finally masking the absence of reality when reality becomes a pure simulacrum.[17]

It is in the world of the fables, the tales and the oral tradition of storytelling that the narrative is freer, and where communication of a story is the primary objective since there is often an audience present and where the readers are usually children. In stories and fables, inherently present in their nature, a fair number of literary features are evidenced such as fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, heterogeneity, dislocation and ludism which are, as we know, some of the features of the Postmodernist text[18] and which, are features present in Auster's narrative style. We have to remember that it was John Barth who was quite happy, for a while, with the term

17. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989. p. 170.

18. Edmund J. Smyth (Ed.), *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, "Introduction," London, Batsford, 1991, p. 9.

Fabulism[19] to describe his own literary style, a style that he otherwise defines as basically romantic formalism. The term fabulation, credited to Robert Scholes, [20] is to be understood as a technique of storytelling in which the dissolution of borderlines between the fictional and the real is obtained by the appropriation of both worlds in the novel. In fabulation the narration of events finds its justification not in an external truth but in multiple versions of events presented in multiple embedded versions of what is being narrated.

As we have already mentioned, Auster's narrative style in prose obeys Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, a concept that in literary theory is also known as dialogical imagination. But we should draw our attention to Bakhtin's definition of heteroglossia:

> The novel orchestrates all its themes {polyphony}, the totality of the world objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types {heteroglossia} and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions {dialogism}.[21]

Narrative discourse is, therefore, treated as a collective work, the work of an orchestra, gathered under the baton of a conductor in which the reader has to fine-tune his audition in order to get the maximum out of the textual score. The role of the reader is not that of an ingenuous entity, it is part and parcel of the orchestration, since it is up to him to reach an understanding of what he has read. This Postmodern text that Bakhtin prefigured is "polyphonic" or "dialogized" in its internal structure and, when it is assumed by the reader, it may reach cogency or unity in its disparity as a point

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19. John Barth, *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984-1994*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1995 p. 118.

20. See Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967.

21. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 262-63.

of arrival for those voices. A good example of this stratification of language exists in the dialogues Daniel Quinn maintains in *City of Glass*. Mentioning just two different instances we can name the three encounters with Peter Stillman Sr., and the one with the Puerto Rican bartender. In these cases, we have language awash with metaphorical uses; in the first case we have what can be termed a negotiation of reality whereas in the second case we have a dialogue in which, what predominates, is sports jargon, incomprehensible to people not familiar with baseball.

The author in this type of fiction is rightly ventriloquized by the multiple voices that he has interwoven into his narrative and which are beyond his control. For Auster, this is what constitutes the difference between prose and poetry. The authoritative discourse that he locates in poetry does not permit the exposition of contradictory voices and dialogue. Under the heavy hand of the author any sort of disparity is controlled and even reduced to silence. Auster, nevertheless, concedes that:

> Prose on the other hand, gives me a chance to articulate my conflicts and contradictions. Like everyone else, I am a multiple being, and I embody a whole range of attitudes and responses to the world.[22]

At this point it is worth remarking that Auster sees his transition from poetry to prose as a natural process without involving, for that matter, any substantial change in the nature and character of his writing. Auster explains the evolution in this way:

> I wrote very short, compact lyrical poems that usually took me months to complete. They were very dense, especially in the beginning — coiled in themselves like fists — but over the years they gradually began to open up,

22. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 133.

> until I finally felt that they were heading in the direction of narrative. I don't think of myself as having made a break from poetry. All my work is of a piece, and the move into prose was the last step in a slow and natural evolution.[23]

The space for contradictions is highlighted after the removal of the author from the center of the narrative, a development that would be known as *the death of the author* thanks to Roland Barthes,[24] and which presupposes a process of withdrawal of the author as the absolute subject or originating voice of literature. This withdrawal, in effect, releases the text from any possible univocal reading, opening it, therefore, to a multitude of possible and contradictory readings. This is what distinguishes the literary text from the literary work. The literary text, as opposed to the literary work, becomes *writable*, meaning it is to be produced by the reader. In other words, Auster offers a text, the writerly text, to be produced finally by the reader.

In an instance which reminds us of the theoretical points laid out by the essay *Borges and I* by Jorge Luis Borges, in which Borges makes a clear distinction between the narrative self and the empirical author, Daniel Quinn, the writer of mystery novels, is presented as a dummy in this world of multiple relations that the novel establishes between the writer and his pseudonym, William Wilson, and detective-hero of the novels, Max Work, who becomes alive as an alter ego to be followed or, even, a nemesis of the author Danie Quinn:

> Since finishing the latest William Wilson novel two weeks earlier, he had been languishing. His private-eye narrator, Max Work, had solved an elaborate series of crimes, had suffered through a number of beatings and narrow escapes, and Quinn was feeling somewhat exhausted by his efforts.

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 104-5.

24. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, London, Cape, 1975 and "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music Text*, Ed. and Trans. Stephen Heath, London, Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 142-8.

> Over the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him, Work had increasingly come to life. In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. (*CG*, p. 6)

This narrative style, which Auster perceives as part of a dialogical process, in which conflicting views and contradictions may be expressed and, more importantly, are purposefully left intact and where meaning is never definitive, or meaning may be beyond interpretation or reach, is left as an open and unanswered suggestion without any sort of conclusiveness. This peculiarity is most notoriously evidenced, as we have already stressed, by the dialogue passage between Daniel Quinn and Virginia Stillman which not only suggests doubt over the veracity of Peter Stillman's statements but questions the capacity of language by pointing at its dualism and, in a more general way, at the problem of truth in communication. Let us see it once again for the sake of clarity:

> "You mustn't assume that Peter always tells the truth. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think he lies."[25] (*CG*, p. 25)

More recently, in the literary career of Paul Auster, in *Oracle Night*, we have the writer Sidney Orr considering two different versions of the same story, a fact which implies the falsity of one of them. In this choice between one of the options of the duality we are left doubting Chang's story about his father during the Cultural Revolution and, at the same time, 'we are led' to believe in the veracity of the narrator, Sidney Orr:

> I'm not saying this proves Chang was lying to me, but it does cast some suspicion over his story. Possibly, there were two teachers who wept, and Liu

25. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 25.

> Yan didn't notice the other one. But it should be pointed out that the book burning was a highly publicized event in Beijing at the same time and, in Liu Yan's words, 'caused a major stir all over the city.' Chang would have known about it, even if his father hadn't been there. Perhaps he told his infamous story in order to impress me. I can't say. (*ON*, p. 123)

We can say, therefore, that meaning is never fixed since it depends on the individual readers. Regarding this point, it is worth considering the "situatedness" of the reader which conditions the act of reading as Harold Bloom adverts:

> Poetic meaning… is… radically indeterminate. Reading, despite all humanist traditions of education, is very nearly impossible, for every reader's relation to every poem is governed by a figuration of belatedness. Tropes or defenses (for their rhetoric and psychology are a virtual identity) are the 'natural' language of the imagination in relation to all prior manifestations of imagination. A poet attempting to make this language new necessarily begins by an arbitrary act of reading that does not differ in kind from the act that his readers subsequently must perform on him.[26]

This excerpt puts into scope the notion of literature as a system in which meaning, readings, or literature itself, obey synchronic and diachronic relations. As we have already mentioned, this perception of literature is already present in T. S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* in which literature constitutes a system, and "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" and any modification affects the whole existing order that necessarily "must be, if ever so slightly altered."[27] We come to the conclusion that the so-called point-of-nowhere, as an instance of total detachment and independence, does not exist for Eliot in literature, even when he

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26. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 69.

27. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920), in *Criticism Major Statements*, Ed. Charles Kaplan and William Davis Anderson, Bedford, St. Martin's, 2000, p. 406.

considers that literature at all moments both absorbs and reinterprets the past, never implying a total rupture in its evolution. What is clear and must, therefore, be deduced is that in literature everything is interrelated, in a way resembling the polyphonic relationship mentioned above; everything that is constructed is then conditioned by the previous uses of language. It is the task of the true writer, the creative writer, to break with the language that he receives and to create a new language. Thus, at the beginning of *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn is solely interested in keeping and preserving the system or the forms already established by the genre to which he dedicates his efforts as a writer, thus we are told by the narrator that:

> What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories. (*CG*, p. 7)

Quinn's fiction, then, seems closed to the world, in contrast with Auster's claimed openness of fiction to the world. It is also worth mentioning here that what Auster, the author of *City of Glass*, does is really the opposite of Daniel Quinn, Auster breaks the forms and conventions of the traditional mystery novel by taking it to an ontological level which, in the end, focuses on the character of writing and authorship. On a theoretical level, the parallelism with *Don Quixote* is more than evident; Cervantes also broke with the tradition of the chivalry novels in fashion during his time by virtue of irony and also by his formal abuse from which he could then be able to concentrate on the theme of authorship and authority. Auster uses the detective as the embodiment not just of the quest of the writer in general, by trying to find answers for a reality that estranges the individual at the same time that upholds the answers, but also shows the quest of a concerned and aware human being. Auster transcends the mystery novel proper; he is conscious

of the profundity to which he can take the mystery novel by using it as a device for something else.

In this perpetual motion of creation, not very different from that perpetual flux to which reality (especially Postmodern reality) or the self, for that matter, are submitted to, we might be able to find in the mind a point in which the difference between what we read and the way we respond to a text could be obliterated. Both texts: the one made available by the text proper and the one begotten in the reader by the act of reading may, therefore, be placed and considered on the same level. Such is the perception of Peter L. Hunt when he keenly observes that:

> […] it is artificial to make any distinction between the *things that we perceive and the things that we respond to in a text*. We do not distinguish the medium from the message any more than we distinguish our input from the text's.[28] [My italics]

Again, what is, therefore, ultimately stressed is the value of the reader as a point of confluence and origin of the literary experience. Having seen how, by privileging the storyline, Auster is interested in establishing communication between his authorial self and the reader; the novel is so underlined as a means to an end, that of communication. The dialogue thus obtained shares many features with the tradition of oral literature where interaction between the parties involved is procured and in which this interaction has a decisive importance in the end result. There must necessarily be an interaction between the author and the reader and not a separation between the two entities because literature is the collaborative effort of both poles of literary communication.

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28. Peter L. Hunt, Criticism, *Theory and Children's Literature*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 100.

From a philosophical perspective, this interaction can be perceived as one more attempt in an effort of bringing down the polarities and borderlines between the subject and the object in the realm of literature. In so doing, what is to be achieved is a true dialogue, a flux of communication centered upon what may be termed as participation. In this involvement of the reader, which turns the literary phenomena into a polyphonic orchestration, the author may lose control of the end result and may disappear altogether from the text as origin and source. The reader then takes control of the meaning of the narrative, and, according to Catherine Belsey[29] he surges not as a passive consumer of a *readable* text but as an active producer of a *writable* text and, as a consequence, ultimately an interrogative text is obtained as a means of filling in all the blanks left by the author.

From a different angle, the loss of power on the part of the author is also reflected in the autonomy of the novel in respect to the author. This issue is very clear for Auster in relation to *The Music of Chance*. In Postmodern novels, the characters often take action in their hands, deliberate action that, if anything, stresses a certain 'ventriloquism' on the part of the author:

> There's no question that the book took over and had its own life independent of my will or judgment about what should or shouldn't go into it. There was an interesting example during the poker game. Nashe leaves the table and goes upstairs to look at "The City of the World" again. He stays for an hour and winds up stealing the two little figures of Flower and Stone. I had no idea he was going to do this until I wrote the passage. *It was as though Nashe had become entirely real for me and was doing it on his own.* I still don't understand why he did it, and yet it was right that he did it.[30] [My italics]

29. See Chapter 6: Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London and New York, Methuen, 1980.
30. Conversation with Mark Irwin, http://www.paulauster.co.uk/denverquarterly.htm

The polyphonic, or Postmodern, approach to literature, in which the co-participation of the reader, in the space provided by the author, together with other voices, needs to be directly considered in the shadow of the oral tradition of bardic nature in literature. In this tradition, the bard is not in full control of the narration and his creativity stands on a different ground to that of the modern writer since his standing, or the nature of the literary object, can be considered as the result of participation of other parties and not just due to the intervention of the author, and last but not least, in most cases, the literary object is not completely original. Moreover, the bard acts both as reader and composer during the different instances of recitation which are also conditioned by the interaction of the public which makes the whole experience of the enactment more immediate due to their mutual interaction in real time. This stress on the interaction of the parties involved, that conditions the narration in oral literature, is highlighted by Walter Ong in this way:

> The oral song (or narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer's memories of songs sung. In working with this interaction, the bard is original and creative on rather different grounds from those of the writer.[31]

It is appropriate here to point out the awareness of the past: the experiences of recitation — and not only these — as one of the determining forces behind this type of literature. This awareness of the past, being so important for Postmodernism, is present here in the action of recitation, constituting an interesting instance of oral literature by which the past is brought into the present.

31. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 146.

In this respect, in narrative fiction as a whole, and in Paul Auster's fiction in particular, it can rightly be affirmed that there is a coalescence of the written and oral forms of storytelling and that there is not such a clear boundary. Auster, by fusing elements of both traditions, seems to stress what a number of linguists such as M. A. K. Halliday have been stressing as the *indifferentiation* between written and oral forms of expression.[32]

The profound sense of orality that inhabits *The New York Trilogy* should be seen as a result of one further instance in Paul Auster's preoccupation with language and, most particularly, with communication and an active use of language. Communication and its effectiveness are asserted in the interaction of characters who, in their dialogues, try not only to get one message across but to convince and elicit a result from the other party involved. This is so to the point that we can affirm that *The New York Trilogy* is the result of the interaction of two distinct ways of dealing with communication: a communication of immediacy in the more-or-less, we may say, Socratic dialogues of the characters of which the reader is witness to, and the narrative non-dialogical parts directed to the more direct appreciation of the reader. What we have in *The Trilogy* is precisely the coalescence of the written and oral attributes of language; we are made sure that both uses of language coexist in the text.

The traces of orality are evidently present in the written dialogues between the characters, not many in Auster we must add, but the hues of orality are present in the immediacy suggested by the written forms carefully selected in their simplicity and which are translated into a fluid and apparently uncomplicated reading. Again, what Auster tries to obtain through his barebones straightforwardness is first

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32. M. A. K. Halliday, *Spoken and Written Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 101.

and foremost a method of communication that considers the novel in a dialogical form, the form of the novel considered as a dialogue. The oral forms are used to stress immediacy of communication at the same time that they are used to objectify reality as much as possible, giving the floor to the characters and, with this, the withdrawal of the biased narrator is effected. In the more traditional communication, supported by the dialogues between the characters, the immediacy is obtained by the absence of the narrator who gives the floor to his characters. In the conception of the novel of dialogue the floor is given to the reader who has to contend with the minimalist approach of the text, procuring explanations, completing details and providing backgrounds. This sort of text is closer to the dialogue of orality in which there are assumptions and blank spaces which sort out both immediacy and presence. This lack of detail and blanks are what Auster considers as most interesting in the fairy tales. They demand our innocence or naive openness to what the story says, to its fantastic load and a total suspension of disbelief.

In this authentic enactment of dialogue with the reader, the text has to show the function of a dialogue. In this absence of detail, the reader is forced to carry out an action of interpretation. This happens especially in the few dialogues that exist in Auster's novels; the removal of the narrator demands a more active engagement of the reader who takes control over the interpretation which is normally in the hands of the narrator. The author and the narrator are distanced from the narration of the text. We can say that words do not tell, they show and disappear and, by the act of showing, they draw attention to a reality which is not contained or present in them and this reality only becomes present after their demand for interpretation.

Fiction and Reality

Traditionally, in literary studies, the terms 'fiction' and 'reality' have come to form two equidistant points of an unquestioned polarity. This polarity has been a result of a historical process of evolution in the narrative as it departs from, what Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, in *The Nature of the Narrative* identified as, "allegiance to myth"[33] towards a position that can be termed as "allegiance to reality;" a process that was prodded on, we must add, by the rapid change in science and thought resulting from the industrial and social revolutions.

The fact that they have been turned into two terms of an opposition, draws attention to the paradoxical hybrid constitution of literature, since literature takes its materials from commonsense reality and, therefore, is related to reality albeit, obviously, different in nature. Scholes and Kellogg are, however, on their part, very keen to emphasize that the novel is not positioned against romance but is itself a "product of the reunion of the empirical and fictional elements in narrative." Their difference, then, would be dependent on how much emphasis is put on the fictive or on the empirical constitutive elements. The traditionally assumed position of the relationship between the two realms is one in which reality provides the materials with which fiction is constructed and that the finished product may have an impact, aesthetic or of some other kind, in the empirical world.

The differentiation between fiction and commonsense reality is already present in the etymology of the word itself: fiction (from Latin's *fingere*) stresses what is made up, not true and invented.

33. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, T*he Nature of the Narrative*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 13.

Fiction is, therefore, an equivalent term for something deceitful that creates the illusion of reality; it provides a semblance of truth for those willing to submit to it by resorting to what, as we have pointed out, since Samuel Taylor Coleridge, has been termed as "suspension of disbelief."[34] One important aspect, not to be overlooked here, is the willingness on the part of the reader — both in terms of consent and assent, and in order to obtain a more perfect fruition of a literary work of art — to assume the reality of fiction in a more distinct and engaging way, by bringing it closer to the realm of commonplace reality. In this vein, and consequently, something that must be stressed is, that a great amount of responsibility for this total and perfect fruition of a literary work of art is put on the reader and, in a peculiar way, on his creative capacity.

In Auster, there is a visible focus on the complexity of writing concerning all its different facets; in fact, characters are often writers trying to find their own way, their own voice, and trying to make sense of reality. Of all the novels by Paul Auster which deal with this problematization of writing, it is in *Oracle Night* where the aspects of creation of fiction and its relation to the empirical world are made most evident. The way in which this connection is made may run against the assumed beliefs in which the interaction of both realms is commonly held. The status of fiction, a matter having been debated since Aristotle, as something likely but not real, is discussed, stressing the aspect of the writer as free from the strictures of the empirical reality and drawing attention to the nature and value of what his scope of influence really is. In *Oracle Night* it is made clear that both entities of fiction and history are vying with each other for the control of empirical time, the time

34. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "'Biographia Literaria," in *English Critical Texts*, Ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 191.

of linear succession, but must also be seen in the context of the experience of time natural during the human perception of being. In a dialogue between writers, Sidney Orr is confronted with John Trause's view that makes fiction the master of future empirical world events. This is obviously a contention that should be completely rejected on rational grounds but which, nevertheless, rendered a French poet, described as a *perfectly* rational man, silent. For Orr, his French colleague had deceived himself, or if we may, had *created* an imaginary cause for a real event by believing that the words he had written about narrating an (imaginary) drowning had caused the drowning of his own daughter:

> There was no connection between imagination and reality, I said, no cause and effect between the words in a poem and the events in our lives. It might have appeared that way to the writer, but what happened to him was no more than a horrible coincidence, a manifestation of bad luck in its cruelest, most perverse form. That didn't mean I blamed him for feeling as he did, but in spite of sympathizing with the man for his dreadful loss, I saw his silence as a refusal to accept the power of the random, purely accidental forces that mold our destinies, and I told Trause that I thought he was punishing himself for no reason. (*ON*, p. 188)

This subject of what we may term as 'control over the written form' also constitutes a recurrent theme in Auster's novels. The narrator of *The Locked Room* destroys Fanshawe's red notebook in an attempt to gain control over his own destiny. This is an action similar to what Orr himself does at the end of *Oracle Night*, and which is not very different in kind from what Daniel Quinn does by writing in the Stillmans' apartment; trying to get hold of his own reality by the act of writing. By their actions, in trying to gain this control over their destinies, Auster's characters seem to react to their discovery of being, what Brian McHale described as, 'cancelled characters,' or

characters for whom their own textual function becomes apparent, making evident their 'ineluctable writtenness.'[35]

The, apparently, rigid borderlines between fiction and reality are, in fact, not evident in the tradition of the American novel or, rather, in what Nathaniel Hawthorne termed as *romance*. Auster in this respect is very clear about the relations between fiction and reality leading him to admit:

> I frequently employ things from my own life. Many writers do that. It is something that has to do with plausibility and sincerity. When I write about problems I have experienced myself, I can do that with a certain conviction, in a way that erases the borderline between fiction and reality. And this is a field I want to cultivate. It isn't really very important whether the reader knows that I had these experiences. This neither detracts from nor adds to the book.[36]

It was Richard Chase who, in his now classic *The American Novel and Its Tradition,* claimed that the American novel in its most characteristic form has always incorporated the element of romance. This prompted him to coin the term of romance-novel to refer to this type of fiction characterized by what he identifies as:

> An assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyll; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider things only indirectly or abstractly.[37]

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35. Brian McHale, *Postmodern Fiction*, New York and London, Methuen, 1987, p. 105.

36. The Compass with the Flickering Rhythm — An Interview with Paul Auster, http://www.paulauster.co.uk/santiagodelrey.htm

37. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. ix.

Regarding fiction, the importance of Hawthorne in the study of the contemporary novel is considerable; for Joel Laporte there would be no modern American novel without Nathaniel Hawthorne. Richard Chase, in his turn, came to consider that the history of the American novel was really that of "the re-discovery of the uses of romance." It is a rediscovery of the full potential of the novel which is also a look at the beginnings of the novel where, the factual and imaginary always met. Of great importance, in relation to these considerations on the American novel, are the theoretical propositions of Nathaniel Hawthorne which stand out for their weight and influence in the tradition of the American novel. For Hawthorne, romance is a *locus* which is identified as "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other."[38] As we have already mentioned, according to Hawthorne the novel, for its part, would "aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience."[39] That is, it would assume a mimetic role in relation to reality, and it would, therefore, be more realistic or involved with commonsense reality. The Romance-novel, with the features identified by Richard Chase, seems to us as well-adapted for the purposes of Postmodernism and in line with what have been Paul Auster's novelistic poetics. Indeed, they are novels in which their field of action is not so much a place but a state of mind, where we can readily observe that the laws of verisimilitude are disregarded, or not fully respected, and in which by providing a

38. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*," *The Scarlet Letter*, New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1988, p. 28.

39. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*," *The House of the Seven Gables*, New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1967, p. 1.

tenuous borderline between the world of fact and the world of mind they bring up the element of human unconsciousness. Last but not least, they are fictions in which man and his problems are dealt with indirectly or abstractly but, we may add, as Hawthorne would put it, without swerving "aside from the truth of the human heart." In sum, these novels present a literary style in which the cohabitation or, even, reconciliation, between the empirical and the fictional impulse, is procured. In Auster there is the particularity that some of the important part of the data he uses as narrative materials are drawn from his own life and biography, a fact that he concedes he is not aware of when writing and about which he says:

> All writers draw on their own lives to write their books; to a greater or lesser degree, every novel is autobiographical. What is interesting, however, is how the work of the imagination intersects with reality.[40]

For Richard Chase,[41] the *romance-novel*, far from the escapism with which it is usually characterized, and due to a different set of features such as "rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity," constitutes itself into a "vehicle for the intellectual and moral ideas of the American novelists."[42] In this respect, it is worth mentioning the interest that literature has attracted from the field of philosophy because of its ethical power and, particularly, for its agility in expressing and studying the preoccupations that had once been thought as pertaining exclusively to the realm of philosophy. Richard Rorty explains this superiority of fiction as motivated by being able

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40. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 122.

41. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. IX.

42. *Ibid*., p. X.

to reveal reality in the contingent character. Fiction is both capable of displaying reality lacking stable points of view and portraying reality still in the making:

> For novels are usually about people — things which are, unlike general ideas and final vocabularies, quite evidently time-bound, embedded in a web of contingencies. Since the characters in novels age and die — since they obviously share the finitude of the books in which they occur — we are not tempted to think that by adopting an attitude toward them we have adopted an attitude toward every *possible* sort of person. By contrast, books which are about ideas, even when historicists like Hegel and Nietzsche, look like descriptions of eternal relations between eternal objects.[43]

The importance of fiction must be seen as a result of the creation of this "neutral territory" of the romance, where a significant degree of detachment and freedom is obtained by fleeing the rigors imposed by realism. The novel is opened to new, previously disregarded, possibilities. With the advent of a fully-fledged Postmodernism this increased degree of freedom not only appeals to writers and critics; this "romance-novel" is perceived as the ideal manner of trying to find a way of explaining the world and making it understandable. This perspective was already assumed in the field of literary criticism by Leo Marx long before the so-called 'Postmodern debate.' Marx singled out this type of novel as the prevailing paradigm in American fiction:

> Our writers, instead of being concerned with social verisimilitude, with manners and customs, have fashioned their own kind of melodramatic, Manichean, all-questioning fable, romance, or idyll, in which they carry

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43. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 107-8.

> us, in bold leap, beyond everyday social experience into an abstract realm of morality and metaphysics.[44]

This task of questioning the world is what Postmodern criticism has termed, indistinctly, as "naming the unnameable" (Patricia Waugh) or, from a different point in time, an attempt at "unexpressing the expressible" (Roland Barthes). What interests us in this general questioning force of Postmodern fiction is that fiction becomes instrumental in criticizing the values of Western civilization by making evident, and bringing awareness towards, all the given data of civilization and, most especially, by bringing awareness towards their status as construct. Fiction submits reality to a full analysis resorting to something similar to Freudian-Lyotardian *anamnesi*s, as an effort to remember all the forgotten foundations of civilization in a movement of unconcealment of the mythic and the psychic bases. In a more general way, and as indicated earlier, this has been explained by Brian McHale[45] as the result of change of dominants in modern thought that has its translation in fiction. This change of dominants is characterized by a change from an epistemological position of asking about the means for a better knowledge of reality, to one of questioning the nature of reality itself, thus foregrounding cognitive questions and assuming an ontological position.

Trying to find an explanation for reality, the novel re-enters the dominion of the mythic and, by analyzing all the processes by which reality and novels are themselves generated and, what is more, by making evident the still prevalent presence of mythological explanations, a rich and productive realm of pertinent literary

44. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 153.

45. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York and London, Methuen, 1987, pp. 9-10.

issues, beyond rational and intellectual controls, are revealed. As a consequence, self-referentiality and metafiction become one of the most attractive aspects of the novel by pointing at the linguistic-metaphoric nature of reality and at the relations that are set between the worlds of fiction and reality. More importantly, though, is that the common processes by which fiction and reality are constituted are stressed.

Going back in time the polyphonic type of narrative already mentioned, with which Mikhail Bakhtin prefigured Postmodern literature, also reinforces the disappearance of the distinction between fiction and reality by its multiplication of points of view. Not only should we say, along with Roland Barthes, that the birth of the reader has a cost evidenced by the death of the author but that the disappearance of the God-like author brings about the new poetics of Postmodernism. As an entity of this time and age, the novel is constituted as a tissue made up of different strands of materials, or, according again to Barthes, made up of quotations from different sources, some of them identifiable, and some not original. It, distinctively, is a novel generated in different centers which may only reach their unity and sense in the reader where, if we are allowed to repeat something we already mentioned, the centrality of literary communication is transferred from the text to the reader who has to contend with the multiplicity of the text and with a meaning that is never fixed, and that will depend on his different meanings. The reader is thus converted into the sole provider of unity reaching a meaning which is always beyond the words and the reference of any text. What is important to stress is that, ultimately, the reader is then led to the illusion of a 'point of nowhere,' signaled by the transcendence of both words and the world. Richard Rorty, for his part, points to what he sees as the role of the novelist as one of redescribing reality in a scenario where multiple descriptions

are offered and, at the same time, the ability to move in a context of descriptions where the distinction between the two poles of *appearance* and *reality* is not important:

> The novelist's substitute for the appearance-reality distinction is a display of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same event. What the novelist [as opposed to the philosopher] finds especially comic is the attempt to privilege one of these descriptions, … What he finds most heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.[46]

This lack of differentiation between fiction and reality is a parallel movement to that of the aesthetization of life which is one of the quests of Postmodernism. By the blurring of borderlines between fiction and reality, and between the realm of art and life, art is recovered from the isolation and distance from the realm of experience to which it was submitted under Modernism. Postmodernism's general effort at aesthetization constitutes a way of reversing the apparent predominance of the aesthetic sphere and its isolation from the ethic and cognitive elements in art. In Postmodernism these Kantian spheres considered as a whole, in their multiplicity, complexity and contradiction, are believed to reflect the authentic nature of the human self in his interaction with the reality of life; they truly reflect the experience of being in the world.

The Postmodern quest, for the ordinary and the commonsense experience, is no other proposal than the reiteration, but now with a different focus, of the attack on Enlightenment initiated by Friedrich von Schiller in his *Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795)

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46. Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 74.

which proposes the aesthetic as a way of reconciling man with the world; the aesthetic would refine man's feelings preparing him for moral action. Furthermore, for Schiller the conflict between human sensuous nature and rational will could be solved by the action of beauty. This attack of theory on Enlightenment and its abstract universalism is taken up again in the twentieth century by Martin Heidegger for whom human knowledge of the world cannot be divorced from daily life experience, from the experience of being embedded in time and space. Heidegger defends the recovery of experience, of being-in-the-world, a goal that can only be obtained by a desautomatization or defamiliarization of perception out of rationalism.

Under this perspective, all the efforts made by Peter Stillman Sr. for the recovery of language in *City of Glass* represent an effort directed at attaining a language that permits authentic knowledge by a truthful rendering of reality. This effort of Heideggerian quality, trying to attain through language a better grasp of reality, aims at making man more aware of his position in the world by the use of a better tool for the unconcealment of reality:

> It is imprecise; it is false; it hides the thing it is supposed to reveal. And if we cannot even name a common, everyday object that we hold in our hands, how can we expect to speak of the things that truly concern us? Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost. (*CG*, pp. 77-78)

Semiotical Realities

Through what we may consider as the *actually real*, a character such as Stillman tries to reconstruct language from its decadence so that it can be brought to truly express reality by becoming semiotically real. Stillman's position, nevertheless, ignores that language, in

mediating reality, is always, and irremediably, a step removed from it. If it is true that reality is mediated by language, we can say that its true expression is the product of a wider interaction between reality, mind and language, which makes difficult a real knowledge of reality in itself, whenever this interaction and the existence of a context are ignored. Those gaps which are, as we have mentioned, even necessary, can be bridged by the action of the mind which evidences that it is precisely in the tension between the actually real and the semiotically real that surges a complementariness that will eventually reveal reality; a reality that is diverse, complex and not always fully present.

Therefore, Stillman's vision of language, which points at its instability due to a 'monadic' character of isolation from reality, and its perception as an entity submitted to becoming, is only a partial expression of the problem of language. Stillman ignores the fact that language, man and reality are part of a process of becoming and, more importantly, of constant realignment, and that there may necessarily be a gap between these parties in the dynamic process of being and signification. Stillman also ignores the fact that mimetic representation is not possible, and that an Adamic conception of language as a univocal one-to-one relationship with the empirical world is but a dream, a fallacy, that ignores the complexities that underlie both language and reality. This preoccupation with language is also one of the concerns of Blue in *Ghosts*. As we saw earlier, for self-assurance Blue tries to reflect on words 'that tally each to each to reality.' Blue's exercise is repeated again later on in the final part of *Ghosts* when Blue, trying "to stay awake a little longer," begins to make a list, similar to some sort of catalog resembling the enumeration of St. Augustine. Nevertheless, both exercises carried out by Blue go beyond the action of Adamic enumeration for they represent an exercise by which sensorial reality is transformed into a

conceptual one. Accordingly, they can be seen by the mind's eye. They become inner words that begin to be perceptible as thoughts and not as physical reality since they are free from the errors induced by our sensorial perception of physical reality. Blue becomes independent from the reality inscribed by White and Black, and accepts reality as more complex than just black and white.

It is in *Moon Palace* where the writer-to-be, Marco Fogg, under the tutelage of Effing, comes to grips with the problem of the description of external reality. Fogg becomes aware of the mutability of reality, aware of all the factors that play a role in the description of reality. And, above all, becomes aware of how his own perspective and mutability make an objective description of reality impossible; a description where possible knowledge and familiarity about the thing to be described does not help:

> A fire hydrant, a taxi cab, a rush of steam pouring up from the pavement — they were deeply familiar to me, and I felt I knew them by heart. But that did not take into account the mutability of those things, the way they changed according to the force and angle of the light, the way their aspect could be altered by what was happening around them: a person walking by, a sudden gust of wind, and odd reflection. Everything was constantly in flux, and though two bricks in a wall might strongly resemble each other, they could never be construed as identical. More to the point, the same brick was never really the same. It was wearing out, imperceptibly crumbling under the effects of the atmosphere, the cold, the heat, the storms that attacked it, and eventually, if one could watch it over the course of centuries, it would no longer be there. All inanimate things were disintegrating, all living things were dying. My head would start to throb whenever I thought of this, imagining the furious and hectic motions of molecules, the unceasing explosions of matter, the collision, the chaos boiling under the surface of all things. (*MP*, p. 122)

As already mentioned, it becomes apparent that reality overwhelms and neutralizes meaning with too much information and that there must be a selection that provides room for expressing

and differentiating the really necessary from what is accessory. Description becomes a problem when approaching reality. Paradoxically, description does not consist of the exhaustiveness of piling up words, words in the end do not make objects more vivid just by themselves. Words are just a preliminary step for the apprehension of reality; what is needed is not so much their profusion and exhaustiveness but, more precisely, some emptiness, the 'air around' them. Likewise, words need to provide a certain distance from reality, to provide just a few accurate hints and present the essential so that they can perform the trick in the mind of the visually handicapped Effing. Words had to disappear the moment they were pronounced:

> The problem was less in my delivery than in my general approach. I was piling too many words on top of each other, and rather than reveal the thing before us, they were in fact obscuring it, burying it under the avalanche of subtleties and geometric abstractions. The important thing to remember was that Effing was blind. My job was not to exhaust him with lengthy catalogues, but to help him see things for himself. In the end, the words didn't matter. Their task was to enable him to apprehend the objects as quickly as possible, and in order to do that, I had to make them disappear the moment they were pronounced. (*MP*, p. 123)

Fogg, the apprentice writer, becomes aware of the problem of mutability of reality in an Heraclitean manner and its effect on writing. If literature has to deal somehow with a changing external reality it is up to the writer to decide what to select out of this mutable reality; the writer must make the reader inhabit the text at the same time that the reader must make his own any impressions provided by the writer. This is a perceptive approach that is valid for the fruition of any aesthetic artifact; we have just to remember Fogg's contemplation of Ralph Albert Blakelock's *Moonlight* and the injunction of his master Effing: "See if you can't begin to enter the

mind of the artist who painted the landscape before you. Imagine that you are Blakelock painting the picture yourself… Spend another fifteen minutes in front of it, *giving yourself up to it* as though there was nothing else but this painting in the entire world."[47] We have to stress that Auster has frequently insisted[48] on the necessity of the reader to inhabit the novel, something that is equivalent, as we have already seen, to Steiner's concept of 'indweltness' in relation to art:

> The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it's the reader who writes the book and not the writer. In my own case as a reader (and I've certainly read more books than I've written!), I find that I almost invariably appropriate scenes and situations from a book and graft them onto my own experiences — or vice versa. In reading a book like *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, I realized at a certain point that all events were set in the house I grew up in as a child. No matter how specific a writer's description of a place might be, I always seem to twist it into something I'm familiar with.[49]

At the same time, Auster also points to an after-effect of this habitation of art, or its dilatory quality by stating that:

> It's the book that gets under your skin, that you can't completely figure out right away, that haunts you and then triggers speculation and thoughts and anxieties and illuminations about the world. The one that you can never completely grab hold of.[50]

After an initial phase of disappointment because of his confrontation with a "deeply contemplative" work, Fogg is led to the details: features that depart from the realistic depiction of reality and which

47. Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*, p. 135.

48. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 111.

49. *Ibid*., p. 111.

50. Interview by Chris Pace, http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/links/secret.html

do not have to do with a lack of artistic skill on the part of the artist. These hues that depart from reality, lead Fogg to the contemplation of other meanings and to a reality which is not literally expressed and has to be reached mentally:

> I wondered if Blakelock hadn't painted his sky green in order to emphasize the harmony, to make a point of showing the connection between heaven and earth. If men can live comfortably in their surroundings, he seemed to be saying, if they can learn to feel themselves a part of the things around them, then perhaps life on earth becomes imbued with a feeling of holiness. I was only guessing, of course, but it struck me that Blakelock was painting an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it… Perhaps, I thought to myself, this picture was meant to stand for everything we had lost. It was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world…. I felt that I had discovered something, even if I didn't know what it was. (*MP*, p. 139)

This reality, of an intellectual or conceptual kind, is not evident and escapes any type of representation. Fogg knows that he has discovered something even when he is not fully aware of what it really is or means. Again, the message of the painting is not immediately available; the painting does not offer itself to that sort of immediate, easy and clear cut 'reading.' It does so formally, stressing its departure from realism and by proposing a meaning which is beyond that of mere sensuous contemplation. Ultimately, Fogg does get to the probable message Blakelock had tried to imbue the painting with, and this is that humans must try to: "learn to feel themselves a part of the things around them, then perhaps life on earth becomes imbued with a feeling of holiness." A statement that draws us to the philosophy of Emerson of *Nature* at the same time that it reminds us of Heidegger's effort of bringing to man awareness of being-in-the-world. By the hand of Effing, Fogg initiates his aesthetic education leading him to achieve the ultimate goal signaled by Schiller, that of being a *Schöne Seele*.

In this respect, the life Fogg shares with Effing can properly be seen as some sort of ritualistic initiation, an education that has to win Fogg's resistance: "If I take you on, Fogg, you'll probably grow to hate me. Just remember that it's all for your own good. There's a hidden purpose to everything I do, and it's not for you to judge."[51] Again, this is an education that requires some detachment from, and even passage of time, in order to bear fruit, this was exactly Effing's demand or method when Fogg was required to contemplate Blakelock's painting.

The World is in My Head

Postmodernism does not seek the separation between mind and body; their union may lead to a true knowledge of man's own nature and awareness of the medium where man carries out its existence. This union of opposites, of being able to communicate with nature, what is identified as an exercise of holiness, constitutes the viable path for the recovery of 'being-in-the-world.' The experience of being can only be reflected by the reintegration of all the features that constitute the human being by means of a truthful command of language. Language is mostly the result of the action of the imagination. Through language and, again, with the collaboration of imagination, reality is made visible, perceptible, meaningful to the human mind enabling the human being to come truly alive through language:

> I was trying to separate myself from my body, taking the long road around my dilemma by pretending it did not exist. Others had traveled 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,

51. Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*, p. 105.

> 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. (*MP*, p. 30)

Marco Fogg realizes that mind and matter go together in human experience, that both are complementary and inseparable; the dichotomy of mind and matter is terminated once they are identified. As Fogg puts it, mind "shows itself to be matter as well." For Fogg the world 'out there' has to do as much with thought (mind) as with sensorial experience (matter). This is a position that suggests, once again, the blurring of the borderline between the self and the world 'out there,' a re-enactment of the 'coincidentia oppositorum' of the romantic philosophy of poets such as William Wordsworth who saw the risk of the total separation of mind and matter as a source for partial knowledge and for dehumanized knowledge. This romantic position is retaken in the twentieth century by personalities of different areas of knowledge but most especially by physicists such as Werner Heisenberg and Erwin Schrödinger. In this respect Schrödinger writes:

> It is maintained that recent discoveries in physics have pushed forward to the mysterious boundary between the subject and object. This boundary, so we are told, is not a sharp boundary at all. We are given to understand that we never observe an object without its being modified or tinged by our own activity in observing it. We are given to understand that under the impact of our refined methods of observation and of thinking about the results of our experiments that mysterious boundary between the subject and object has broken down…Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier did not exist."[52]

52. Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?: With Mind and Matter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 136-137.

From this perspective, in this interaction of mind and reality, what is evidenced is that the human being necessarily deals with what is semiotically real. This is the only world which is perceived. We may as well say that in our intercourse with reality we ultimately contend with a reality which ends up possessing a mind-like character. Coincidentally, this is a characteristic we consider to be quite Austerian. In a notebook entry from his youth, Auster expresses an apparently simple idea that comes close to Charles S. Peirce's conception of the universe as mind: "The world is in my head. My body is in the world."[53]

For pragmatist philosopher Charles S. Peirce, the universe is quite the result of an interaction in dialogue of the mind and the universe; at the beginning both act as separate selves and unity results from their complementarity. The observing self, the mind, is not autonomous and external reality is not just there to be manipulated. The interaction of mind and matter will lead to Pierce's consideration that all matter is really mind, and mind is continuous.[54]

These considerations have to be taken as part of a generalized movement that stresses what we have termed as the 'semiotically real' as part of a mind-like reality, which is consistent with twentieth century interest in language as creator of human reality. By stressing the gap between the semiotic reality and the outer reality, what is ultimately stressed is the impossibility of knowing reality, a position which in its turn, stresses similarities existing in both the world of fiction and the world of empirical reality by pointing to the connections between what is perceived mentally and what is perceived sensually. What is also important to stress is that the

53. See Gérard de Cortanze, *Dossier Paul Auster*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 1996, p. 77.

54. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, Ed. C. Harthshorne and P. Weiss 1-6. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1932, Vol. 6. p. 301.

reader in the act of reading just perceives one world, not just the semiotically real as opposed to the real. Furthermore, according to Peirce, man is just a sign identical to the rest of the signs. Under Pierce's perspective, when considering signs, thoughts are also identified as signs. The logical conclusion is, therefore, that external signs, man and thoughts, are taken as making up part of one same reality. In this, we can easily deduce a link between the realms of fiction and reality which makes them equal since every thought is an external sign, and man and the external sign are the same:

> There is no element whatever of man's consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the world …The word or sign which man uses is the man himself…that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an external sign, the man and the external sign are identical. Thus language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.[55]

If language plays a role in revealing reality, this activity of language becomes so crucial that reality is considered as non-existent until it is expressed by means of linguistic signs. Reality is reduced to signs and it becomes evident the paradox by which signs are revealed by other signs. Our full appreciation of the reality around us also assumes a paradoxical bend: the more we are familiar with the reality around us, the less we seem to apprehend it. In parallel terms, things, in order to be properly revealed, need a language that necessarily shows them as if they were perceived for the very first time. Reality needs to be de-familiarized so that a full perception of it can be attained. This activity of defamiliarization is the center of all artistic activity, and it consists, in its essence, of a process of redescription of reality — translating it to another medium — so

55. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

that it can be properly and accurately shown, and constitutes a magnificent task as it is observed by Fogg:

> If regarded in the proper way, the effort to describe things accurately was precisely the kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn: humility, patience, rigor. Instead of doing it merely to discharge an obligation I began to consider it as a spiritual exercise, a process of training myself how to look at the world as if I were discovering it for the first time. What do you see? And if you see, how do you put it into words? (*MP*, p. 122)

This difficulty in re-presentation constitutes, as we know, one of the themes of Romanticism, especially so regarding the subject of the sublime. In literature, this difficulty is admirably presented by John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The poet, in trying to translate the scenes on the surface of the urn into words, finds that the urn "can express a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" and that any attempt to render it to words would, in the end, be ludicrous.

It is in *Moon Palace* where we can follow the journey of self-discovery and apprenticeship of Marco Fogg. His personal growth, as motivated by discovery of his family roots and the revelation of his true personality, is parallel to the discovery of his way of dealing with reality and putting it to words. In this novel, the proper technique for writing is presented as the result of a process acquired after a personal effort by a subject who tries with all his will to learn his trade and who seeks perfection in a way that resembles an almost mystical exercise. *Moon Palace* presents the process of discovery of language, not as a tool for re-presentation but as a tool for creativity; a discovery which occurs parallel to the ripening of Fogg who may be said to be led along the way under a master, who has already laid and designed the path to be followed, in his personal quest or journey of the mind. The training leads to results, to the discovery of a technique which consists of the combination of description and — its

opposite — the lack of description: what we may adequately term as a certain amount of nothingness in the words to be used. For Fogg, the apprehension of reality depends on this silence that allows Effing to travel to the encounter of the thing described. We have already seen that this is something that Auster himself considers as crucial in the narrative technique he uses. In doing this, Fogg deals with reality in a similar way to Auster:

> It took me weeks of hard work to simplify my sentences, to learn how to separate the extraneous from the essential. I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work of his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him. (*MP*, p. 123)

This technique is no other than a way of slowing down the perception, of halting the immediate communication and providing time for a reflection on what is being told. Viktor Shklovsky showed that the ability of the artist and of his *oeuvre* would be dependent on his skill of slowing down perception, by making things 'strange' and enabling; in this way, a different kind of perception and, ultimately, awareness than the one provided by reality under normal circumstances. This slowing down of perception for an artistic object is precisely intended to make the audience perceive it, as it were, for the first time. The deferment of immediate perception seems to be something connatural to any representational system as literal expression is never possible and meaning is never fully present in representational systems, since it results from the cohabitation of the signifiers that keep transforming themselves into signifieds. This idea is consistent with the essential perception of mutability of all things and the consideration of language as a temporal process

and most especially with the mutability of the idea of self, as Terry Eagleton emphasizes:

> Nothing is ever fully present in signs. It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails my meaning being always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but I myself: since language is something I am made out of, rather than a conventional tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction.[56]

We must assume with Paul Auster that, in the process of perceiving the world, the empirical world has been denaturalized by being corseted twice by rules that stress the rational, the logical and verisimilar and which, at all times, avoid the unexplainable, the fantastic and whatever things are beyond the control of the mind. Auster believes in the constructed character of reality:

> Because reality is something we invent. We have different lenses for viewing the world, and every culture does it differently. I would say that since the 18th century, we've put a rational machine to work in deciphering the world, and it produces certain kinds of stories. And these stories are, so to speak, "realistic," when in fact they're not, they are just another interpretation of reality.[57]

It is precisely this awareness about its linguistic nature that distinguishes Postmodernism. The modernist aesthetics of 'make it new' are replaced by an aesthetic that focuses on the linguistic reality of everything. Meaning, or reality for that matter, are no longer considered to be 'out there' but rather to be a linguistic device generated by a human desire to control and understand nature.

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56. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 130.
57. Interview by Chris Pace, http://www.bluecricket.com/auster/links/secret.html

It, definitely, is a conception that makes of reality a mere text, to be interpreted and which presupposes, to some extent, a return to Idealism and the Emersonian conception of nature as a sign:

> 1. Words are *signs* of natural facts.
> 2. Particular natural facts are *symbols* of particular facts.
> 3. Nature is the symbol of the *spirit.*[58] [My italics]

Having already seen that the world is a sign, and that both reality and fiction share a common base in their linguistic origin, this common nature is translated in literature into a very evident focus on the texts and their production, and interestingly enough, more specifically, on their production of meaning and, eventually, revealing a questioning of fiction. Stephen Heath, by looking at the similarities between the *Nouveau Roman* and American Postmodernist fiction, sees that the interest is primarily upon language itself. Thus, for Heath it can be claimed that:

> Its foundation is a profound experience of language and form and the demonstration of that experience in the writing of the novel which, transgressed, is no longer repetition [i.e., "re-presentation" of "reality"] and self-effacement but work and self-presentation as *text*. Its "realism" is not the mirroring of some "Reality" but an attention to the forms of intelligibility in which the real is produced, a dramatization of possibilities of language, forms of articulation, limitations, of its own horizon.[59]

Reality and fiction are part of the linguistic-philosophical paradigm explicated by Ferdinand de Saussure that ignores verifiability in reality; it makes of language a system that structures relations between

58. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Nature," *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 48.

59. Stephen Heath, T*he Nouveau Roman*, London, Pan / Picador, 1972, p. 22.

signs, out of which meaning surges without taking into account any empirical reality, in fact as a system it is self-contained and self-sufficient. Under this perspective, the question of truth as capital in establishing the difference between reality and fiction is made redundant. This fact was pointed out by Tzvetan Todorov who indicates that:

> Literature is not a discourse that can or must be false… it is a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false, to raise this question has no meaning: this is what defines its very status as 'fiction.'[60]

External truths are seen as verifiable whereas in fiction this verification has no point. Now the tables have been turned to the detriment of external truths since what is made available for examination are just constructs of the mind. In *City of Glass,* Peter Stillman Jr. becomes aware that "his story" is something that is told but of which he has no possible means of checking its truthfulness:

> Long ago there was mother and father. I remember none of that. They say: mother died. Who they are I cannot say. Excuse me. But that is what they say. (*CG*, p. 16)

Thus, it can be said that fictional characters, as well as events and situations both "exist and do not exist." They solely exist by the grace of the frame provided by fiction that originates them and can, with all certainty, lose, what can be termed as, their character if, by any chance, they were originally taken out of it. It should also be stressed that there is not a difference between ordinary language and literary language since both refer to realities which cannot be verified and about which the application of the verifiability principle

60. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, Trans. Richard Howard, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p. 18.

does not make sense. Language has different uses but these depend on the framing its users give to it. We must agree with Stanley Fish when he states that there is a frame in literature that stresses that language is special, that it is discriminated by a different sort of use:

> Literature is language…but is language around which we have drawn a frame, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed… The difference lies not in the language but in ourselves. Only such a view, I believe, can accommodate and reconcile the two intuitions that have for so long kept linguistic and literary theory apart — the intuition that there *is* a class of literary utterances, and the intuition that any piece of language can become a member of that class.[61]

In a similar way to this language that is equal but different, metafictional characters may become conscious of their natures in the context of the fiction they make part of, usually by making questions which are extraneous to the natural context of fiction. In Auster's most typical bildungsroman, *Moon Palace*, the hero Marco Fogg is confronted by his mentor Effing with the possibility of his own "non-existence:"

> "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*." (*MP*, p. 105) [My italics]

Even in metafictional novels, the fictional illusion is never broken even when there is, at all times, the hint that his stories are an illusion. Auster's characters try to go on living in that illusion, fighting off any sort of control that may exist; this is the case for each one of the characters of the *New York Trilogy* and even for Nashe

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61. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 108-9.

in *The Music of Chance*. In *Oracle Night* the metafictional process is embedded in the multiple commentaries Orr makes about the process of creation when writing his own novel, which can be seen as the deconstruction or explanation of the process of incubation, and the writing of fiction, more than an act of criticism proper.

Porous Borders

In Postmodernism, the novel is the site where imagination, as source of creativeness, and empirical reality coalesce and where all is submitted to scrutiny as a result of a disposition towards the questioning of the sources of both fiction and reality; highlighting their common constructed and provisional natures as well as their also common sharing of inscrutable sources, in both human psychology and in forgotten mythological sources. For Waugh, the specific type of fiction about fiction, or metafiction, accomplishes the task of revealing the common nature of fiction and what we take as the commonsense reality, at the same time that it generates awareness of the verbal character of existence in general. More interestingly and consequently, by doing so, the conventions of reality itself are also questioned:

> Metafiction, then, does not abandon 'the real world' for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What is does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover — through its own self-reflection — a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written.'[62]

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62. Patricia Waugh, M*etafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 18.

The movement towards the meeting of the real and the imaginary, conceived as both the possible and magical, in the fictive space of the novel, can be seen as an attack on the premises of Modernity evidenced by the dualistic nature of western thought. This was expressed in an absolute dependency on reason that led to the radical separation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge,[63] which in its turn precluded other sources of knowledge which did not depend on rational or sensorial experience. We believe that the Postmodern movement of integration of the real and imaginary constitutes a different instance of the romantic preoccupation with the unity of the opposites through the imagination by means of the creation of aesthetic entities.

As we have already mentioned, in the interview conducted by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, and in what seems like a revision of Oscar Wilde's epigraph that stated that life copied art, Auster expresses his view that reality is stranger than fiction and that the conventions of verisimilitude applied to fiction have been spilled over reality, warping the sense of reality. In doing this, Auster states that reality has been distorted by the paradigms of fiction, especially those that make fiction subsidiary to the laws of rational Cartesian logic. Auster's vision of reality constituted in such a way does not prevent him, as already stated, from considering himself as a realist writer, even when his vision of the world is one oftentimes governed by the fortuitous command of chance and seems to be adrift with unsolvable mysteries:

> From an aesthetic point of view, the introduction of chance elements in fiction probably creates as many problems as it solves. I've come in for a lot of abuse from critics because of it. In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself

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63. Patricia Waugh, "Introduction," *Postmodernism A Reader*, London, E. Arnold, 1992, p. 2.

> a realist. Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives. And yet there's a widely held notion that novels shouldn't stretch the imagination too far. Anything that appears 'implausible' is necessarily taken to be forced, artificial 'unrealistic.' I don't know what reality these people have been living in, but it certainly isn't my reality. In some perverse way, I believe they've spent too much time reading books. They're so immersed in the conventions of so-called realistic fiction that their sense of reality has been distorted. Everything's been smoothed out in these novels, robbed of its singularity, boxed into a predictable world of cause and effect. Anyone with the wit to get his nose out of his book and study what's actually in front of him will understand that his realism is a complete sham. To put it another way: truth is stranger than fiction. What I am after I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in.'[64]

This vision is not uncommon in other writers who contemplate reality in disbelief, or even, in admiration since reality seems to be more unreal and surprising than whatever their own imaginings might create. Thus, Philip Roth, coinciding in this respect with Paul Auster clearly affirms:

> [...] the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.[65]

By abandoning realism or, rather a false pretense of representing reality, Paul Auster presents in his books the impossibility that reality

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64. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, pp. 116-7.

65. Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," in *The Novel Today*, Ed. Malcolm Bradbury, London, Fontana Press, 1977, p. 34.

may be contained in a verbal expression and draws attention to the fact that language mediates reality, and that in no way can it continue to be considered as a transparent window pane for the revelation of the world. Auster seems to be stressing that verisimilitude is very different from what we have assumed or, even better, does not exist; it is part of that construct we know as reality and that it does not help to explain all the facts of empirical reality:

> If it still shocks me to report what happened, that is because the real is always ahead of what we can imagine. No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth. This lesson seems inescapable to me now. (*L*, p. 160)

Facts make external reality predictable. As already pointed out by John Dewey and Jacques Derrida, ideas and observations are dependent on language and, therefore, the world of ideas and observation is not completely independent from the realm of language. Facts do not exist; they are interpretations that structure the world and are revealed through language. Since this is so, any truth claim cannot be based on language and this is the problem that Heidegger tackled when he considered language as the 'house of being':

> Against positivism, which halts at phenomena — 'There are only *Facts*' — I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations.[66]

If, for Modernist artists, reality had exceeded the possibility of representation or, actually had come to be perceived as an impossibility, with Postmodernism, reality seems to be a step ahead of representation. Not only does reality escape comprehension but it is found to be unstable if not completely unknowable. Reality is, therefore, and as stated earlier, not objective and existing out there

66. Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, New York, MacMillan, 1965, p. 83.

but is perceived as subjective and like a metaphorical construct that, nonetheless, allows us to get hold or control the commonplace and, therefore, somehow comes to organize the world of life for a more truthful experience of the world of life.

It is, thus, not surprising that Postmodern authors in general, and Auster in particular, make readers question themselves at all times about the perspectives of reality offered by the texts. Texts constitute on their part a privileged means for questioning the nature of reality: what reality is and what is understood and perceived as reality. Irreversibly, texts end up pointing at the limits of knowledge. By not finding any explanation, a door to the dimension of the fantastic and mysterious is opened, leading to a state of uneasiness by challenging assumed explanations and whatever certainties that had been taken for granted:

> 'Of course I was. I was sitting at my desk.'
>
> 'Well, I didn't see you. Maybe you were somewhere else. In the bathroom maybe'
>
> 'I don't remember going to the bathroom. As far as I know, I was sitting at my desk the whole time.'(*ON*, p. 25)

In this respect, we can affirm that Auster shares a vision, common to Postmodernism, once again, one of Heideggerian influence in trying to portray the reality of Being, out of the influence of Western philosophical tradition. This is but one way of experiencing reality which reflected what Heidegger paradoxically considered as non-being for its extreme dependence on reason. In general terms, Paul Auster's characters often come to a head on confrontation with what is unexplainable from a logical and realistic standpoint. According to Auster, reality is made up by those accidents that escape human control. Mystery and the fantastic, therefore, are present as part of a reality that has been denied representation

in the narrative. We can say that Auster opens up the narrative to experience which is, more often than not, and quite surprisingly, out of the reach of reason.

This is a site where the storyline offered by the diegetic movement is never lost and has to respond in its entirety to the multiplicity of the world, disregarding by necessity any sort of integration that would presuppose an exclusive choice. Any single response to a disjunctive reality of "either/or" choices is substituted by an integrating perspective which always takes into consideration what could have been but is not, 'the other,' the realm of the possible. Again, we have to stress that there is no difference between the commonsense world and the world of fiction; in Auster the mysterious and the fantastic also belong to the empirical reality, as part of the world that constitutes the experience of life, and are always present together with the human quest for explanation, as a possibility for unconcealment of the unknown. This is, in effect, what characterizes the Postmodern according to Linda Hutcheon:

> Postmodernism is the *process* of making the *product*; it is *absence* within *presence*, it is a *dispersal* that needs *centering* in order to *be* dispersal; it is an *idiolect* that wants to be, but knows it cannot be, the *master code*; it is *immanence* denying yet yearning for *transcendence*. In other words, the postmodern partakes the logic of "both / and," no one of "either / or."[67]

The world of the mind and the world of fiction do not need and must not be submitted to a world made with disjunctives. The world of fiction can be paradoxical and can contemplate and assess both realities, casting a glance on what has not been but could have been. This way of perceiving can provide a more truthful vision

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67. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, p. 49.

of reality by showing a more complex view than the one which excludes evidence by sustaining a standpoint generated with "either / or" choices. With Postmodernism the attitude we are led to understand and assume is that reality comes to life in the integrating and unifying perspective originated by "both / and" statements. For Daniel Quinn, his confrontation with the world of monistic interpretations, puzzlingly awash with uncertainties, is initiated with his first visual encounter with Peter Stillman Sr., or rather, with the encounter with both Stillman and his own submission to the arbitrariness of chance represented by a single, excluding, choice:

> Whatever choice he made — and he had to make a choice — would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end. At that moment, the two Stillmans started on their way again. The first turned right, the second turned left. Quinn craved an amoeba's body, wanting to cut himself in half and run off in two directions at once. "Do something," he said to himself, "do something now, you idiot." (*CG*, p. 56)

As soon as Quinn disregards the 'prosperous' Stillman, Quinn enters a new phase of psychological development; the door for the development of insight is opened. The mind with the help of imagination can do more. Fiction operates in a different way and can go beyond the limitations imposed by the realm of reality, it can be present at the same time in both realms and, by doing this, the interaction of both worlds is underlined. The reality of fiction is the fiction of reality. In *Oracle Night* the writer John Trause argues for the reality of fiction, for a different status of fiction which defies the commonsense of the empirical world of fact. Fiction, or the act of writing, is not what is present or real, but what will be realized in the future, and not merely what is likely to happen in the future. Writing becomes an act of projecting reality into the future.

More simply stated, Aristotle's consideration of the superiority of the poet over the historian is taken a step further, history may

still be about what happened but fiction, or the poet's task, is taken to mean not just what is likely to happen in the future but as the future itself. Whatever is written will irremissibly take place, will be materialized. The writer is then converted, for better and for worse, into a true creator of the world and not just a creator of a fictive world subordinated to the real world.

Fiction has the power of creating reality, of dictating it, Heidegger's term for this is *dichtung*. Writing becomes an action designed to make things happen and not just a recording of fictitious things with no bearing whatsoever over reality. In *Oracle Night* the possibility of fiction to determine the future is seen by the narrator as a surge of primitivism and magic power. Writer John Trause's transformation of the 'poet's' work from mere possibility into actuality, essentially means that the poet really and truly dictates the future by writing about it, and in so doing, he gives precedence to the work of the poet against that of the historian. This is something which evidently constitutes a paradox but needs to be seen under the light of Linda Hutcheon's affirmation:

> It is part of the Postmodern stand to confront the paradoxes of the fictive Historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both.[68]

Fictional narratives and history narratives are distinguished by their framing; once their original framings are withdrawn what is left provides a space for contrast and for what Hutcheon terms as 'double awareness' about the description of empirical reality and gives way to the versions of history. This awareness presupposes a new consideration of reality, a reality that must be looked at with

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68. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

suspicion and for which a 'suspension of belief' must be applied. Words are both false and real, there is no fiction / reality dichotomy or separation, both coalesce in the realm of human existence:

> It was a bland, commonsense argument, a defense of pragmatism and science over the darkness of primitive, magical thinking. To my surprise, John took the opposite view. I wasn't sure if he was pulling my leg or simply trying to play devil's advocate, but he said that the writer's decision made perfect sense to him and that he admired his friend for having kept his promise. 'Thoughts are real', he said. 'Words are real. Everything human is real, and sometimes we know things before they happen, even if we aren't aware of it. We live in the present, but the future is inside us at every moment. Maybe that's what writing is all about, Sid. Not recording events from the past, but making things happen in the future.' (*ON*, pp. 188-9)

From a perspective which takes history as the description of the empirical reality in narrative form, the description of actual events as such is not different from the descriptions made in fiction. The difference lies in something which is extraneous to the narrative itself: historical facts are believed to be true and are taken as referring to extra-textual reality. History is delimited by a frame that does not require the 'suspension of disbelief' since it is a description of the world of empirical reality. With Postmodernism and its insistence on the linguistic character of reality, a position that can be traced back to the philosophy of Nietzsche, history assumes the same sort of non-referential character of fiction. What is termed as reality does not refer, as is the case for fiction, to an extra-textual reality. They are both linguistic constructs in relation to their respective worlds. Both fiction and history depend on the same techniques of re-presentation, the borderline between them becomes even more blurry if we consider that both are cognitive in their aims and mimetic in their means. For Hayden White this notion can be taken

even further by including even those literary styles that focus on their own form and are self-referential:

> The most ludic and seemingly expressivist discourse, of poetry no less than of prose, and even of those forms of poetry which seem to illuminate only 'writing itself'. In this respect, history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation.[69]

Patricia Waugh makes us reconsider history on the same grounds as those of fiction, as a language-based description or narrative, one which is also delimited by the same textual boundaries that enclose fiction. This is a way of considering any factual description or historical account as determined by its linguistic makeup, something that gives it the same status as any other text, and, therefore, as we have been stressing, determined by the relation existing between linguistic signs in the self-contained and autonomous manner of its narrative structure. In this respect, this sort of narration is also a narration that obeys all the requisites of narrations and therefore it is also to be considered as fictional, providing one of the possible descriptions of empirical reality. Once more, we have to remember here Aristotle and his affirmation about the superiority of fiction over history because of its capacity to speak of the universal or "of what could or might happen."[70] And it is here as we have alluded earlier that rests the importance of the poet in opposition to the historian since his gifts allow him to 'see' the future.

In Auster's challenge to the assumed perceptions of the world of commonsense and fiction, fiction may become not only real but can also play a role affecting and, as we have just seen, even

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69. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 122.

70. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. James Hutton, London and New York, Norton, 1982, 1, 451 a-b.

dictating the events of the world of empirical, commonplace, reality. This certainly goes beyond what novels can do by denouncing or drawing attention to situations in the empirical reality but by making reality happen in the way they describe it. This is a disquieting aspect for Orr who takes a cautious or, rather, timorous decision of tearing the notebook up, lest he would ever be affected by what he had written in it and in this way obtains his independence and freedom from it:

> Roughly three years after Trause and I had that conversation, I tore up the blue notebook and threw it into a garbage can on the corner of Third Place and Court Street in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. At the time, it felt like the correct thing to do, and as I walked back to my apartment that Monday afternoon in September, nine days after the day in question, I was more or less convinced that the failures and disappointments of the past week were finally over. But they weren't over. The story was just beginning — the true story started only *then*, after I destroyed the blue notebook — and everything I've written so far is little more than a prelude to the horrors I'm about to relate now. Did the unfortunate French writer kill his child with his poem — or did his words merely predict her death? I don't know. What I do know is that I would no longer argue against his decision today. I respect the silence he imposed on himself, and I understand the revulsion he must have felt whenever the thought of writing again. More than twenty years after the fact, I now believe that Trause called it right. We sometimes know things before they happen, even if we don't know that we know. (*ON*, p. 189)

This action and the considerations about this power of fiction brings to mind a statement in one of the letters of John Keats:[71] "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's Dream — he awoke and found it truth… Imagination and its empirical reflection is the same as human life and its Spiritual repetition." In this letter, Keats expresses his rejection of consecutive thinking and embraces a vision of the action of the human mind which combines sensation

71. "Letter to Benjamin Bailey," 22 November 1817, in *English Critical Texts*, Ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 256.

and imagination and in which, therefore, the real and imaginary are combined in man's pursuit of truth; this constitutes a vision that seems to coincide with that of Auster. This subject of the power of fiction over reality leads us to the question of who controls what or whom and, irremediably, to the subject of the power of the notebook, the power of fiction. Because under this set of ideas, reality is conditioned by fiction (the future) or, more precisely and less problematically, fiction can be conditioned by the past. Mind transforms perception, a time warp that affects the linear succession of events innate to narration. Fiction presents reality, makes it present in time too, but Auster plays with the possibility that fiction could *futurize*, and go beyond the field of mere possibility. This is a way of playing with the dynamics of what is understood by fiction. Fiction is not true (as of here and now) but will be true (will take place, will be present) by this being present and also present in time, each time it will be read:

> I know. It's all in my head. I'm not saying it isn't, but ever since I bought that notebook, everything's gone out of whack. I can't tell if I'm the one who's using the notebook or if the notebook's been using me. Does that make any sense?' (*ON*, p. 141)

The above quotation reflects a character who feels at risk regarding the future, a future that he has recorded for himself. What Auster has to say, as many others have stressed, is that he is not a puppet master.[72]

Imagination is a dream which is not under the control of its master. The character Orr is not in full command either:

> I had given him some light but he was still locked inside that grim chamber, and without the proper tools to dig his way out, he was eventually going to die in there. (*ON*, p. 121)

72. Gerard de Cortanze, *Dossier Paul Auster*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 1996. p. 95.

Thus, writing enters the realm of reality but with a different quality as has always been expected. The act of writing can be about making things happen in the future. Magic elements gather all the mythical power in *Oracle Night* challenging the conventions of the realistic mode of writing by putting under scrutiny our understanding of the true meaning of Western civilization. In a challenge to commonsense reality, thoughts, the fictive world of a writer, may foretell reality and may, in the end, become real, closing the gap between two opposing realms:

> The poet was a rational man, John said, a person known for his lucidity and sharpness of mind, but he blamed the poem for his daughter's death. Lost in the throes of grief, he persuaded himself that the words he'd written about an imaginary drowning had caused a real drowning, that a fictional tragedy had provoked a real tragedy in the real world. As a consequence, this immensely gifted writer, this man who had been born to write books, vowed never to write again. Words could kill, he discovered. Words could alter reality, and therefore they were too dangerous to be entrusted to a man who loved them above all else. (*ON*, p. 188)

The Gap Once Again

Language does not permit access to external reality and when it tries to do so it only creates a new reality. By the use of the faculty of imagination another reality may be revealed, one which is not really that different in nature and truth from the one which is created and revealed from the empirical reality with language. This other type of reality revealed by imagination may serve as, and is often identified as, part of the effort to denounce the metaphysics of presence upon which Western thought is built and as a way of expressing the *constructedness* of all the methods of description and representation of reality since they are based on linguistic means. In *Moon Palace*, the novel that deals with the search and ultimate

discovery of true literary and personal expression by a young writer, this world of the imaginary, of the 'non-existing' secondary nature comes to life by accepting the non-present as present:

> But there he was on a cloudless spring night walking along with an open umbrella over his head. That was incongruous enough, but then I saw that the umbrella was also broken: the protective cloth had been stripped off the armature, and with the naked spokes spread out uselessly in the air, it looked as though he was carrying some huge and improbable steel flower. I couldn't help laughing at the sight… This was imagination in its purest form: the act of bringing nonexistent things to life, of persuading others to accept a world that was not really there. Coming as it did on that particular night, it somehow seemed to match the impulse behind what Effing and I had just been doing down at Forty-Second Street. A lunatic spirit had just taken hold of the city. Fifty-dollar bills were walking around in strangers' pockets, it was raining and yet not raining, and the cloudburst pouring through our broken umbrella did not hit us with a single drop. (*MP*, p. 209)

Imagination may very well be identified as the art of bringing to the world of empirical reality those things that do not belong to it. It is also a faculty that depends on persuasion; the laws of the commonsense experience are, therefore, to be suspended. People must be led to accept those realities as true even, or while, there must, at the same time be, an awareness of contemplating a created reality. An awareness from a vantage point that allows for the consideration of a duality of experience: the vantage point that permits one to say something like: "it was raining and yet not raining." This consideration presupposes a treatment of this created reality of a second nature as a metaphor. This 'as if' metaphorical attitude of literature bases itself upon a tension, a tension between two realities that become "present realities."

It goes without saying that the imagination present in literature is more than a tool for the creation of another reality, it is also a means for the attainment of knowledge, something that was already

made evident during the romantic period but which has subsequently been embraced by thinkers and philosophers with different backgrounds in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For instance, pragmatist philosopher William James considers that knowledge about reality can be attained in two different ways:

> There are two ways of knowing things, knowing them immediately, and knowing them conceptually or representatively. Although such things as the white paper before your eyes can be known intuitively, most of the things we know, the tigers now in India, for example, or the scholastic system in philosophy are known only representatively and symbolically.[73]

These two ways that make possible the knowledge of things, an immediate and a conceptual or representative one, are, therefore, the result of either an immediate observation of an object which is present, or the result of a representational and conceptual rendition of an object which both reveals and demands a deferred reflection upon itself as object. In this latter mode of knowledge, an object is recreated in order to be seen mentally. This makes of imagination an important tool for outdoing the limitations of experience by making present something which is absent and, therefore, transcending the mere materiality with which objects can be considered. It is a process by which something real must be conceptualized and converted into a mindlike reality that will eventually become decodified so that it can be made real and present; present both in the temporal sense and in the sense of immediacy.

It is this second type of knowledge that is linked to the imaginative and the creative processes of art. This vision of knowledge considers both the mediated knowledge, and the type of knowledge that results from a slower, conscious and willing process of dealing with reality, one of reflection and thought. Both ways

73. William James, T*he Writings of William James*, New York, Modern Library, 1968, p. 155.

of contemplation can be present in art, nevertheless, it is the second one that is most characteristically present in art, since artistic fruition depends on the slowing down of perception that allows for reflection, a process that takes defamiliarization as one of its utensils.

In a way which is quite common in most novelists, Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night* 'steals' from reality a setting for his fictional story and, therefore, converts something which belongs to the empirical reality into something that passes on to belong to the fictional world. Not only does this typical conversion change the status of the setting into fiction but it does something even more important; the words of Orr also hint at something of a different nature. For instance, the apartment, in his mind, belongs to both worlds and, what is more important, the conversion of the apartment into a part of a fiction also seems to bring this, now fictive, apartment to the empirical reality. This is appropriately termed by Orr as "a state of double consciousness." The setting, the actual room from empirical reality, is described as an imaginary space, as something that was no longer present since it was part of fiction but still, and at the same time, was part of the empirical reality:

> I had stolen John's apartment for my story in the blue notebook, and when we got to Barrow Street and he opened the door to let us in, I had the strange, not altogether unpleasant feeling that I was entering an imaginary space, walking into a room that wasn't there. I had visited Trause's apartment countless times in the past, but now that I had spent several hours thinking about it in my own apartment in Brooklyn, peopling it with the invented characters of my story, it seemed to belong as much to the world of fiction as to the world of solid objects and flesh-and-blood human beings. Unexpectedly, this feeling didn't go away. If anything, it grew stronger as the night went on, and by the time the Chinese food arrived at eight-thirty, I was already beginning to settle into what I could have to call (for want of a better name) a state of double consciousness. I was both a part of what was going on around me and cut off from it, drifting freely in my mind as I imagined myself sitting

> at my desk in Brooklyn, writing about this place in the blue notebook, and sitting in a chair on the top floor of a Manhattan duplex, firmly anchored in my body, listening to what John and Grace were saying to each other and even adding some remarks of my own. It's not unusual for a person to be so preoccupied as to appear absent — but the point was that I wasn't absent. I was there, fully engaged in what was happening, and at the same time I wasn't there — for there wasn't an authentic there anymore. It was an illusory place that existed in my head, and that's where I was as well. In both places at the same time. In the apartment and in the story. In the story in the apartment that I was still writing in my head. (*ON*, pp. 25-6)

Yet, by using the expression "state of double consciousness," Orr conveys a state of awareness about the presence of both worlds, the real and the imaginary one in fiction, but also draws attention to his conscious attitude as a writer. For Orr, this also presupposes a blurring of both his sense of reality and fiction, both worlds seem to become life-like, indistinct and in communication.

The art of fiction makes it possible that things be present in some other way to that of empirical reality. Things belong to a different reality: they lose their reality and presence in the real world of empirical reality to acquire a different status that makes them belong to both worlds. As a result, we are dealing with the reality or the fictionality, or the truth or the falsity of literary words. Patricia Waugh,[74] in this respect, also assumes the middle ground by citing John Fowles suggestion in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* of a third way, that of considering fictional objects as "worlds as real as, but other than the world that is. Or was." We have to assume that this world is as real as the world that we consider real and we must take it as the real world by suspending our disbelief about this world.

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74. See, Patricia Waugh, M*etafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1984.

If, as previously stated, there is a porosity of reality and fiction towards each other's worlds, fiction is to be considered as part of a middle ground between two worlds, a middle ground in which reality penetrates fiction but fiction also enters reality. In so doing, both fiction and reality are made not only the carriers of truth but also part of truth. In relation to this, Waugh identifies what she terms as the creation / description paradox by which the ontological status of the fictive is explained as both being determined and existing by virtue of the fiction they —themselves— create. This can be considered as no other statement than the affirmation of the autonomy of art, of fiction, and at the same time constitutes the admission that language refers, and exists, in relation to its own system of signs. This sort of frame, a linguistic one, makes, for instance, of history something true in the realm of the context it creates for itself; the result is that all history is also some sort of fiction that justifies itself according to the rules it establishes for its own use.

Reality in the Womb of Time

From the point of view of history, it is with little difficulty that we may assume that reality exists because it has been conditioned or determined by past events and in this way the past is very much present. Or, conversely, we may assume some other perspective: the present is very much past. This brings to mind T. S. Eliot once again, especially this quote from the first lines of *Burnt Norton*:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present

> All time is unredeemable.
> What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present.[75]

This paradox of time contained in the affirmation that "in the circle the beginning and the end are common," Heraclitus and, as we have just seen, Eliot verify that there is no redemption from time, no liberation from the fact of being historical, there is no possible autonomy from the past, from the unstoppable train of events we know as consecutive time.

By stating that the present has been contained in the womb of the past and, thus, accepting the implication that the future is also determined by the past, time is reduced to some sort of synchronicity and is always present; the future is a possibility contained in the present. But, above all, what is of interest here is that both what was and what was not and might have been, the not real and not present but possible, occupy the same status as the real and present; reality is a possibility of the present. With the term present, if we are allowed to express it in this way, we refer to what is of here and now, or the immediate, but we can also refer to present by considering it as part of something that without having a physical entity or existence is felt as real, as being physically present before our eyes. It becomes evident that this quite resigned perspective of history is, therefore, a perspective which bears some correspondence with art and especially with the art of the narrative.

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75. T. S. Eliot, "The Four Quartets," *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, New York, Harcourt Brace & World, 1971, p. 117.

In narratives, obviously including those in the realm of fiction, the three states that rule their existence are recoverable in the present time of the work of fiction, which takes place as the narrative is actualized, in each reading. The idea of time and writing as an Heraclitean process, as a constant flow, is somehow softened in the narrative and a sense of unity of experience is obtained by the demarcation of time that the narrative presupposes. This unity of experience offered by fiction is achieved through the combination of the past, the present and the future; the borderlines between the three are not rigid and may become indistinct since they are no more than conceptual features that help organize reality and fiction.

The vision offered by Sidney Orr about time travel, when considering the script proposal for *The Time Machine,* expresses the consequences from a fictive point of view of the idea of synchronicity or, rather, the destruction of the idea of time as a linear progression through different discrete stages. It is a way of taking T. S. Eliot's notion a step further by giving people the possibility of changing the (dis)course of history at any time and changing the notion of history as narration of something past, static and immutable. The notion of time becomes warped. It is not just that the past affects the present and the future but that the present and future — for that matter — can affect the past in a movement of interaction:

> And if people from future generations could travel back and forth across the years and centuries, then both the past and the future would be filled with people who did not belong to the time they were visiting. In the end, all times would be tainted, thronged with interlopers and tourists from other ages, and once people from the future began to influence events in the past and people from the past began to influence events in the future, the nature of time would change. Instead of being continuous progression of discrete moments inching forward in one direction only, it would crumble into a vast, synchronistic blur. Simply put, as soon as one person began to travel in time, time as we know it would be destroyed. (*ON*, p. 104)

Reality is Fiction, Fiction Reality

Considering the capacity literature has of imitating reality, literature can therefore be deduced to have the capacity of creating the illusion of life-like reality. Quite simply, this illusion is dependent on showing things borrowed from reality and integrating them into a make-believe narrative. This action, of showing, is obviously an illusion that will depend on the narrative ability of the author who must communicate "in a manner which is detailed, precise, 'alive,' and in that way give more or less the *illusion of mimesis* — which is the only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral and written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitation."[76]

It is precisely this difficulty in creating the illusion of reality that occupies Marco Fogg's efforts at the beginning of his first literary quest. Fogg's quest is a matter of actually translating what is visual into language, of putting reality into words, of telling something so that it can be shown, and it is precisely in the gap resulting between reality and 'showing by telling' that the difficulty lies, as Fogg notes:

> The world enters us through our eyes, but we cannot make sense of it until it descends into our mouths. I began to appreciate how great that distance was, to understand how far a thing must travel in order to get from the one place to the other. In actual terms, it was no more than two or three inches, but considering how many accidents and losses could occur along the way, it might just as well have been a journey from the earth to the moon. (*MP*, p. 122)

This is, nevertheless, one of the crucial philosophical problems with which philosophy of language is confronted. Ludwig Wittgenstein

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76. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980, p. 164.

considered it to be the 'cardinal problem in philosophy.' It is a problem that makes us aware of the tension between what can be uttered by words and a reality or, more to the point, experience of reality which is not only difficult to express in words but which is actually beyond verbal expression and may produce in the end just silence. The philosophical problem posed by these things beyond expression, and beyond thought, is clearly acknowledged by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he states that there are two ways of dealing with empirical reality 'what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by propositions — i.e. by language — (and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown (*gezeigt*).[77] This constitutes a matter that is intimately connected with that of cognition, once we accept that we know reality through its interpretation or translation into words.

The difficulties in finding the adequate language for literature, seen by Derrida as an act that resembles that of "innocent" Adamic naming, are also extraordinarily well perceived by the narrator of *Leviathan*, Peter Aaron, in a wearisome and painful recollection of his experience of writing, especially so if we compare it to the naturalness and ease with the medium he is able to sense in his friend Benjamin Sachs, for whom reality is always accompanied by a matching word:

> I have always been a plodder, a person who anguishes and struggles over each sentence, and even on my best days I do no more than inch along, crawling on my belly like a man lost in the desert. The smallest word is surrounded by acres of silence for me, *and even after I manage to get that word down on the page, it seems to sit there like a mirage, a speck of doubt glimmering in the sand. Language has never been accessible to me* in the way that it was for Sachs. I'm shut off from my own thoughts, *trapped in a no-man's-land between feeling and articulation*, and no matter how hard I try to express myself,

77. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, Ed. G. H. von Wright, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, p. 71 (Letter to Bertrand Russell, August 19, 1919).

> I can rarely come up with more than a confused stammer. Sachs never had any of these difficulties. *Words and things matched up for him, whereas for me they are constantly breaking apart, flying off in a hundred different directions.* I spend most of my time picking up the pieces and gluing them back together, but Sachs never had to stumble around like that, hunting through garbage dumps and trash bins, wondering if the hadn't fit the wrong pieces next to each other. His uncertainties were of a different order, but no matter how hard life became for him in other ways, words were never his problem. The act of writing was remarkably free of pain for him, and when he was working well, he could put words down on the page as fast as he could speak them. It was a curious talent, and because Sachs himself was hardly even aware of it, he seemed to live in a state of perfect innocence. Almost like a child, I sometimes thought, like a prodigious child playing with his toys.[78] [My italics]

The excerpt quoted above can actually be considered as an admission or, more likely, a confession which probably gives expression to Paul Auster's own difficulties; difficulties we have come to know about in some of his interviews in which Auster pronounces and stresses his meticulousness and his painstaking efforts trying to get his sentences right. As already mentioned, we are told by Auster in one of his interviews that the gap between reality and language must be filled, up to a point, in order to create the illusion of reality. Then, for Auster, once this gap is closed, there must be consideration of the fact that this second reality has undergone an estrangement from reality: the real things, those from the empirical reality, are converted in their nature, as we have already seen, and become something else. The reality of our sensorial perception, whenever it becomes part of fiction, changes its nature and becomes fictive too, because of the particular framing provided by fiction. People, events and places are recontextualized and,

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78. Paul Auster, *Leviathan*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993. p. 50. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as L followed by page number.

therefore, constitute a second nature or, according to Waugh, an 'alternative world:'

> The people and events here may 'match' those in the real world, but these people and events are recontextualized in the act of writing a history. Their meanings and identities always change with the shift in context. So history, although ultimately a material reality (a presence), is shown to exist always within 'textual' boundaries. History, to this extent, is also 'fictional', also a set of 'alternative worlds.'[79]

We have already mentioned the evidence that there is a paradox in the use of language: the description of the world of experience is dependent on the use of language, and therefore our perception of reality is conditioned by the use of language which defines and shapes reality itself and, ultimately, affects our capacity of knowing about it. This observation constitutes the basis for the well-known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by which language is considered as effectively molding the thought of its users and conditioning their perception of reality. A vision which coincides with that of philosopher Martin Heidegger in considering language as the 'house of being.' According to Edward Sapir:

> Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projections of its implicit expectations into the field of experience.[80]

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79. Patricia Waugh, M*etafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1984, p. 106.

80. Edward Sapir, "Conceptual Categories of Primitive Languages," *Science*, 1931, p. 578.

If our perception of the world is dependent on language, and our mind, as we have just seen, is also shaped by language, it appears that Sidney Orr's fear of the written word in *Oracle Night* is not very far from these two visions about how language actually determines experience, the perception experience, and even the future. Sidney Orr's perception of the world of fiction seems to affect the factual world; a blurring of the frontiers between both worlds seems to have been effected, the characters of his fictive world belong to both worlds. We may consider this 'double consciousness' also in relation to a different sense, as part of the blurring to which fiction submits to the world of reality, something connatural with the 'suspension of disbelief,' an action equivalent to being aware of dealing with a different sort of reality which is in many ways grounded in the empirical reality of the so-called 'common sense world.' The importance of the word and the written word in the Judeo-Christian tradition, should be noted here. In the *Book of Genesis*, we are told that the word preceded the creation of the universe. The word, thus, precedes time and creates reality.

We can, therefore, state that human beings come into being through language which at the same time also reflects their own perception and knowledge of reality. Events and facts come into being through the discourse which objectifies them; this constitutes an affirmation that first and foremost stresses that reality is but a representation, a representation that depends on its communication in order to be considered as such in a community of speakers.

The action of suspending our disbelief towards the world of fiction is one of the necessary actions in the fruition of the literary work of art. *City of Glass* presents, by the hand of a character whose name is Paul Auster, a 'speculative essay' on the dangers of the make-believe, most particularly that of assuming fiction as

reality by believing in the veracity and truthfulness of fiction in the world of commonsense experience. This danger of assuming the fictional as the real and empirical presupposes a lack of a 'double consciousness' in regarding artistic expression. In relation to the operation of suspension of disbelief we must not forget that, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge mentions in *Biographia Literaria*,[81] it is to be considered as a volitional act, *a willing suspension of disbelief*, which properly understood as such presupposes not only intention but also a full realization of what this action entails as a departure in relation to the so-called world of the common sense. It seems necessary, therefore, to point out that the *double consciousness* concept we have used when talking about the position of the writer in relation to his created world is very much present in Coleridge's definition. It is also a state of mind, an awareness, in relation to life and fiction that must be replicated in the reader or receiver of the artwork: the reader has to be aware of the world of commonsense experience and its rules so that he can translate things from one world to the other. This ability of the reader will determine to a great extent the fruition of the literary text but it will also, and more importantly, determine the goal of cognition also related to fiction.

Metaphorical Weight

The two fundamental features of the fruition of the artwork, *suspension of disbelief* and *double consciousness*, have to be dealt with in relation to the use of metaphor. We also have to bear in mind that the world of literature is, in its nature, essentially metaphoric and,

81. Samuel T. Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," in *English Critical Texts*, Ed. D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 191.

likewise, this metaphorical status within the realm of literature, in its creation and description of its particular reality, is not different from other descriptions of reality, and not just history as we have seen. It affects other descriptions, such as the scientific ones, since what both do is to present a world of hypothesis. Admittedly, any metaphor consists of the concurrence of two entities as Earl MacCormac points out:

> A metaphor results from the juxtaposition of the old and the new. Our familiarity with the old usage allows us to recognize the terms as meaningful while the new usage suggests a different way of comprehending its meanings. If we find the new meaning significant, then we drop the older meaning associated with the term.[82]

This tension between the 'tenor,' or underlying idea, and the imagined nature or 'vehicle' is the main feature in all metaphoric uses, either literary or scientific, and must be related to the term 'double consciousness' in what presupposes an awareness about what the metaphorical process tries to carry out and accomplishes.

In *City of Glass* it is evidenced that the use of *Don Quixote* as a tenor or, rather, as a root metaphor, provides a road map for a whole set of interpretations about *City of Glass*. The initials of Daniel Quinn are not merely coincidental with those of the chivalric hero, since Quinn is actually involved in a Quixotic quest: that of discovering the answers to the romantic questions of whence, what and where in relation to his being. This does not seem to be the case for Don Quixote's deranged and sufficiently acknowledged attitude of taking fiction as reality, a consequence of the dismissal of *double consciousness*. But we also have a different sort of 'danger,' which

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82. Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion*, Durham, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1976, p. 36.

belongs to the orchestrator and master of the narrative; a danger that is rooted in the 'bewitchment' that the stories may exercise over their own creators and not just their readers. In *City of Glass* we are offered by a writer-character by the name of Paul Auster, a speculative or 'imaginative' essay on Cervantes's *opera prima*. The questions set on the dangers of the make-believe in Auster's essay may at first solely point to the erroneous assumption of fictive reality as empirical reality and, therefore, to the disregard of the particular frame of fiction by which the truth claims of fiction are not to be directly taken to the commonsense world. We are told that Cervantes himself had a passion for those books of chivalry — he "devoured them" — and we are also told that "in some sense, Don Quixote was just a stand-in for himself, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra."[83] These considerations lead us to ponder the following relationships existing between Daniel Quinn and the hero of his novels, Max Work: Work had become his "interior brother" and his "comrade in solitude." He, Daniel Quinn, lived in the world through the imaginary Work, his alter ego, and had vanished progressively from it to give existence to a character who was aggressive, quick-tongued and always at home; a real hard-boiled detective who "walked through the mayhem of his adventures with ease and indifference that never failed to impress his creator." The narrator concludes this list of qualities of his hero by affirming that Quinn "had in him to be Work if he only chose to be."[84]

It becomes evident that Daniel Quinn, a writer by trade, is bewitched by the world of the make-believe he himself has created and wants, as an author, to experience what may be considered as the ultimate experience for a writer: the experience of being able

83. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 98.

84. *Ibid*., p. 9.

to get a taste of the life he depicts in his own mystery books, after innumerable hours of solitary work and isolation. In this respect, Paul Auster mentions in an interview:

> Sometimes I have the impression that in writing a novel one becomes an actor. One penetrates into another character, another imaginary being, and ends up becoming this other character and this other imaginary being. It is for this reason, without doubt, that I have had so much fun working with the actors of Smoke and Blue in the Face. The writer who writes stories and the actor who acts both take part in the same effort: to penetrate into imaginary beings, to give them a body and life-likeness, to impart on them weight and reality.[85]

Stepping into the realm of fiction does not need to appear in our eyes as too farfetched since in *City of Glass* we have also been told that the writer and "the detective are interchangeable." Quinn wants to see the world through the eyes of his own creation and takes a leap forward, a leap of faith, at the first opportunity he has. Quite to the literary point, Quinn is an author who wants to sense what it is like to 'live in the pages of a book.' Paul Auster, as we have already pointed out, admittedly thought about using as an epigram for *City of Glass*: 'And it also means something to talk of "living in the pages of a book"' by no other than language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein,[86] as the subtitle to *City of Glass*. This epigram not used provides a clue for an interesting reading about *City of Glass*; a reading which departs little from the "imaginative reading" of the "speculative essay" since we understand that both *City of Glass* and *Don Quixote* allude to questions which are not fully formulated

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85. Interview with Gerard de Cortanze, "Le monde est dans ma tête, mon corps est dans le monde," *Magazine Littéraire*, 338, Décembre 1995, pp. 18-25.

86. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 110.

and demand the participation of our insight. In relation to Quinn, whether or not he acts as a stand-in for Paul Auster, the empirical author, does not seem to be relevant, it is a fact that Quinn is experiencing his existence in an adventure over which he has no control, an adventure in which Quinn feels entrapped and where he records what is happening to him and, accordingly, feels that he exists in the pages of his own notebook. It is through this exercise of recording that he becomes aware of himself. Quinn's writing and our reading is a process of penetrating the reality of his record; it is a progressive movement with an initial movement started by assuming somebody else's personality, and creating the fiction for himself, that of being a private detective, assuming therefore all the fiction of the detective work.

Quinn penetrates the realm of fiction first through an irresistible attraction to the admirable antics of his hero and, then, by assuming the role of a private investigator and finally, by assuming for himself a deeper involvement with the narrative and consequently by finding himself as part of one narrative; we may end up considering that Quinn ends up considering life as a narrative. His life at the Stillman's is reduced to a room in which time is counted by the pages left in the notebook; if witticism is allowed, we may say that it is a truly 'literary' life. No doubt, this is a way of testing the gullibility of the readers and their involvement in the narration. Certainly, Quinn as a reader has been carried away by the adventure to an extreme position. In the end, this is quite possibly the reason why Quinn does not appreciate Auster's sense of delight in the explanation of Don Quixote. Fiction and reality are merged in Quinn and he owes his being to their interaction in the circumstances of the 'story.' Quinn enters a different dimension of being — gains knowledge about the artifices of the make-believe: he is a character who assumes for himself the fictive role of detective for his own life and is seduced

by the adventure of the unknown by giving himself up blindly to the adventure of the case.

Upon entering reality as a fiction, Quinn starts questioning the life engendered by the 'story' he is in. As soon as Daniel Quinn steps into fiction, by first taking up an identity of a private investigator, he becomes part of fiction assuming for himself a life of make-believe. After a while there is a point of no return in the story and Quinn cannot himself get rid of the past chain of events that have marked the progress of the story. These past events now constitute 'the history' to the story, which has placed him in the story in the particular way he is relating to it. It becomes evident that the linear succession engendered by time, and the writing that the story presupposes, is something from which Quinn cannot escape. He has lost his bearings as much as Don Quixote, not in the reality of the commonsense existence but in the fiction with which he has collaborated. A fiction which, he has come to perceive, he has certainly not created despite assuming a different identity and over which he has no command. The identity of a private investigator, who apparently does not exist as such in the story, has taken control of him. Since he is questioning the story from inside, the narrator is right to suggest that Quinn is unable to grasp the nature of Auster's pleasure when Auster points out that Cervantes in *Don Quixote* was conducting an experiment. This fact provides a new strength and meaning in the way that it indicates that there must be some mysterious entity controlling Quinn's reality; somebody we may term an *auctor absconditus*, an author who is absent and hidden but who, nevertheless, makes himself be felt as part of the mystery of the novel:

> He wanted to test the gullibility of his fellow men. Would it be possible he wondered, to stand up before the world and with the utmost conviction spew out lies and nonsense? Would it be possible to persuade others to agree with what he said, even though they did not believe him? In other words, to what

> extent would people tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement? The answer is obvious, isn't it? To any extent. (*CG*, p. 100)

Reading, after all, is an act of faith on the part of the reader who must in full belief trust the reliability of the teller. The story must pass as a fact, as data of the empirical world, and not simply as an act of mere creation by one individual. At the same time the readers must tolerate what Auster considered as blasphemies in order to be amused. The tension existing between the writer and the reader is thus put under control or dissolved: a tension which stems from the logical imbalance provoked by the control and possession of information on the part of the writer, a third party who objectifies reality and apparently liberates fiction from the idea of source and origin. Borrowing a simile from T. S. Eliot[87] we can say that the reader is distracted by this scheme and the author is free to act. This is what Stillman Sr. does by creating Henry Dark, in order to back up his ideas and present his 'created' — fictional — facts as real.

As a character who is a detective — and in this quality also as a reader, if only, of clues — Quinn has been exposed to a reading of *Don Quixote* that goes beyond the mere words that tell its story. A reading that heralds *City of Glass,* and the adventure in which Quinn is inscribed, as something other than just a straight account of a series of events that make up a story; its meaning must be searched for beyond the words that reveal the story. Quinn has willingly suffered a process of continual self-sacrifice and he has given himself up to the story; he has suffered a continual extinction of personality as a character and comes face to face with the limits

87. T. S. Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, compares the effect of meaning in a poem to that of the distraction that meat produces on guard dogs when led to eat it by a burglar.

of his quest; a quest that rapidly becomes focused on the inability to pursue a rational line for the explanation and solution of a case, or story, which cannot be told in full. Daniel Quinn sacrificed his ego in this story not as a writer but as a prime agent for an author who later gets hold of his red notebook and edits his notes and makes sympathetic comments about his existence:

> 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. (*CG*, p. 132)

This is the end, but at the same time, constitutes a new beginning for Quinn. Marked by this change of focus, Quinn's quest will, in his actions, take on an ontological footing, and he will not concern himself with the solution of the case for he has now become engrossed in uncovering the true nature of the case from which everything has its origin. Quinn, in his quest finds more questions, questions that remind us of the power of literature to formulate questions. We can properly say, as Roland Barthes observed: "the power of literature is at once its very impotence to answer the world's questions and its power to ask real questions, total questions, whose answer is not somehow presupposed in the very form of a question."[88]

Quinn's only link to reality within the story he lives in comes from the imaginative essay on *Don Quixote*, which is a direct reference to the general possibilities of the novel. This essay brings about the possibility of holding up a mirror to reality and attaining, in this way, in philosophical terms, a state of awareness of being which also entails the possibility of hinting at the multiple relationships

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88. Roland Barthes, "Literature Today" in *Barthes: Critical Essays*, Trans. R. Howard, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1972, p. 156.

between the different entities present in a novel. Thus, we are told, that the Auster as a character in *City of Glass* is not the 'author;' that the author as such is not in the novel and that he has, according to the narrator, "behaved badly throughout" and also:

> It's someone else, an anonymous narrator who comes in on the last page and walks off with Quinn's red notebook. So, the Auster on the cover and the Auster in the story are not the same person. They're the same and yet not the same.[89]

Despite the fact that Auster in *City of Glass* is just a character like any other, we cannot but feel sympathy with the narrator and think about the feelings of dejection felt by other literary figures, such as *Frankenstein,* when abandoned by his creator. This would make us think of creators as evil, especially so when they seem to be throwing the dice and hiding their hands. We can thus think of the solitude of the Modern and Postmodern man when dealing with the questions posed by existence.

Abandoned and released from the tension with his writer, Quinn is alone to find his own answers; at the same time the ontological quest is made evident when Quinn disappears in the story as the story proceeds to its stage of open-endedness. Indeed, as we have already stated at the beginning, following Paul Auster clues, in mystery novels, no circumference can be drawn until the book comes to its end. And we have to make clear that we have been warned as readers by the narrator that there are inaccuracies; inexactitudes that make us consider the version of the narrator just as a hypothesis, by someone whom we had trusted from the beginning to be a 'reliable narrator.' Someone we had thought had first-hand knowledge, that of

89. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 137.

an omniscient narrator, and not just the knowledge of someone who acts, seemingly, as editor of a notebook. This circumstance leaves us, the readers, questioning the book as much as Quinn is questioning the story and the nature of his existence in it:

> 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 interpretation. The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand. (*CG*, p. 132)

Tension with the Rules

We should return now to T. S. Eliot and his *Tradition and the Individual Talent*; not just because Eliot defends a continual self-sacrifice and continual extinction of personality in art, but in order to move it from the expression of personal feelings and to tackle the expression of higher values. We see Eliot's essay as most valuable in relation to what it inherently states about the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships the work of art establishes, and the bearing this may have in the scope of literature. Once more, we must insist that in *City of Glass* the narrator informs us about a peculiar relation of Daniel Quinn's mystery stories: "What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories."[90] In this statement two things become clear: Quinn's novels are closer to other novels than to the world of reality and they are not open to question the world directly but to question the world through fiction and, if we will, tradition. From this stance, stems a second feature of Paul

90. Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 7.

Auster's novels: the paradigm of mystery novels has not been left intact. The paradigm will be challenged and subverted to include other things, just in the same manner that we have indicated that Quinn is liberated and opened to the questions of the world and becomes a Postmodern-day knight by becoming a private eye, the Postmodern mystery novel is opened to questioning the novel itself: the world of the novel, and the world of commonplace reality in a philosophical way.

At the onset of his errand, Daniel Quinn's vision about novels does not coincide with the one that Paul Auster expresses in his interviews, one which is concerned with what they state about the world of life. Quinn's vision of novels is one that takes the above-mentioned syntagmatic approach: their relation to other novels, their relation to fiction as a system. If, in the 'imaginative essay' that Paul Auster as a character presents to Quinn, it is made clear that one of the dangers of the make-believe is that of taking fiction for reality. Auster, the empirical writer of *City of Glass*, considers that writing is to be concerned about the problems of life and not about other fiction. *Don Quixote* is perceived as a great book in this precise sense, because through fiction it deals with the problems of the world of life. This constitutes one of the keys for understanding *City of Glass*. Both *Don Quixote* and *City of Glass,* through their ontological new perspectives about the relation between fiction and reality, relate to the big philosophical questions of life. Thus, we may grasp and reach the metaphysical quality of both the Knight Errant and the Private Detective now to be seen on the same plane. And we can also consider the projection of both authors, Cervantes and Auster, in their works.

One of the dangers of the so-called make-believe is that it can sometimes be an escape from the problems of life. Mystery fiction can be seen as a dead, non-productive metaphor, if its stories are

far from the real problems that affect mankind. The same can be said about the chivalric genre: when Cervantes started writing *Don Quixote*, genres then encapsulated their stories in loyal obedience to the paradigm to which they belonged. However, what both Cervantes and Auster do is to subvert the genre in its obedience to the set traditional paradigms, challenging their mastery, their rules. If we take the hint from Auster and make an 'imaginative reading, of the same sort that the Auster character of *City of Glass* made for *Don Quixote*, we may deduce that Daniel Quinn is a stand-in for Auster; the same as Quixote in relation to Cervantes who loved chivalric adventures and wanted to liberate them from dependency on a paradigm that had killed them as a worthwhile genre. Quinn is taken to be a stand-in for the empirical author, Auster, who also passes on to inhabit the fiction in a questioning mood from a position of the same 'double consciousness' that Orr experiences in *Oracle Night*.

Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger share a vision of language that is best expressed by the latter's consideration of language as 'the house of being.' It is precisely through language that Quinn becomes aware of the value of, and of the true relations he maintains with, his surrounding medium. Language reveals itself as fundamental in reaching self-awareness as a tool which defines and delimits the self and the sense of selfhood. Language can ultimately exercise unexpected control to the point that, according to Heidegger, it is language that speaks, or spells out, man. Under this perspective, in their nature the characters of novels are very similar to human beings in that both are linguistic constructs. Having stated this, we should cast a different glance at novels with fantastic contents that challenge our capacity for accepting the make-believe.

Avowedly, Auster focused his *New York Trilogy* on the borderlines between what is considered the real and the imaginary and what is considered to be outrageous and, therefore, a product

of madness. Quinn's entrance into the world of fiction is paralleled in *Oracle Night* by writer Martin Frost's affair, truly an extreme infatuation, with his creative muse: truly a presence or, better, a character of his own novel. Frost tries in a desperate way to bring her into the world of empirical reality by means of the only possible way, by breaking the conventions of fiction and of common-sense reality. This challenge to the set rules of fiction is an attempt to establish a link between the two worlds and probe to what extent fiction, the words of fiction, may alter the words of reality, the ones that describe the empirical reality.

This duplicity can also be considered in a wider perspective, the perspective created by the use of language when translating non-linguistic data into linguistic data. This is a perspective that necessarily considers both realities in their mutual relationship and which evidences the importance of this connection, if any such translation is to succeed. In the end, it has to do with the communication of meaning and the granting of perspective on that primordial object which was the basis of the translation:

> Meaning itself is perspective-bound… In order to understand verbal meaning… the interpreter has to submit to a double perspective. He preserves his own standpoint and, at the same time, imaginatively realizes the standpoint of the speaker. This is a characteristic of all verbal intercourse.[91]

Both ends of communication are always to be considered, for in the transmission of meaning a 'double perspective' is required, one that also takes into contemplation the receiver, or possible receivers, but above all it must consider a perspective on the non-linguistic data which is at the originating end of this so-called translation.

91. Eric D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967, p. 135.

In literature, because of its mostly metaphorical nature in taking one world for another, the relationship evidenced by the 'double consciousness' is a necessity in order to really effect this perception of one world for the another. The similarity, or ground for comparison, which is the fruit of the observation of one object, has to be somehow present in the resulting comparison, at the risk of not being able to communicate other than literal meanings, and any meanings only understandable by the author. That is, some degree of external reference must be kept at all moments, as an aid to stress awareness about what is being carried out. In literature, this, the "double consciousness," is the awareness of the coalescence of the two realities in the mind of the author, of the reality of fiction and the reality of the empirical world. In its turn, this consciousness must always be replicated in the mind of the reader.

Not only fiction is dependent on metaphors: the twentieth century has stressed the metaphorical basis of all knowledge, especially under the influence of Nietzsche for whom the illusory character of truth stands out:

> What is therefore truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions, of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect senses…[92]

Nietzsche is prefiguring the impossibility of accessing absolute truth which was to be evidenced in the field of the so-called hard sciences especially after Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Einstein's theory of relativity. Knowledge presupposes the mediation

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92. Friedrich Nietzsche,"On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense," in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Ed. O. Levy and Trans. M. Magge, New York, Gordon Press, 1974, p. 180.

of language in relation to non-linguistic data. Knowledge, in its relation to language and empirical reality, is essentially metaphorical; metaphors provide an arbitrary structure which organizes the chaos of reality leading to its interpretation by the linguistic creation which ultimately composes facts.[93] What these notions lead to is a displacement of the idea of truth in favor of the idea of 'usefulness' or, even, performance[94] since what is important is quite simply the use of words for specific ends. This fact puts forward the idea that reality is *ab initio* representation. Thus, Henry Dark in *City of Glass* becomes useful as the carrier of an explanation for Stillman's essay, at the same time that Dark protects the author from exposing an outrageous or disruptive theory. Furthermore, Henry Dark puts forward an explanatory hypothesis of reality. Stillman, in his turn, uses Dark in order to protect himself for dishonestly engaging with 'fiction' in a context, that of scientific research, that should be characterized by its truthfulness and trustworthiness. This constitutes a perversion as much as that of Martin Frost's challenge to the rules of fiction, in his attempt of engaging 'empirical reality' with a character of his own creation.

> "You see, there never was any such person as Henry Dark. I made him up. He's an invention." (*CG*, p. 80)

As a cover, as protection, Henry Dark will help the author that gave him existence to elude the contingencies of criticism in the empirical world. It works as a (linguistic) resort that helps claiming truth. At the same time, the creation of facts is underlined as a

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93. In relation to Nietzsche his consideration of knowledge "as an army of metaphors" is well known and also that facts result from the direct use of language.

94. This is one of the key points of the Postmodern according to Lyotard who stresses the idea of performance.

possibility that has the power to affect the empirical world by breaching the borderlines of reality into fiction:

> I needed him, you see. I had certain ideas at the time that were too dangerous and controversial. So I pretended they had come from someone else. It was a way of protecting myself. (*CG*, p. 80)

The creation of Henry Dark, also, presupposes the submission of authorial power to a character who passes on to assume the responsibility over Stillman's 'dangerous' theory. A procedure that is repeated once again in relation to *City of Glass* which presents a Paul Auster who is not the author, and then a character — Quinn — who is not the one who is made to assume responsibility over the words in the red notebook, since the "story" is made to depend on the ability of the anonymous narrator who edits the notebook and presents it as *City of Glass*. A plot for verisimilitude, no doubt, but also a way of playing hide-and-seek with the reader who senses chance, in a realm where everything is not really provoked by chance since the writer has always been in control, or so we are made to believe from a rational perspective of creativity.

From the always present and persistent position of direct engagement with fiction and all its possibilities in Auster's novels —a position evidenced by the maxim running through *City of Glass*: "living in the pages of book"— we can go on to observe this engagement as a commitment that renders the novelist hero of *Leviathan* silent so that he can become politically more active, in commonsense reality, making evident an apparent rejection of the values of literature. Benjamin Sachs is a character endowed with all the traits that make a writer excel. We are even told by an identified narrator, Peter Aaron, that Sachs was always at home in the world of words, they came to him naturally to the extent

that he was 'like a child playing with his toys.' This image of quasi-primeval innocence of a man at peace with himself and his art is reversed when he finds out that "inventing stories was a sham." After this change of attitude his "re-encounter" with his book *The New Colossus,* becomes, in his eyes, nothing but the cruel "portrait of the artist as a young moron." Sachs decides to take action into his own hands and starts by taking on the work initiated by Dimaggio, a university professor turned activist or, rather, terrorist. Sachs believes that actions make the difference he had never made while writing; a difference that provides him with objectives and a sense and purpose in life, a personal revolution that provides him with a new beginning and a second chance to rebuild life:

> It was a miraculous confluence, a startling conjunction of motives and ambitions. I had found the unifying principle, and this one idea would bring all the broken pieces of myself together. For the first time in my life, I would be whole. (*L*, p. 228)

This effort in reconstructing Sachs's life is paralleled by Peter Aaron's, effort to 'reconstruct' his friend's life, from data gathered from different sources, by putting it into book form in what aims to be a true account, despite some acknowledged limitations that make the narrator feel hard-pressed for time:

> I have nothing to rely on but my own memories. I'm not saying that these memories should be doubted, that there is anything false or tainted about the things I do not know about Sachs, but I don't want to present this book as something it's not. There is nothing definitive about it. It's not a biography or an exhaustive psychological portrait, and even though Sachs confided a great deal to me over the years of our friendship, I don't claim to have more than a partial understanding of who he was. *I want to tell the truth about him, to set down these memories as honestly as I can, but I can't dismiss the possibility that I'm wrong, that the truth is quite different from what I imagine it to be.* (*L*, p. 22) [My italics]

Nevertheless, and in order to set a firm understanding about the narrative, this acknowledgement by Aaron is preceded by a quite disquieting Marco Polo — like statement as far as truth claims go:

> I can only speak about the things I know, the things I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears. Except for Fanny, it's possible that I was closer to Sachs than anyone else, but that doesn't make me an expert on the details of his life. (*L*, p. 22)

We are face-to-face with a narrator who is reduced to a mere collector of facts and figments of his memory which may end up being not quite trustworthy. Aaron tells us that he does not know everything. Again, we can see that this narrator will tell, and at the same time, not tell the whole truth. Aaron's task is to produce a narrative that neutralizes the official version, that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation:

> In other words, the whole time I'm here in Vermont writing this story, they'll be busy writing their own story. It will be my story, and once they've finished it, they'll know as much about me as I do myself.

The necessity of this narrative evidences not an avowed powerfulness of the written word in setting reality down as something irrefutable but, on the contrary, the fact that any reality proclaimed by the narrative mode has to contend with other realities of the same kind. The *Leviathan* of the novel would be, therefore, the multiple monster-like made-up narratives that form the national self of any country, and most especially when these narratives become a myth of ecstatic metaphorical value without any power to provoke the tension of dialogical exchange.

In the America that has lost its soul, it is in a movement towards political action, and therefore, a movement that creates tension, that Sachs finds his soul and his purpose in life. But more than that, Sachs affirms himself as an individual who departs from the indistinct mass

of those who believe in the 'stories' that explain reality. We must not forget that Sachs loved the ironies of history; neither must we forget that he was a writer, a builder of, so to speak, self-contained or self-reliant stories. And, it is precisely in his awareness and treatment of history as a story, or *metanarrative*, that we must place his finding of a 'unifying principle' for himself. We are told that Sachs was "great for turning facts into metaphors" so much so that the narrator admits: "I could never be quite sure how seriously he took this game, but he played it often, and at times it was almost as if he were unable to stop himself." Sachs, in our understanding, had gained access to a different reading of history: we are eventually told that he "plays with the facts" because he has found the essence running the operation of those facts, of the world, of the empirical reality. For Sachs this is the first step towards a full commitment with the world, a commitment that assumes the construction of reality as any other fiction. Sachs's stance presupposes a full understanding of the nature of reality, again, as a metaphor. However, it is also a position of power given by knowledge of reality, a knowledge expressed by the awareness inherent in the use of the word irony:

> Sachs loved these ironies, the vast follies and contradictions of history, the way in which facts were constantly turning themselves on their head. By gorging himself on those facts, he was able to read the world as though it were a work of the imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real. I could never be quite sure how seriously he took this game, but he played it often, and at times it was almost as if he were unable to stop himself. The business about his birth was part of this same compulsion. On the one hand, it was a form of gallows humor but it was also an attempt to define who he was, a way of implicating himself in the horrors of his own time. (*L*, p. 24)

By the rejection of the world of the given, the world made up by grand narratives, Sachs is able to find himself. Political activism

provides him with a *raison d'être* in a country where *freedom can be dangerous*. America had lost its north but Sachs, in individualizing himself, finds his soul and, at the same time, discovers he has a new mission to carry out, a mission in which he will be truthful to his principles and where he can really make a difference. Sachs, once revitalized by his enlightenment, is able to take the reins of his destiny and act as a champion for the recovery of the past values, the return to the political roots of America which means that his return is nothing else than an attempt to travel back in time. Sachs becomes an American Adam, pioneering in the world of post-industrial society for a reversal of everything that had gone wrong with the American dream and, most particularly, he has become a champion of individual rights:

> I was no longer bewitched. I felt inspired, invigorated, cleansed. Almost like a man who had found religion. Like a man who had heard the call. The unfinished business of my life suddenly ceased to matter. I was ready to march out into the wilderness and spread the word, ready to begin all over again. (*L*, p. 228)

In a profound sort of involvement that resembles, as we are told, a spiritual experience, Sachs, has reached a higher degree of self-awareness. Without any doubt this is one of the concessions to the romantic spirit of Henry David Thoreau which lingers in the pages of *Leviathan* by means of his book *Civil Disobedience*. In *Leviathan* we are told that Thoreau was Sachs's model; a model brought and recovered from the past which constitutes an exaltation of individuality in the face of an advancing and comprehensive power of government. *Civil Disobedience* presents a program, for what can be considered even today, radical political action, a program which is clearly emphasized in its final lines:

> There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.[95]

In this indebtedness to Transcendentalism, knowledge for Sachs comes as a spiritual matter; it is the self-awareness of his involvement with the surrounding reality that leads him to the pursuit of self-realization which, as we have seen, is translated into political activism of an extreme kind. Sachs wants to become an actor in the world of reality; he stops writing in order to influence reality more directly and, maybe, more conclusively in defense of those much idealized and mythologized goals for which America as an idea stands for. Most visibly these are the ideals of self-government, liberty and justice, we are told. No doubt, Paul Auster writing this novel at the beginning of a conservative surge in the 1980's played with the idea of the powerlessness of the writer to effect any decisive change of course in the political arena. But for Auster, the writing of novels, or the use of the writer's skills, and political activity, are two different things and are not to be mixed. Writing has a different sort of approach, one not rooted in the abstract ideological involvement but one which acts through the concrete and down-to-earth realities and stresses "the dignity and importance of the individual;" literature must touch the individual:

> Literature is something else altogether. I believe that it's dangerous for novelists or poets to entangle themselves directly with politics in their work. I'm not saying that we don't all have a right and a need and sometimes a duty to speak out as citizens, but the value of fiction… is that it's about the individual, the dignity and importance of the individual. Once you start dealing in ideas that are too large or too abstract, you can't make art that will touch anyone,

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95. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, New York, Signet Classics-New American Library, 1974, p. 240.

> and then it's valueless. No matter how angry I am right now, for example, I believe my job as a writer is to stick to my guns and keep writing my little stories.[96]

It is evident that, for Auster, fiction has a pedagogical approach: that of holding a mirror up to reality and drawing attention to reality in a different way from that with which it is ordinarily perceived. According to Paul Auster, fictions, or stories, carry out the fundamental task of providing room for reflection and making sense of the world; they are creations that obey a human natural disposition to interact with the world and this alone constitutes the 'usefulness' of its truth claims:

> In the long run, I suppose, I tend to think of myself more as storyteller than a novelist. I believe that stories are the fundamental food for the soul. We can't live without stories. In one form or another, everybody is living on them from the age of two until their death. People don't necessarily have to read novels to satisfy their need for stories. They watch television or read comic books or go to the movies. In whatever form they get them, these stories are crucial. It's through stories that we struggle to make sense of the world. This is what keeps me going — the justification for spending my life locked up in a little room, putting worlds on paper. The world won't collapse if I never write another book. But in the end, *I don't think of it as an entirely useless activity. I'm part of the great human enterprise of trying to make sense of what we're doing here in the world. There are so many moments of questioning why you do it and what the purpose of it is — it's important to remember that it's not for nothing.* This is about the only thing I've ever come up with that makes any sense.[97] [My italics]

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96. John Reed in conversation with Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Rail*, August/September 2003: http://thebrooklynrail.org/books/sept03/auster.html

97. Conversation with Mark Irwin, *Denver Quarterly*: http://www.paulauster.co.uk/denver quarterly.html

This vision of literature coincides with Milan Kundera's[98] appeal for thought in the novel, as one of the fundamental constitutive ingredients of the elixir of life to be prescribed for the prevention of the death of the novel. It is an appeal that does not consist of the transformation of the novel into philosophy but of the "marshalling around the novel all the means that can illuminate man's being;"[99] an ingredient that has always made up the life-blood of the novel since its beginnings by the hand of Cervantes, Stern or Swift.

Metaphorical Tension

In opposition to the assumed views proclaimed by logical positivism, Earl MacCormac expresses how metaphors also represent a fundamental device for explanatory purposes, when used by the hard sciences, which had traditionally been considered to use a language that was confirmable, unambiguous, precise and clear. According to MacCormac hard sciences utilize metaphors as a way of posing hypotheses intelligibly.[100] Metaphors, working as hypotheses, allow scientists their easy substitution. The twentieth century makes clear that all scientific knowledge is grounded on the same sort of metaphorical structure used in other fields, that assure explanations for human experience. In this way, any old episteme can be easily abandoned in favor of a new one. According to Ernst

98. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1986. We must remember that his full prescription combined the appeal of play, the appeal of dream and the appeal of time, together with the above-mentioned appeal of thought.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

100. See Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion*, Durham, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1976.

Cassirer, metaphors are a superior and more dynamic alternative to the rational capacity of organization provided by logical structures:

> Aesthetic experience is incomparably richer. It is pregnant with infinite possibilities which remain unrealized in ordinary sense experience. In the work of the artist these possibilities become actualities, they are brought into the open and take on a definite shape. The revelation of this inexhaustibility of the aspects of things is one of the great privileges and one of the deepest charms of art.[101]

One of the most coherent theories put forth, in order to explain the workings of metaphors, establishes, as the fundamental component, the tension they create. If taken as literal representations of reality they become absurd: still metaphors are always characterized by a shock of surprise, a shock that plays with our assumed knowledge of reality. The new term expressed by the metaphor is produced by means of the juxtaposition between new ideas based on the perception (in sum, presence) of a preceding and older idea. I. A. Richards pointed out that all the metaphors that produce this legitimate tension consist of two referents: the well-known and the less-well-known.

It is precisely this tension theory of the metaphor that constitutes the basis for Paul Ricœur's theory of the narrative. For Ricœur, the tension exists not only in the statement between the tenor and the vehicle, it is repeated between the possible literal and metaphorical interpretations, and, again, in the tension revealed in the relational function of the copula, between the terms of resemblance and difference: metaphorical truth 'preserves the

101. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1953, p. 186.

"is not" within the "is."[102] This is the position made clear when we mentioned earlier the announcement of the Majorcan storyteller and we could say that this constitutes one of the 'not expressed but implied' statements of all works of art.

The difference between ordinary language and the metaphorical use of language rests both on the creation of tension with ordinary language use and also, most especially, on this speculative tension. Tension is vital since it invigorates language by taking its dullness away and separating it from ordinary wearing. Jacques Lacan also emphasizes some kind of tension in metaphors when he points out, from his psychological perspective, that:

> The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the representation of two images, that is, two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connection with the rest of the chain.[103]

The statement of a metaphor demands from us our identification of its "as if" quality, characterized by its proposal of several possible meanings, suggested by what can be termed as that imaginative and initial hypothesis which is the essential feature of metaphorical use. This understanding of the metaphor adapts very well to the Postmodern mood in fiction since it helps to express the plurality of reality and the hypothetical and, therefore, provisional assumptions about it.

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102. Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of the Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977, pp. 248-9.

103. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1977, p. 157.

Metaphors are projected into reality in order to make possible our grasp of reality by providing organization. We may very well say that a 'fiction,' or a subject's order, is projected into reality: in this projection, reality and fiction meet in knowledge. When metaphors are no longer perceived as such, they end up being taken for the real thing and, obviously, the tension is lost. When literature is mentioned as a metaphorical device for the unconcealment of reality, we must specify that it is so in its capacity of suggesting hypothesis for the explanation of reality; something that resembles the concept, pointed out by MacCormac,[104] of diaphor, a type of metaphor that *suggests* possible new meanings rather than expressing meanings that can already be confirmed by an audience or by readers. It is, therefore, part of a conception of language that considers it as changing and adapting, or rather, as alive in relation to the world it describes and is not fixed. In this suggestion, we must see language as that tool that, by its hypothesizing, can reveal reality in the negotiated manner of dialogue. A diaphor may never lose its tension — it remains suggestive rather than expressive of experience and when interpreted literally, as we have already mentioned, always produces absurdity. Something similar happens when we consider idiolects or technical jargon; if there is not a clear context or knowledge about what they refer to the result is incomprehensible or absurd. A highly metaphorical use of language is what we perceive when Quinn engages in conversation about a baseball game with the counterman of the Heights luncheonette. Quinn, as someone who shares with the bartender the common frame of understanding the rules of the game of baseball, participates in the dialogue by assenting,

104. Earl R. MacCormac, *Metaphor and Myth in Science and Religion*, Durham, Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1976, p. 84-5.

by means of his silence, and the ensuing monologue is transformed into a dialogue:

> First two times up, Kingman hits solo shots," he said. "Boom, boom. Big mothers — all the way to the moon. Jones is pitching good for once and things don't look too bad. It's two to one, bottom of the ninth. Pittsburgh gets men on a second and third, one out, so the Mets go to the bullpen for Allen. He walks the guy to load them up. The Mets bring the corners in for a force at home, or maybe they can get the double play if it's hit up the middle. Peña comes up and chicken-shits a little grounder to the first and the fucker goes through Kingman's legs. Two men score, and that's it, bye-bye New York. (*CG*, p. 37)

We have the examples of metaphors profusely used in the dialogues Quinn establishes with both Stillmans, father and son. Here again, metaphors are an easy device full of meaning but at same time within dialogues they try to reach a higher ground, to know more. The result is quite formulaic and empty they do not provide anything new, they are severed from the realm of life, from ordinary use, they do not affect our understanding of life, they are expressions but which communicate directly and immediately the reality of a situation. They provide a key for a solution.

The silence in the excerpt quoted above, draws attention to the intentionally made-to-be-felt presence of the author, despite his silence and the many critical announcements proclaiming the death of the author. Surprisingly, or not, it is shortly after the monologue with the bartender that Quinn, for no apparent reason, "suddenly felt an irresistible urge for a particular red notebook at the bottom." He decides to buy it "almost embarrassed by the intensity of his feelings." Still, it is not the presence of a master puppeteer who makes the tension of the strings felt but, rather, that of one diluted in the characters who refer or, better, submit, to the empirical author's interests and worries. We must not forget that some of the characters and events directly allude to Paul Auster's own life. We know that

City of Glass, in the words of Paul Auster, is an homage to his wife, a reflection on how his life would have been if he had not met his wife Siri Hustvedt. This revelation links Daniel Quinn to Auster, the empirical writer, and at the same time to Auster the character who through his wife and son reflects the real and empirical Paul Auster. In this respect, it is essential to bear in mind what Auster admits in the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, stressing the importance of life and experience in his work: "What I am trying to say, I suppose, is that the material that haunts me, the material that I feel compelled to write about, is dredged up from the depths of my own memories. But even after that material is given to me, I can't always be sure where it comes from."[105]

The most important issue is that language is not fixed: language serves human beings in the purpose of conveying information about reality, which is mutable and in process, language will vary according to the use human beings, in their relation to reality, give to it. Language provides the basis for human activity and must be seen also as a mode of action, in other words: language is not a product (*ergon*) but an activity (*energeia*), something that Coleridge had already observed when he affirmed that things are not *producta jam et ver fixa*.[106] Moreover language, as well as the reality perceived and created by language, is essentially a transaction between a speaker and a listener; a transaction that presupposes the ability to change and adapt to new realities that are made dependent on the availability of new information made accessible by language.

105. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 126.

106. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T*he Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Colerid*ge, Ed. Kathleen Coburn and M. Christensen, 4 Parts in 8 vols, London and New York, Princeton University Press, 1957.

Language, according to American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, is a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a fact which leads him to consider language in a 'dramatistic' way, as a result of the interaction between parties; an interaction which presupposes the constant negotiation of reality in each intervention. This view on language known as the 'dramatist theory of language'[107] is a conception of language similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's term *dialogism*[108] which also refers to this type of mutability and adaptation in the language of literature. Under Bakhtin's light, literature is perceived as a dialogue not just between a reader and a writer but also as an orchestration that contains multiple voices or dialogues within its narration. Under this vision soliloquies are also a dialogue between two entities: that of a *you* and an *I* which are separated from the subject who makes a declaration. Thus, that long soliloquy by Peter Stillman Jr. in second chapter of *City of Glass* is not just an exposition to Daniel Quinn, it is also a dialogue between Peter and himself as a way of assessing and understanding his own reality. One of the most important dialogues of this sort in American letters is the one described by T. S. Eliot's poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* where the dialogue shows, with cutting irony, the indecisiveness of character, an aging man, seeking meaning and some sort of transcendence.

Language and reality, therefore, are not fixed but negotiated in communication. This position is not unique to Dewey: later on in the twentieth century Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* assumes a similar position by viewing language as 'part of an activity

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107. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, New York, Dover Publications, 1958, p. 158.

108. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.

or a form of life.'[109] The dialogue, as a means for the communication of knowledge, has a long tradition in Western civilization; we have to mention the Socratic Method evidenced by Paul Auster most vividly in the dialogues between Daniel Quinn and Peter Stillman Sr. in *City of Glass*.

Narrative Truth Claims

Since commonsense reality and language are in constant flux, ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is very much present in spirit in *Oracle Night* as the philosopher seeking the coincidence of opposites. A coincidence made obviously present in Auster by his use of the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* which resound in a powerful expression of the dissolution of opposites, in the written word of the narrative:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of *comparison.*[110] [My italics]

The above-cited introductory lines serve Charles Dickens to make a comparison between the fictionalized events of the past, and the present day and age of his own writing. It is clear that Dickens is

109. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe New York, MacMillan, 1962, p. 11.

110. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 35.

using *A Tale of Two Cities* in a metaphorical manner that seeks to affect the perception of his readers about the times in which they are living; an intentionality in Dickens that is no other than an attempt to use a metaphorical device of re-structuring or reordering the perception and ideas of his own readers. We could term this as manipulation but also, using a less derogatory term, as creation of new ideas or, if we use Heidegger's terminology, it is a way of using words/language to bring things into being, to bring objects into a meaningful existence.

The paradoxical configuration between terms, in the excerpt from *A Tale of Two Cities*, points at the plurality of interpretations that a historical event may have and how reality must be something that escapes both opposites; how history is always an interpretation based on facts that appear verbally metamorphosed or re-presented before us. The inclusion of the excerpt, besides pointing towards the constructedness of history, also underscores the fact that history as a process is inescapable and affects both reality and fiction. History, or the passage of time, frames both reality and fiction; history frames the human being as much as language does. If we want to adopt a more positive perspective, language and texts offer humans the basis for the process of world making.

Despite this similarity in the way that fiction and reality are "constructed," a similarity which highlights the lack of any objectivity in any of the descriptions based on language, there is a profound difference between history and fiction, one which has to do with the type of truth claims they present. Most particularly, history bases itself on what has allegedly been. Therefore, it claims to produce well-founded factual descriptions of past events and, in doing so, as we have seen, carries out a linguistic reconstruction of the past. In this reconstruction, there is room for an imaginative approach; history has to be presented in a convincing way. Persuasion in history

also plays a crucial role because even when we acknowledge that history deals with facts we must, all the same, be aware that we are dealing with re-presentations and interpretations. In an extreme position, but not an uncommon one, we find narratives of historical events that approach fiction in that they are quite "literary" in their reconstructions; imaginative in their presentations once they recreate, in part, reality, to give it more credibility. In this way, we can affirm that this conception of history presents what might have been, together with what it is believed to have, in fact, happened. In both of these cases of history there is a demand to the reader to believe in the facts presented since they belong to history. Despite "literary leave" the intention of the writer is that there should not be any suspicion or disbelief about what is narrated.

Paul Auster, by including the full excerpt of *A Tale of Two Cities,* stresses in his novel the necessity of what his narrator in *Oracle Night* terms as "State of Double Consciousness." The historical events of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and exactly the same can be said about the documented historical events scattered around in *Oracle Night*, are part of a story (fiction) but also part of history (as reality of the past). The reader is, therefore, explicitly given a hint and asked to consider the world of life (history) in the world of fiction and adopt that double consciousness towards fiction and reality, one that also considers the past as a process in fiction.

The exploration of time in Auster is reminiscent of the treatment Nathaniel Hawthorne gives to time. Present and past are frequently merged as a result of some moral fault in his protagonists. In likewise manner, Auster's characters are often chased, and doomed by a curse of past deeds. This becomes most evident in the case of *The Music of Chance* in which both characters, Pozzi and Nashe, are apparently possessed by some dark fate, brought about by the two counterpart characters, Flowers and Stone, who rule as a

hidden demiurge, controlling their destinies and actions through a stern and uncompromising foreman, of more than seemingly dark purposes, known by no other better name than Calvin Murks.

To remind us of the possibility of causality in a world dominated by chance, we have, in *The Music of Chance,* the town of Ockham. Under the shadow of William of Ockham, Pozzi insists on blaming Jim Nashe for his 'bad luck:' he should not have stolen a chunk of the model, an action that Pozzi determines to be "like committing a sin," it is "like violating a fundamental law," or "tampering with the universe." Pozzi concludes that 'things went out of whack' and as a consequence retribution has taken hold of their lives. Nashe's response to Pozzi supposes an affirmation of the world of 'reality;' a reality understood as beyond the effects of unexplainable occurrences beyond any rational explanation, beyond myth:

> You want to believe in some hidden purpose. You're trying to persuade yourself there's a reason for what happens in the world. I don't care what you call it — God or luck or harmony — it all comes down to the same bullshit. It's a way of avoiding the facts, of refusing to look at how things really work. (*MC*, p. 139)

Beyond the Literary

Taking up Nashe's response in *The Music of Chance* as factual or realistic. Nevertheless, the presence of sin as a supernatural power, threatening the condition of the characters, is felt as much as in any of the narratives of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Both Nashe and Pozzi are trapped by reality despite their efforts to flee from it. This is a reality that no longer appears as something solid and genuine but one that causes Nashe to perceive the interaction of his psychological reality of loneliness with his surrounding reality. Nashe's sole way out

is only a mental escape obtained by the apparent sacrifice of his mind by his body; he believes that the mind-body tension disappears by working strenuously:

> He was more cut off from the world now than ever before, and there were times when he could feel something collapsing inside him, as if the ground he stood on were gradually giving way, crumbling under the pressure of his loneliness. (*MC*, p. 177)

This submission to the forces of destiny which can be seen as an abandonment of the self to destiny, has a direct result: that of paradoxically permitting Nashe to find the idea of self, at the same time as it signals the possibility of encountering the spiritual reality of man. Senses do lie, or are imprecise; the only hope is that there is some possibility for gnosis in the hidden wisdom buried deep down in the world. Human beings must contend with the duality of their inner and outer reality, their duality as beings made up of mind and body.

Having obtained some detachment and objectivity from reality, literature provides a fictional 'platform' from which to get hold of the present and, consequently, gain some control over the future. It is just a fictional grounding since — paradoxically — in this case, there is also no escape from language, unless we consider language as a willing suspension of disbelief, a disbelief in the incapacity of language to re-present reality and, therefore, of manipulating it. Ralph Waldo Emerson found that there is a mode of taking shelter from these inexorable forces in flux, which the world of empirical reality creates around human existence. There is a sanctuary in literature that is very similar to a Kantian point of nowhere. Literature affects the movement of life, intended for a future effect:

> Literature is a point outside our hodiernal circle through which a new one may be described. The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence

> we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.[111]

This ideal 'point of nowhere' or what we have termed 'neutral territory' is a fiction which is brought about by the world of the make-believe. It is a point out of the forces of nature and the ground, for this world is language, a special type of language that points to its being real and, at the same time, not real. The attainment of this peculiar standing is something conscious —willing— and presupposes the acceptance of the rules of the destiny it offers the reader. The world of commonsense reality also demands allegiance to its rules and, as an escape precisely from these rules; the fictional world allows for a space for reflection on reality.

Hawthorne created his "neutral territory" to transcend the dualities of his world, especially the ones resulting from moral matters; reality exists in this territory as a by-product of the combination of the real and the imaginary. Reality acquires a different nature, it slips between the visible physical world and the reality beyond, the dream world. Auster also draws attention to this duplicity by showing the confrontation between the two realities, a confrontation that puts his characters in context with their own limitations, as fictional characters and as human beings. Auster's characters end up meeting head-on with their own bodily reality, a reality that they can explain by their own awareness about their own selves and by the use of some sort of spiritual gift provided by the mind and the imagination. This dualism, we are led to believe, is only to be surpassed by the recognition and awareness of the split constitution of man's being.

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111. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 232.

The world of reality created by fiction provides Sidney Orr with this privileged place to both question the workings of the construction of fiction and the mind of the creator of the literary work of art. At the same time, in *Oracle Night,* we are presented with an insider view of the act of producing a literary work of art — the 'plumbing' as Paul Auster might term it — in the sense that we witness how the writer follows an idea which becomes an obsession, and tries to give it some form. This is followed by commentaries, at the same time that Orr is confronted with the narrative of his mind at a precise moment of crisis in his life. The author, in order to follow his idea, reaches a state of consciousness provided by living in two realities at the same time. A reality between sleeping and waking that can directly be traced to romantic theories of imagination. Life becomes unreal, a vivid fiction. But what is confirmed by Paul Auster's fiction is that reality also exists in a neutral territory which is affected by the fictions we create trying to make sense of reality, and looking for comfort in an unpleasant world.

In a similar way to fiction, reality also exists in this "neutral territory" between the physical world and the interior one provided by imagination. It is clear that the perception of the world is made up from the empirical data that we receive from the senses and from what is built by the imagination. Fictions are fundamental for the perception of reality: they buttress our knowledge of it, truth is formed out of the illusions that help us get hold of reality. In this respect, it is quite remarkable that characters may fill the gaps of their own realities with 'stories.' This is valid in relation to Pozzi who makes up a story about his father, his 'hero father,' and also in relation to Nashe who tries to calm Pozzi down with his own stories. Pozzi's position is summarized by his statement "You had to invent something. It's not possible to leave it blank. The mind

won't let you."[112] This is also the case for David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*, a character who is literally pushed or forced into the story of his recovery as a human being by another character, Alma, who has associated with her persona both an ethereal quality —soul— and a fictional one — that of being associated with Hawthorne's story *The Birthmark*.

In the same order of things, Marco Fogg in *Moon Palace* becomes conscious of this presence of "a projection" that makes fiction better than reality. We cannot tell for sure the real from the imaginary:

> Life was a fever dream, he discovered, and reality was a groundless world of figments and hallucinations, a place where everything you imagined came true. (*BI*, p. 163)

Sidney Orr, in transferring his lived experiences from his past to his present, and in being afraid of his writing as a possible cause for disaster and disruption in the future, juggles both with the assumed ideas of fiction — not to mention the Kantian *a priori* of time and space. What must be remembered are the forms, according to Einstein, that organize the chaos of world phenomena. Chased by a guilty conscience, Orr can project a past event in his mind to the world of empirical reality. By doing this, present and past, the indistinct Heraclitean beginning and end coalesce in the narrative:

> I had been doing everything in my power not to think about what had happened the day before, to forget my sorry peccadillo and put it behind me, but there was no escape from what I had done. Martine had come to life again in the form of Régine Dumas. She was everywhere now, even in my friend's Barrow Street apartment, half a world away from that shabby cinder block building in Queens. (*ON*, p. 134)

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112. Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance*, p. 46.

It follows for Orr, that both the present and the past, and the real and the not real become the same. They are again equally part of that Kantian world of phenomena, a word that etymologically means what is perceived by the subject. And, no doubt, for Orr, both Régine Dumas and Martine were 'physically' perceived in Barrow Street at his friend's apartment.

The unexplainable plays a role in our commonsense experiences which are also affected by the unreal or psychological realities. In this respect, we can cite what happens to David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*, to whom a situation of stress during an airplane trip makes him be projected into the body of his son. In a very vivid way, "not a thing of the imagination so much as a real thing" we are told, Zimmer felt as if the transmutation had actually taken place and was as real as Orr's encounter with Martine "in the form of Régine Dumas:"

> Oddly enough, the instant I became aware of this thought, aware of the fact that I had conjured up this thought about mothers and children, I imagined that I had slipped into the body of Todd, my own son, and that it was Helen who was comforting me and not Alma. That feeling lasted for only a few seconds, but it was extremely powerful, not a thing of the imagination so much as a real thing, an actual transformation that turned me into someone else, and the moment it started to go away, the worst of what had happened to me was suddenly over. (*BI*, p. 125)

The identification of the sources for historical data in *Oracle Night* serves the purpose of revealing the 'scaffolding' of fiction. It is precisely this scaffolding that helps fiction to transit to the world of reality by offering verisimilitude and providing truthfulness to fiction. It must be stressed that this truthful and verisimilar reality is the combination of fact with fiction. Authors use reality as a scaffold for their stories; this is Marco Fogg's most important finding in his quest for the discovery of the true language for fiction.

As we have said throughout this book, reality makes part of fiction in the same way that fiction makes part of reality.

It must also be stressed here what Auster has often expressed, that the important things are not the stories themselves but what they state about man's being. Typically, Auster's hero characters show us that his writing is more about organizing the world of their own experience and showing what their own understanding about reality is like. As a way of showing this involvement with 'life,' Auster uses a fair amount of biographical data, some other times the expression of extraliterary truth is highlighted by the use of historical data. In this case, *Oracle Night* goes further by showing in a metafictional way the sources of data, mentioning an actual book with its full references, to stress the historicity of data included in fiction:

> Although Ed was a fictional character, the story he told about giving milk to the dead baby was true. I borrowed it from a book I'd once read about the Second World War, (*The Lid Lifts* by Patrick Gordon-Walker, London, 1945) the story was retold in 1985 (*From the Ruins of the Reich: Germany 1945-1949*, Crown Publishers, 1985). (*ON*, p. 43)

Sometimes the real references make us believe that the words of his narrator-author characters reflect Auster's thoughts and feelings. For instance, such is the case with Orr's commentary on the news story "Born in a Toilet, Baby Discarded" which Auster himself identified as a real story he had read in the *New York Times*:

> When I finished reading the article for the first time, I said to myself: *This is the worst story I have ever read*. Experience can be a scaffold for the creations of a fiction writer. (*ON*, p. 98)

The author, as a being who is both aware and engaged in the reality around him, not just as a source for mere material for his stories but also as material that may affect the perception of the

world of life of his readers, feels compelled to write quite naturally whenever the events demand so. This is what Sidney Orr does by including a bizarre incident in his fiction, a decision that will eventually cause its own response, and awake readers by "haranguing" them into a state of awareness:

> The article had churned up so much in me, I felt I had to write some kind of response to it, to tackle the misery it had provoked head on. I kept at it for about an hour, writing backward in the notebook, beginning with page ninety-six, then turning to page ninety-five, and so on. When I finished my little harangue, I closed the notebook, stood up from my desk, and walked down the hall to the kitchen. (*ON,* p. 99)

Constructedness in Fiction and Reality

The narrator of *The Locked Room* tells us how, in a census report, he acted as an 'inventor' of whole families, of large families basically on political grounds because: "the greater the poor population, the more obligated the government would feel to spend money on it." By this procedure the narrator is stressing how fictions can cross the borderline and become somehow realities, and how these new realities may really affect the real world. Imaginary stories affect our vision about reality by 'manipulating' reality:

> Everyone knows that stories are imaginary. Whatever effect they might have on us, we know they are not true, even when they tell us truths more important than the ones we can find elsewhere. As opposed to the story writer, I was offering my creations directly to the real world, and therefore it seemed possible to me that they could affect this real world in a real way, that they could eventually become part of the real itself. No writer could ask for more than that.[113]

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113. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy (City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room)*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1992. p. 250. Hereafter, further references to this edition will be placed in the text and designated as *LR* followed by page number.

In *Oracle Night* the power of the written word is taken a step further. Orr is convinced that his friend's novel, *Empire of the Bones*, was a "premonition of things to come." For Orr this novel from the past determined or incubated the future: the written word can affect reality. It is not, so to speak, the fiction produced by faking data, it is not the fiction that is being passed for the real but a fiction that dictates and controls reality, a fiction that will condition or, rather, determine *tout court* the future. The make believe will make itself real and will become reality:

> It didn't matter that the story had been written in 1952, the year Grace was born. 'The Empire of Bones' was a premonition of things to come. It had been put in a box and left to incubate for thirty years, and little by little it had evolved into a story about the woman we both loved — my wife, my brave and struggling wife. (*ON*, p. 193)

This vision reflects the conception that literature is a representation that precedes what it represents, something that reminds us of Emerson and his words in the essay *The Poet*: "For poetry was all written before time was…," lines that lead us back on to the idea that: "The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold… for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes."[114] This will be an idea later developed by Peirce and Heidegger to mean that humans obtain the notion of being by reflecting upon words, and reality exists by the creation that is brought about by the use of language. As we have just seen in one example, this vision is much indebted to the conception of creativity commonly held by the romantic writers and by which art is perceived as the product of the creative power of the mind; a power that *embodies* the visible and sensuous

114. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet,' in *Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 262-3.

and the unseen and spiritual. Thus, this imaginative power of the mind is superior to the scientific method in revealing the truer version of the nature of things by expounding all aspects related to their existence, their complexity. This creative power is closely associated with the gift of imagination by which the true poet both perceives reality and creates *essential* reality; as John Keats would put it "what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth — whether it existed before or not."[115] According to Keats, the poet operates from the visible world and with the materials provided by both the visible world and by his gift of imagination which creates other materials. This view puts the poet on a superior plane of reality, one which transcends the physical and temporal limitations by putting him in contact with the ideal and non-temporal concepts of truth and beauty.

The idea of a-temporality and, as we have just alluded, the ruling of the world by the word, are part of the romantic tradition in which the poet, as *a man of greater sensibility* than common men, possesses the gift to see the invisible and visible nature, resulting in a more complete man. A man, we are told by Shelley, with the capacity to legislate the world in an effective way.

The idea of absolute time, as Kant conceived, has been submitted to attack especially since Albert Einstein, for whom the "the distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one."[116] Time is no longer to be an absolute but a product of the necessity man has of organizing reality: time is, we might say, a metaphor. In Auster, time seems to be closer to the idea of *specious present*, a boundary between a remembered past and an

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115. John Keats, "Letter to Benjamin Bailey," 22 November, 1817, in *Selected Poems and Letters of John Keats*, Ed. Robert Gittings, London, Heinemann, 1982. pp. 36-8.

116. *Albert Einstein-Michele Besso correspondence (1903-1955)*, Paris, Hamann, 1972, pp. 537-8.

anticipated future which is the product of reading, — if we bear in mind Robert Jauss's theory of aesthetic reception, concerning reading in a tripartite division of: understanding, interpretation and application. For Jauss, the moment of application, which he also terms as *Katharsis*, takes place when "a text from the past is of interest not only in reference to its primary context, but is also interpreted to disclose a possible significance for the contemporary situation."[117]

Obviously, this contemporary moment is always a moment in the future. In relation to the moment of creation or *poiesis*, its influence will always be a place in the future after each one of its realizations are completed by the action of reading. In this sense, we can see any literary work in a *place* out of time, never completed; this world-making is always to be done by future readers, it never reaches the point of being past perfect. This world of language is always to be experienced as action by the readers, always actualized, always present. Action, which is in the original biblical language of the *Book of Genesis* expressed by the term *dabar*, translated into English by the term word, implying at the beginning and with no end. Time should be considered as warped; a notion already present in the nineteenth century philosophy of Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*:

> Or thinkest thou it were impossible, unimaginable? Is the Past annihilated then, or only past; is the Future non-extant, or only future? Those mystic faculties of thine, Memory and Hope, already answer: already through those mystic avenues, thou the Earth-blinded summonest both Past and Future, and communist with them, thought as yet darkly, and with mute beckonings. The curtains of Yesterday drop down, the curtains of tomorrow roll up; but *Yesterday and Tomorrow both are*. Pierce through the time-element, glance

117. Hans Robert Jauss, T*oward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans. Timothy Bahti, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 139.

> into the Eternal, Believe that thou findest written in the sanctuaries of Man's soul, even as all Thinkers, in all ages, have devoutly read it there: that Time and space are not God, but creations of God; that with God as it is a universal Here, so it is an everlasting Now.[118] [My italics]

Any text, as Auster would have it, provides its readers with a basis for world-making. In it, the reader is always sent to the future and the only solace is to be provided by no other than the fictional ground of the text itself. We may rightly observe this in *City of Glass* by the many occasions in which the narrator addresses us to a future instance in time. In general, the language of literary works is always deferred in its realization to the last line. For Quinn, his life is measured in the pages of the red notebook.

The World as a Writer

The origin of all the narratives writers produce has always been the greatest of mysteries. It is from nothingness that language and reality emanate, and this is the reason why the origins of art can be seen as a mystery: an origin which comes close to the Judeo-Christian theological conception of creation, expressed as resulting from action and motion, ideas we have already seen expressed by the terms *dabar*, *energeia* or, more closely to art, *poiesis*. This instance, the originating moment, as a starting point is something which is out of the realm of literary criticism and which belongs as much to mythology as to the realm of psychology, provided that we are looking for something close to a rational explanation. The original idea that gives birth to a narration is

118. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdrockh in Three Books*, Ed. Mark Engel, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 192.

something that seems to escape the control of the writer, as much as the story itself, that may lead him to an unexpected result.

As many other writers have already pointed out, fiction may be beyond the control of the author. Paul Auster, in the interview conducted by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, gives the unequivocal sense that fiction, the narrative itself, may impose its own course upon the author. Thus, in relation to the *Music of Chance,* Auster mentions that the activity of writing is elusive and how a writer may be unaware of the plot and the shape being given to a book:

> It's never possible to predict what it's going to be like. With my other books, I've usually known the general shape of the story before beginning to write it, but in this case a number of crucial elements were altered as I went along. I began with a different ending in mind, but at a certain point I realized that I had been wrong, that the book was heading towards a much darker conclusion than I had originally planned. This revelation came as a shock to me, it stopped me cold in my tracks. But there was no getting around it, and after thinking it over for several days, I understood that I had no choice.[119]

This idea of creation approaches, in its quite near-supernatural features, Emerson's conception of poetry as a-temporal activity that gives origin to reality, a conception similar to Heidegger's *dichtung*. This nothingness before time and space, is the nowhere to which Auster's characters seem to aspire; a point that will give some explanation to their existence as characters and to which they may have access to by means of isolation. Thus, we have to mention that once reaching this point of nowhere a higher state of perception is reached and creation and self-awareness are

119. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 152.

initiated at the same time. This constitutes a position of insight where the recognition or awareness of both 'being and not being' and, what is more, of integrating these two states of mind in one persona, are the starting point for the liberation of the dualities of mind and body and the starting point for aspiration to a higher reality. Words begin to make sense; a revelation takes place and the narrator of *The Locked Room* announces:

> My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable. This was the time hole between self and not-self, and for the first time in my life I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world. (*LR*, p. 232)

This excerpt presupposes a redefinition of meaning and, at the same time, personality. The presence of traces of romantic idealism are evident; as the transcendentalists would have it, the *I* in the confrontation with the *Not-I* generates self-conscience and a higher degree of self-awareness, or awareness of one's own self, is reached as a principle on upon which the relationship with reality must find a firmer grounding.

In a seemingly paradoxically way, Daniel Quinn's awareness of his own being is brought about by a process of isolation and by what we may term as disinvestment. In the interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster expresses his opinion that self-knowledge is a "process of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. It finally comes to the same thing."[120] A state of nakedness and alienation from the familiarity provided by the world and, maybe, even a fair amount of rejection

120. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 106.

shown by this separation from the world. This is a process similar to the one described by Martin Heidegger as *Angst*.[121] Quinn fades into insignificance and nothingness, he reaches a new state of mind in the contemplation of his own finitude which places himself into perspective. Quinn reaches a perspective over the concept of being, of being aware of his own being. This may be the only type of knowledge to which human beings can aspire to ultimately attain. It may very well be the starting point or the principle from which to make sense of reality. Interestingly enough, and with our thoughts focused on the romantic American tradition, philosopher Francisco Varela[122] seemed to believe that reality could not be known because of the breach between 'semiotic' realities and the 'real' and, consequently, the only type of knowledge left to man is the knowledge about oneself.

One of the characteristic consequences of this process is that of isolation, that serves the objective of differentiating individuality. Individuality by isolation is present in all of Auster's major characters: David Zimmer, Sidney Orr, Daniel Quinn, who are also writers, artists, and, therefore, exiles in their own right, or by their own nature, according to Auster. This isolation again is paradoxical because, as Auster affirms, it is by isolation that one feels that he is not alone:

> The astonishing thing, I think, is that at the moment when you are truly alone, when you truly enter a state of solitude, that is the moment when you are not alone anymore, when you start to feel your connection with others.

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121. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 228-35.

122. Francisco Varela, "The Creative Circle: Sketches on the Natural History of Circularity," in *The Invented Reality*, Ed. Paul Watzlawick, New York, W. W. Norton, 1984, pp. 309-23.

> I believe I even quote Rimbaud in that book, 'Je est un autre' — I is another — and I take that sentence quite literally. In the process of writing or thinking about yourself, you actually become someone else."[123]

It is again in this paradoxical isolation that art can be created; this is why in Auster his characters with artistic and literary ambitions are isolated. Paraphrasing Auster, anyone who becomes a poet is always, as far as relationship to the world is concerned, an exile. In this reiteration of the classical theory of creativity, the artist finds purpose and his own self in what he does by creation. Inspiration seems to be the product of hard work and a certain amount of detachment from life seems to be a necessity, from which a better contemplation of reality can certainly be effected:

> I'm constantly questioning the thing that I do. It's certainly a stupid way to live your life, isolating yourself every day, making something nobody really needs or wants — the world can do very well without the books I write.[124]

This process of isolation and disinvestment, or, ultimate unclothing of the self, closely resembles a spiritual and mystical exercise. We have that ultimate disinvestment in Daniel Quinn, when mounting guard outside the Stillman's apartment, and in Marco Fogg while living in Central Park. In both cases, it is a 'spiritual' process of purification, of confronting the essentials in life in order to find their own way in understanding reality. It is a complete path to personal enlightenment with fasting included, lack of clothing and isolation, which corresponds to some sort of 'inner exile.' By means of this process, characters seek to obtain, if not inspiration, insight into the unattainable, the ultimate questions about their own

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123. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 106.

124. Interview conducted by Adam Begley, http://www.writersonline.co.uk/aapaulauster.htm

beings, and to transcend the limitations of their bodily natures. Regarding this "spiritual" line of the novels, Auster expresses the following view about the *New York Trilogy*:

> 'Religious' might not be the word I would use, but I agree that these books are mostly concerned with spiritual questions, the search for spiritual grace. At some point or another, all three characters undergo a form of humiliation, of degradation, and perhaps that is a necessary stage in discovering *who we are.*[125] [My italics]

This secular transcendence is one of the instances of attempting to try to obtain a position beyond the world, the world of language. This transcendental ultimate shedding of contingency and limitations of the body constitutes a paradox for humans which reflects the previously mentioned paradox of language. Transcendence from a bodily reality would grant humans that position from nowhere, from which to obtain the precise language (maybe as a way of reaching that pre-verbal state before the breach between semiotic signs and reality came about) to describe reality and which would, therefore, lead to the reversal of the Fall of Babel, thus, invalidating the continuous and treacherous process of circularity: language about language. The process that Eco identifies as *continuous semiosis* and Wittgenstein terms as *infinite regression* which separates humans more and more from reality. The inevitable happened: Peter Stillman's son becomes a poet from his child-like innocence he is unable to bridge the gap with language and get a hold on the true reality of things. Peter's father, as custodian of the symbolic order, has to undo his wrong by killing his own son who has unexpectedly contributed to the biblical punishment of the multiplication of tongues. The dream

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125. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Joseph Mallia, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 110.

of developing some sort of *metalangue*, abstracted from common language usage, with the purpose of describing empirical reality in full precision, has vanished. Auster's characters do try to locate themselves outside the centripetal forces of this process by creating their own *logos* as writers. Marco Fogg creates his language as we have seen; his own language as expression of artistic reality. But also, Zimmer and Orr, in the books they write, create their own contingent and particular *logos* in which they attempt to grasp and explain a portion of the reality around them. By the act of writing fiction, they are able to gain control over their own lives and, therefore, over their reality. In this sense, fiction also positively and decisively affects (their) reality as beings.

The action of writing is, therefore, central in the novels of Auster; writing is a supernatural experience. We have already stressed that the artist lives between two realities and we know that the artist actually, physically, disappears when immersed in his writing in the Portuguese notebook. Sidney Orr had really disappeared: he was not there to be seen, he was not to be accessed or perceived from the world of reality. Orr went to that special place where out of nothingness everything surges, he was finally transported to a different sort of dimension:

> Well, it was quite an experience. The first time I used the notebook, Grace tells me I wasn't there anymore…That I disappeared. I know it sounds ridiculous, but she knocked on my door while I was writing, and when I didn't answer she poked her head into the room. She swears she didn't see me… I was in my room writing, and I didn't hear the phone ring. When I got up from my desk and went into the kitchen, there were two messages on the machine.' (*ON*, pp. 140-1)

Inspiration is not to be dominated by man; it escapes human control. As the name suggests, it has a spiritual quality, a magical quality by which an author is taken to the original and preverbal site where he can organize and shape reality. Consequently, it

is not surprising that Orr does not hear the particularly loud bell of the phone and that he is not seen by his wife.

All of Auster's characters are taken to a higher state of awareness while trying to make sense of reality; a state that gives sense to their lives, their activity as writers, and that ultimately presupposes knowledge of the same type as the one noted by the Heideggerian *being in the world*. This is an assertion which fittingly links quite accurately to the protagonists of *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace, Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night* — all of them writers too who, in their work, experience the pull of fiction together with its complexities. The creative writer creates reality of a different kind in his dialogue between the two worlds and questions the status of reality and, as a consequence, access to a truer knowledge of the idea and meaning of being is gained. In Auster, the subject of the craft of writing and the character of hero-novelists is one of the main topics as a way of questioning the world. These characters seek a position both out of time and out of language, which is the paradox of fiction. This is the paradox of the author, both in control of fiction and language and not in control of fiction and language. The French author mentioned in *Oracle Night* does not want the written word to surpass the borderlines of fiction into the empirical world. The writer has chosen Scherezade's death, silence. This constitutes an admission of abandonment to a mythical impulse which, from the logical perspective of contemporary man, is not seen positively but which highlights the fact that reality cannot be accessed only by rational methods; in most cases, it escapes rational analysis. The only way that reality can be fully expressed, we are led to believe, is by admitting the fullest range of descriptions possible, and obtained by whatever methods available.

Sidney Orr as a writer tries to obtain, in his solitude, an apprehension of reality out of time and counter this time as creator of reality.

He seems to be able to transcend by apparently disappearing from the face of the world to a neutral territory. And this is the place for the writer: a place out of the logics of the commonsense reality, free from the domination of reality and free from the artificial structuring language of logic and time. Orr, under this perspective, represents Brian McHale's ontological project by being both engaged and divorced from the real. This constitutes an attitude which is to be attained only by poetic language, as Ricœur points out:

> Poetic language breaks through to a pre-scientific, ante-predicative level, where the notions of fact, object, reality and truth are called into question by this very means of vacillation of literal reference.[126]

Language is just nothing more than an illusion from which we can speak of reality without any attachments, from our part, to the reality expressed, since we know we cannot get to reality by using language. Here lies the value of fiction: its illusion of indicating a point from nowhere from which to consider reality, as much in flux and constant change as the reality of language. This is expressed by Auster in the following words:

> It's not even that writing gives me a lot of pleasure. It's hard work. You suffer a lot. You feel inadequate. The sense of failure is enormous — no sense of glory or triumph, no sense of satisfaction. It's just that when I'm not writing I feel lost; I feel that I'm not living to any purpose whatsoever.[127]

Hawthorne's neutral territory of the imagination resembles very much the Modern and Postmodern representations of the subconscious, in which dreamlike states of illusions or hallucinations are

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126. Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of the Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. 254.

127. Interview conducted by Adam Begley, http://www.writersonline.co.uk/aapaulauster.htm

presented. This neutral territory is attained by the isolation and solitude of the writer. For Hawthorne's character Fanshawe, it is clear that solitude is the instrument that helps him to reach inside himself and discover his own self, leading him into maturity as a writer:

> Solitude became a passageway into the self, an instrument of discovery. Although he was still quite young at the time. I believe this period marked the beginning of his maturity as a writer. From now on, the work is no longer promising — it is fulfilled, accomplished, unmistakably his own. (*LR*, p. 277-8)

This constitutes a process common to all the hero writers we have mentioned: writing is a process of self-discovery and this is the way to reach any accomplishment as a writer. Auster expresses his opinion that stories "are written by a certain place in our interior which is unknown and inaccessible" which makes us consider that stories and self-knowledge are not directly related unless we consider self-knowledge as that way of being that permits reaching a special site for the contemplation of reality; a site which is obtained when the writer is at peace with himself in the world of life.

This position that considers writing a path towards self-awareness is one that we see explicitly in Paul Auster, for whom writing is a path for the true discovery of the identity of the human being who writes novels. Writing is a process of self-discovery; we may term it as such and it constitutes a direct result from its involvement with art. By putting, or translating, external reality into words, things and reality are organized in the flux of language. This process of naming provides some tranquil assurance while recognizing that there is an illusion of stasis:

> Every writer is trapped by his obsessions. You don't choose your subjects — they choose you, and once you enter a book, you're powerless to escape. Writing novels isn't a science, after all. You grope your way forward, eliminating

> and adding material as you go along, changing your mind, discovering what you are attempting to do in the process of doing it. And in the end, all you really discover is yourself. Again and again.[128]

This is a position that coincides with German romantic author Wilhelm Schlegel for whom "the medium of literature is precisely that same medium through which alone the human mind attains self-awareness, and therewith mastery in the voluntary combination of its own mental representations: language."[129]

Inspiration, in the case of Orr, is prodded on by a plain Portuguese notebook which, thus, acquires a magical status. This magical feeling is reinforced by the idea that Orr, in his creative isolation, is taken out of the confines of his room into a different space. This idea is reinforced, as we have seen, since he is presented as out of sight, he is not seen by his wife and he is not aware of any phone calls on his answering machine. In a particular similar way, Muses are associated with higher states of awareness: they belong to a different world, a world which is not the material world and they help authors in crossing the borderlines between the two worlds. With their help the writer thus belongs to both worlds. The fiction writer Sidney Orr provides enriching views on the inner workings and hidden powers of the mind of a creative writer; always surrounded by the mystery of inspiration, seen as identical to that of Superman flying:

> I sat at my desk for more than an hour with the pen in my hand, but I didn't write a word. Perhaps that was what John had been referring to when he spoke of the 'cruelty' of the Portuguese notebooks. You flew along in them for a while, borne away by a feeling of your own power, a mental Superman speeding through a bright blue sky with your cape flapping behind you, and then, without any warning, you came crashing down to earth. (*ON*, p. 93)

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128. http://www.failbetter.com/2002-4/AusterInterview.htm

129. Wilhelm Schlegel, "Über Schöne Literatur und Kunst," in *Deutsche Literaturedenkmale des 18v. 19. Jahrhunderts*, XVII, 1884, p. 261.

The Question of Borderlines

One of the first to observe, from the field of psychiatry, this capacity of fiction for the liberation of tensions was Sigmund Freud who, in his *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*,[130] considers creativity as nothing more than *phantasy* that allows the writer a simple way for fleeing reality. The creative work of writing grants its artist just a means to 'blow off steam;' something which in technical psychoanalytical terms is known as a process of abreaction. For Paul Auster:

> Writing, in some sense, is an activity that helps me to relieve some of the pressure caused by these secrets. Hidden memories, traumas, childhood scars — there's no question that novels emerge from those inaccessible parts of ourselves.[131]

This view is part of a traditional view in psychiatry that has often seen artistic creators as some type of neurotics who need to escape from reality by resorting to *phantasy*; these particular human beings seek isolation in order to cure their neuroses. Suffering from some sort of imbalance, artistic inspiration would provide a way to help integrate the external world with the artist's inner self. In *Oracle Night*, Orr comes close to dementia; he is not able to differentiate the external reality from his own inner reality. This, obviously, constitutes some extreme sort of annihilation of the self by fusing itself with what we may term the object over which the personality is projected: in this case it was fiction. According to Orr's friend, John Trause, he was like a demented

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130. Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *Authorship: from Plato to Postmodern*, Ed. Seán Burke, , Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995, pp. 54-72.

131. Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*, Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, p. 123.

alchemist the first time he used the notebook. This seems to correspond quite closely to a statement by Auster during an interview in which he considered writing as an act, surrounded somehow by mystery and indicates that it is nothing short of an outcome of a compulsion:

> Again, every book I've ever written has been a conundrum to me. I don't know what I'm doing, or why I'm doing it. There is simply the compulsion to do it, the absolute necessity of getting that story down on paper. Sometimes, later, after a book is written, I have little glimmers of understanding about where it came from, little hints.[132]

For Paul Auster's characters, the natural way out is brought about by writing which provides room for sublimation from neurosis and from the threats provided by the external world which has become internalized. Once again, and from a perspective based on the empirical world, we are dealing with the tenuous borderline between the world of fact and the world of fiction, a borderline that has much to do with the world of mental states. This is true for David Zimmer and becomes real due to a psychological imbalance produced by panic, and even more real when the character considers it "not a thing of the imagination." Thus, we are confronted with the possibility of a vividly experienced 'fiction' in the world of commonsense reality. Zimmer, during a situation of stress or post-traumatic stress, experiences vividly something which is the product of his own mind.

Both Zimmer and Orr have suffered traumatic experiences, a loss of close family members or a close brush with death, which have left them ailing or psychologically weakened. Both have initiated the path

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132. Interview by Ashton Applewhite: http://www.pearsonrewards.com/static/rguides/us/mr_vertigo.html

of recovery by trying to awaken and invigorate their sense of selfhood which is obtained by a deeper understanding and different commitment with reality. The literary efforts of both writers, Sidney Orr and David Zimmer, serve a 'therapeutic' or healing function. By the creation or, even, habitation of a world which is not the real one but which does not imply an alienation, or disengagement, from the world, this creativity may suppose a closer and truer relation with reality by enhancing human perception of reality.

It is also a common feature to most of Auster's characters that they are at some point confronted with their own bodily realities and that these are perceived as a source of limitation to be left behind or to be transcended. That is why there is, in them, what we may term as some sort of mystical procurement for some other state of being, a state of being that leads them to search for their inner selves, their own light or, in other words, a state of higher awareness. It is in inwardness and isolation that we find the two main features that stand out in characters, while seeking this process that will lead them to knowledge about themselves and consequently about the world around them.

David Zimmer experiences this quest as an opposition between two realities, an outward and inward nature which is also reflected in a dualistic set of goals. Zimmer is a character whom Auster describes as "literally fighting for his life," trying to find a balance between his inner and external states of mind. In his attempt to find a reason for going on living, Zimmer finds a 'raison d'être' in Hector Mann; by finding a key to this man's mystery he is able to reach inside himself and find himself. We are told that Zimmer leaves behind some other goal in his life, obtaining tenure at his university. His life becomes an obsessive focalization on just one subject: Mann. Zimmer's focus will mean writing as its objective. But this is just one

of two reasons, the most important one is to go on living; writing provides a reason to learn how to live on with the world of life in a different way:

> My outward purpose was to study and master the films of Hector Mann, but the truth was that I was teaching myself how to concentrate, training myself how to think about one thing and one thing only. It was the life of a monomaniac, but it was the only way I could live now without crumbling to pieces. (*BI*, p. 27)

First, Zimmer has to separate himself from the world in order to find himself, he must gain control over his own mind. His separation from the world leads him to a progressive and slow encounter with his inner self, his own full humanity. Because of his emotional frailty he is an exile, he has to become a full human being by understanding his own reality, by reflecting on Mann as a type of man who is submersed in a radical and paradoxical dualism of spiritual and transcendental realities, and bodily and contingent realities. Always aware of his own emotional state, Zimmer tries to avoid being crushed by reality; writing is his way out of the world and into the reality of his own self:

> I was slowly getting used to being without Helen and the boys, but that didn't mean I had made any progress. I didn't know who I was, and I didn't know what I wanted, and until I found a way to live with other people again, I would continue to be something only half human. All through the writing of the book, I intentionally put off thinking about the future. (*BI*, p. 56)

Psychologically convalescing, Zimmer found his 'hospital' in a prefab ski chalet; he is a man dealing with an irreparable loss trying to recover his full human status. The solitude of writing provides the focus that makes the person transcend his misery by an exercise of self-analysis:

> 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 invented every day. (*BI*, p. 57)

Once again we can repeat that the grouping of the above-mentioned narratives, under the label of novels of education, comes quite naturally since their characters, and sometimes the narrators themselves, seem to reach a better understanding about themselves and about their relation to the world they inhabit. Admittedly, Auster is very interested in the idea of human development; he expresses his opinion that his novels deal with the construction of personalities:

> I am very much interested in the years of youth. When I read the biographies of famous persons, writers or not, I am always most interested in the chapters that deal with the person before his becoming known. The years of development are something that is always fascinating. Which path do you choose to become yourself… Maybe this is the reason why many of my books are similar to what in German is called the Entwicklungsroman.[133]

Since these characters are artists, or somehow come to discover their artistic sensibility, we can really group them in the more technical term of novel as a *künstleroman* since they deal with the individual as an artist on the path to self-discovery and expressly, deal with the issue of the discovery of artistic maturity. In this way, and by his existence within 'the story,' Quinn discovers the complex relation between fiction and reality, something he was lacking in his own work as a mystery novel writer; his writing has a wider scope, it is about life. Quinn starts a new path in his life and gains an artistic frame by addressing his interest to other areas that he

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133. Interview with Gérard de Cortanze, "Le monde est dans ma tête, mon corps est dans le monde," *Magazine Littéraire*, 338, Décembre 1995, pp. 18-25.

previously had never been concerned about, a shift that shows his change towards a questioning mood and a renewed artistic interest. Most interestingly, Quinn is able to effect the reversal of the post-Babel division of language into tongues, by the use of an artistic language over which he does not seem to have control; he has become a true *namer*, a poet who unifies the sign with a referent and, above all, is able to outdo the division between being and language:

> For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. Quinn no longer had any interest in himself. He wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were a part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower. They no longer had anything to do with him. (*CG*, p. 130)

If the only knowledge accessible to man may, in the end, be self-knowledge, this may be that 'theoretical first step' from which to start making sense of reality. What is also remarkable is that according to Judeo-Christian tradition "knowledge makes you free." This is what happens to Auster's characters, they become free by their own awareness about themselves. Thus, Blue, in *Ghosts,* becomes aware of his situation as a character in a plot devised by Black and White. By gaining insight, Blue becomes free but at the same time he is also able to show a clear artistic attitude; he gets reprimanded and, despite temptation, forces himself to write a report, full of detail with little room for 'excursions into the make-believe.' Everything leads to disappointing results since he excludes his subjective point of view of his life from the report:

> He goes back to the beginning and works his way through the case, step by step. Determined to do exactly what has been asked of him, he painstakingly composes the report in the old style, tackling each detail with such care and aggravating precision that many hours go by before he manages

> to finish. As he reads over the results, he is forced to admit that everything seems accurate. But then why does he feel so dissatisfied, so troubled by what he has written? He says to himself: what happened is not really what happened. For the first time in his experience of writing reports, he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure things they are trying to say. (*G*, pp. 147-148)

We also have other instances of the attainment of self-knowledge in other novels. The narrator in *The Locked Room* realizes that to a certain extent he has been a character of Fanshawe, playing a role for him, and he gains and makes available to us his insight into the nature of the novels of *The New York Trilogy*. This insight comes as a moment of awareness about the end, as a contemplation about the finite nature of the three books. But this moment is also revealed as a moment of conclusion which is faced without fear and which stresses the struggle, that existence presupposes, as an incessant and persistent movement towards knowledge:

> The end, however, is clear to me. I have not forgotten it, and I feel lucky to have kept that much. The 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 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 don't 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 the words; it's in the struggle. (*LR*, p. 294)

Jim Nashe, in *The Music of Chance,* is able to produce autonomous action by acknowledging the reality of the world he inhabits with all of its laws, even if in the end he may have to face death, his own

finitude. David Zimmer, in *The Book of Illusions*, talks to us from the world beyond, about how he recovered his own self with the help of Alma. Like him, Alma also talks from a position out of time; we are told that "she was not truly in this world anymore when she sat down to write me the (suicide) letter." In a similar way to what happens in books, everything can be restarted because the films have not been destroyed, "sooner or later a person will come along who accidentally opens the door of the room where Alma hid them, and the story will start all over again."[134]

Marco Fogg only gains knowledge about his own origins, his own story, after his father's death. In the way of inheritance, he has received a severe education by Effing from whom he learns the basic skills for dealing with reality, from the perspective of a young man who wants to become a writer. For all this sense of ending, end of life, end of the story we have read, there is a new beginning when he finally reaches California after a long walk that sets him at the beginning of his own life.

Sidney Orr as a writer uses fiction; uses all the power of stories for the benefit and sake of his own life. He lives out of writing but also lives by the power of these stories in order to get hold of his own life; quite literally he uses them in different ways to reach some control on his (marital) life. When faced with the prospect that stories can cross the line and become real stories, Orr becomes overwhelmed by the fear of the power of the written world contained in his notebook. It is the idea of end, contained in Trause's book, and the idea of separation from his wife Grace that leads him to tear up the pages of his blue notebook, and manages to stop the advance of these

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134. Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*, p. 321.

stories into the realm of reality; they become stories that will never be fully incubated. But the story had not started yet:

> The true story started only *then*, after I destroyed the blue notebook — and everything I've written so far is little more that a prelude to the horrors I'm about to relate now. Is there a connection between the *before* and the *after*? I don't know. Did the unfortunate French writer kill his child with his poem — or did his words merely predict her death? I don't know. What I do know is that I would no longer argue against his decision today. I respect the silence he imposes on himself, and I understand the revulsion he must have felt whenever he thought of writing again. More than twenty years after the fact, I now believe that Trause called it right. We sometimes know things before they happen, even if we don't know that we know. (*ON*, p. 189)

Time Rules

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding,' in *Four Quartets*.>

In an indirect or, even, if we may say so, furtive way, the common feature that connects the books of this study is the idea of finitude. All of their hero-writers come in contact with, or are confronted with, a sense of ending at some point or another. For all of them there is that close brush with their own natural limits and, to the extent that they come in contact with their own finitude, death; we can say that they become aware of a different sort of reality, that which is precisely determined by their own perception of their existence, or being, in the context of time. It is in this context that their impending termination, in any form, is revealed but also that their own meaning is made evident. Under these circumstances it is obvious that these

novels are dealing with the problem of existence on quite obvious Heideggerian terms: those that state that being is delimited by the boundaries of beginning and end and which establish and make possible the idea of any meaning in time: "We all point to *temporality* as the meaning of the Being of that entity which we call "Dasein."[135]

In the novels of this study, it is this idea of finitude that paradoxically absolves —unties— and liberates its human heroes (both from the constrictions of time and from their bodily and contingent realities) and makes possible the unconcealment of a new conception of being, one which is revealed in them through their movement of becoming. This constitutes a new conception of being which also requires a new conception of time:

> Time must be brought to light — and genuinely conceived as the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it. In order to discern this, *time* needs to be *explicated primordially as the horizon for the understanding of Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein, which understands Being.* This task as a whole requires that the conception of time thus obtained shall be distinguished from the way in which it is ordinarily understood.[136] [My italics]

According to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the main feature of the Dasein —the human being characterized by its own discovery of belongingness to temporality— must be its full realization of its existence in time: once the Dasein accepts this he will experience the true reality of being. Heidegger stresses that it is only when the Dasein is in the context of its own death, or in an equivalent state of extreme anxiety (*angst*), that meaning —*the* meaning— for the

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135. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford and Cambridge, Blackwell, 2004, p. 38.

136. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Dasein is revealed. Auster will express this in *The Book of Illusions* in this manner:

> Moments of crisis produced a redoubled vitality in men. Or, more succinctly perhaps: Men don't begin to live fully until their backs are against the wall. (*BI*, p. 238)

This state is only to be reached through the state of self-awareness in the world of the everyday and its contingencies. The Dasein's relationship with the surrounding world of commonplace objects, one of discovery and of unconcealment, determines both its knowledge about the world and its knowledge about itself. It is by means of contact with the 'everydayness' of existence that the *forgetfulness of being* can be transcended; a forgetfulness systematically imposed by Western thought through its philosophy, ontology and metaphysics:

> I realized that I had never acquired the habit of looking closely at things, and now that I was being asked to do it, the results were dreadfully inadequate. Until then, I had always had a penchant for generalizing, for seeing the similarities between things rather than their differences. Now I was being plunged into a world of particulars, and the struggles to evoke them in words, to summon up the immediate sensual data, presented a challenge I was ill prepared for. (*MP*, p. 121)

According to Ancient Greek and Oriental philosophy, life results in the true integration of beginning and end. In this respect the Greek philosopher Alcmaeon of Croton would say "Men die because they are unable to conjugate beginning with end." This is what Heidegger is telling us and this is what the books by Paul Auster we selected, tell us through their characters, that a different perspective of time is needed. In Auster's characters the contemplation of time as finitude is transformed into viewing time, not as *Kronos* devouring his sons, but into a conception of time as *Kronos agéraos*, a never-aging time

that is to be represented as a snake biting its own tail and which is close to Heraclitean conceptions of time. This presupposes a conception of time wider than that of beginning and end and which implies getting hold of the minute moment. This is precisely, as we have seen, one of the premises of aesthetic Postmodernism which operates together with the rescue of the commonplace and everydayness. This involvement with the commonplace may be contradictory since it, sometimes, escapes being told but, nevertheless, its telling is always attempted.

Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein pointed toward the linguistic character of reality. Ever since Heidegger, all poetry is *Dichtung* (naming): the poet is an orphic singer who brings things into being, as it were, for the first time. Rational thought and the mythical are reunited again when perceived as necessary in an integrating conception of cognition, one which looks at reality as fundamentally constructed by language:

> The poet names the gods and names all things in that which they are. This naming does not consist in merely something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather that when the poet speaks the essential word, the existent is by this naming nominated as what it is. So it becomes known *as* existent. Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word.[137]

This conception of the poet as maker and god-like creator justifies Sidney Orr's, Blue's and Peter Aaron's fear of the written word; they end up destroying any written manuscripts and drafts of novels lest they should come to affect the empirical reality.

It is true that no books will ever age: they do not belong to a past since they will be always actualized in each one of the readings, they

137. Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, Trans. Douglas Scott, Chicago, Regnery, 1949, p. 276.

will start all over again as soon as they attract readers. Books can become a pronoun to human experience. The task of art is to set up a world, nonetheless the work does not belong to it — nor to this world of physical experience. This is the use of memory:

> For liberation — not less of love but expanding
> Of love beyond desire, and no liberation
> From the future as well as the past
>
> T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding,' in *Four Quartets*.

Past no longer is, the future has already taken place — it is taking place, the present is just a gift to be cherished as *Kairós* (eternal return of the same in Nietzsche). Each myth, each novel, constitutes a retelling — repetition of a time in time, which encompasses in itself the grand myth of abstraction from temporality. According to this, *Oracle Night* can be seen as the novel that best represents this preoccupation with time; in Auster time becomes dominated in novels and can be replayed. In novels a new reality is brought up, comes to life. This reality operates and works very much in the same way as 3-D for Richard, allowing the 'unattainable,' or making their readers feel that the stories speak to them, as is the case for Nick Bowen when reading Sylvia Maxwell's novel.

Bearing in mind everything we have mentioned, it must come as no surprise that in Auster the idea of *myth* is not opposed to that of *logos*: both coexist as collaborating in the unconcealment of reality. Literature supposes the unsupported thought out of time and liberated from all physicality; it shares features with the Sutra of the Diamente[138] of Eastern philosophy. This can be considered as a site of pre-verbal nothingness, of wholeness before verbalization in which everything is pure potentiality. This site may presuppose

138. See Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, London, George Allen & Unwinn, 1980.

some sort of giving up of reality that can be seen as the paradoxical abandonment to reality, so that reality reveals its laws. Literature is a repletion out of time in grand non-aging time. It constitutes a rupture with the idea of flux and becoming inherent to the time outside literature. This is the time of the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's rhyme, that of a man condemned to live (in death) forever for having challenged God in creative power with his own creations *ex-nihilo*.

In this state of affairs, writing also presupposes a 'struggle' between a word and its referent; between human potentialities and man's rootedness in a specific environment; a struggle between a language and its parole; a struggle between time as *Kronos* and time as minute time, *Kairós*, a fight that implies paradigmatic and syntagmatic oppositions. It is under this perspective that writing becomes an expression of multiple and quasi-infinite dualities, in Auster, between death and eternity, being and becoming, mind and body. Nevertheless, these oppositions show at certain moments that the separation between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* is seemingly doomed. As we have seen, here is a complete empathy between the investigator and the thing investigated; this is what Blue feels with Black. This is mysterious since he knows full well all the movements of Black. The object of inquiry is perfectly assimilated by the enquirer making him feel without any doubt that he understands the 'other.' Above all, this projection of himself out unto the 'other' makes Blue feel free; free to dedicate his time to his own musings and reflections, to the point that Blue is able to predict what Black is going to do:

> There are moments when he feels so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what Black is going to do, to know when he will stay in his room and when he will go out, he needs merely look into himself. Whole days go by when he doesn't even bother to look through the window or follow Black on the street. Now

> and then, he even allows himself to make solo expeditions, knowing full well that during the time he is gone Black will not have budged from his spot. How he knows this remains something of a mystery to him, but the fact is that he is never wrong, and when the feeling comes over him, he is beyond all doubt and hesitation. (*G*, p. 156)

Exactly the same sort of identification happens to Quinn: the goal is soon revealed as that of getting "into the mind" of the opposing party by predicting or using the same sort of methods as that party and, therefore, by these means an identification with the 'other' is carried out. Nonetheless, at this point Quinn conceded that he had not been hired to understand anything or, to what is the same, to reach a truly intellectual insight on reality:

> And yet, what is it that Dupin says in Poe? 'An identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent.' But here it would apply to Stillman senior. Which is probably even worse. (*CG*, p. 40)

This coalescence, or union of opposites, is not just a product of intuition, imagination or of a 'leap into' sense; it is a reduplication of what happens between the figures of the empirical writer and that of the being who writes. The latter appropriates the former and there is no difference between the subject and the predicate. It can be affirmed, in almost biblical quality, that he is as he is. Because of the connection authors have with both realities, and the precedence of fiction, fiction may take precedence over the empirical reality. The author creates an alter ego, his superior in all respects, which dwarfs his own image, and the empirical author seems to become unreal under his own eyes, unreal like reality; reality may easily become more artificial than fiction:

> He had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work. His detective necessarily had to be real. The nature

> of the books demanded it. If Quinn had allowed himself to vanish, to withdraw from the confines of a strange and hermetic life, Work continued to live in the world of others, and the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work's presence in that world became. (*CG*, p. 9)

A similar situation to that experienced by the writer Sidney Orr: "I wrote the book in less than nine months. But other than that I didn't budge from Brooklyn." Presence and absence in two worlds is stressed; this constitutes a situation that can be described as similar to the hypnagogic state of Hawthorne's characters who move between both worlds. When confronted with the world Sidney Orr had departed, in order to create the fictional world, Orr recognizes this *state of double consciousness* from which he can contemplate fiction and reality; a state of consciousness that may be termed as close to the hypnagogic state Richard Wilbur uses to describe the opposition between the mental and empirical realities in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Orr furthers his explanation about this state of double consciousness, in which reality itself also seems to evaporate, in the following terms:

> I was both a part of what was going on around me and cut off from it, drifting freely in my mind as I imagined myself sitting at my desk in Brooklyn, writing about this place in the blue notebook, and sitting in a chair on the top floor of a Manhattan duplex, firmly anchored in my body, listening to what John and Grace were saying to each other and even adding some remarks of my own. It's not unusual for a person to be so preoccupied as to appear absent — but the point was that I wasn't absent. I was there, fully engaged in what was happening, and at the same time I wasn't there — for the there wasn't an authentic there anymore. It was an illusory place that existed in my head, and that's where I was as well. In both places at the same time. In the apartment and in the story. In the story in the apartment that I was still writing in my head. (*ON*, pp. 25-26)

In *The Book of Illusions*, there is a clear treatment of the problem of dualism, one which reaches a level of mysticism. We are even told that for Horace Mann the world had split in two. Alma, a character, as already noted, with a name of evident spiritual connotations, would be described dualistically as one in whom her mind and body were no longer talking to each other. Mann, for his part, tries to 'go numb' in order to transcend sensorial experience and reach up for a new state of awareness far from a material experience of reality. Paradoxically, Mann chooses a peculiar way of expurgating sin, a way that does not seem less than the path to more sin or, even, utter perdition. It can, correctly, be said that he has *abandoned* his body to the world:

> His world had split in two, Alma said, and his mind and body were no longer talking to each other. He was an exhibitionist and a hermit, a mad debauchee and a solitary monk, and if he managed to survive these contradictions in himself for as long as he did, it was only because he willed his mind to go numb. No more struggles to be good, no more pretending to believe in the virtues of self-denial. His body had taken control of him, and the less he thought about what his body was doing, the more successfully he was able to do it. (*BI*, p. 184)

Gathering all this information we may say that the writer, we can conclusively infer, exists in a 'neutral territory' between the physical world and the interior and imaginary one in what is a privileged position of observation and interaction with the world; this standpoint was already present in the romance typology drawn by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In Postmodernism, the prevailing sense of loss of reality, which in the end makes reality a part of fiction since it is beyond believable and has a dreamlike nature, contributes to bring fiction into the daily experience of the world. This reality may exist

in a neutral territory that, as we have seen, may take place out of the fiction of books:

> The whole scene had an imaginary quality to it. I knew that it was real, but at the same time it was better than reality, more nearly a projection of what I wanted from reality than anything I had experienced before. My desires were very strong, overpowering in fact, but it was only because of Kitty that they were given a chance to express themselves. (*MP*, p. 94)

Thus, this hypnagogic state presented by a 'neutral territory' serves individuals to transcend the limitations of the world. As a neutral territory it is beyond the influence of reason and that is why it marks a borderline between reality and some other reality, that of imagination and craziness. Under this set of relations, the notebook materializes the imagination of the writer that must be kept under the control of the writer. The magic power of the notebook is no other than the expression of the power of the writer. Creativity, thus, seems to be something alien to the apprehension of the writer himself because it escapes a rational explanation:

> I know. It's all in my head. I'm not saying it isn't, but ever since I bought that notebook, everything's gone out of whack. I can't tell if I'm the one who's using the notebook or if the notebook's been using me. Does that make any sense?' (*ON*, p. 141)

In this case, David Zimmer, by means of his split existence provided by his writing, procures isolation from the world of reality. We have, therefore, a conception of the writer as that of character experimenting a split self; a being who lives between the two worlds. It is precisely in the interval between these two worlds that the creativity of the writer takes place in an encounter with the otherness of the 'world out there:'

> But I wasn't really in Brooklyn either. 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. (*BI*, p. 55)

Indeed, the novelist as an empirical being lives by himself in this duality of two worlds and, once the fictive world is created, this world and all its characters become extremely vivid for the writer; events and actions first exist in the mind but enter the realm of empirical commonsense reality, or so the writer is led to believe:

> I didn't model him on anyone I knew (not consciously, at any rate), but once I had finished putting him together in my mind, he became astonishingly vivid to me — almost as if I could see him, almost as if he had entered the room and were standing next to me, looking down at the desk with his hand on my shoulder and reading the words I was writing… watching me bring him to life with my pen. (*ON*, p. 15)

Definitely, the senses are not to be trusted; the foundations provided by empiricism as based on close observation are no longer valid for getting hold of trustworthy information. That is, reality, our perception of reality, obtained by the senses is to be distrusted. There is an impossibility of attained reality experienced under normal circumstances:

> To my surprise, the light was flashing on the answering machine. There hadn't been any messages when I'd returned from my lunch at Rita's, and now there were two. Strange. Insignificant, perhaps, but strange. For the fact was, I hadn't heard the phone ring. Had I been so caught up in what I was doing that I hadn't noticed the sound? Possibly. But if that were so, then it was the first time it had ever happened to me. Our phone had a particular loud bell, and the noise always carried down the hall to my workroom — even when the door was shut. (*ON*, p. 99)

Under these circumstances what we consider as imaginings become true, like in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and, at last, fiction for a writer becomes more important than reality. There is always a point in which fiction becomes an obsession in the life of the fiction writer, and fiction takes precedence over reality by taking over the writer and his world:

> There is a point at which a book begins to take over your life, when the world you have imagined becomes more important to you than the real world, and it barely crossed my mind that I was sitting in the same chair that Sachs used to sit in, that I was writing at the same table he used to write at, that I was breathing the same air he had once breathed. (*L*, p. 218)

Taking a somewhat different position, writing constitutes a metaphor for life, writing is about life and this is the position Paul Auster often takes. Writing is also about a life started and finished at the beginning and end of each one of the *readings* to which it can be submitted, and where meaning prevails and transcends the act of reading. Under this perspective, it can be said that all works of art tend to "ex-tasis," to be out of themselves, to transcend their own realities to that, much longed for, point of nowhere that we have mentioned before. In Auster's books, writing advances with the experience of the characters, each one of them is also writing its own identity while seeking knowledge as beings-in-the-world. In this search there is one more paradox: the last, or the first questions or answers are those to be sought. Writing presupposes not just the unconcealment of identity / truth, but also that of the characters and that of the author himself, who may always end up unconcealing himself before his own eyes.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this book has been to concentrate on the subject of the novel according to Paul Auster. In this respect, I have stressed the importance of communication, and most particularly, the association of this communication with what can be termed as the world of ideas or the world of philosophy.

Since Postmodernism is to be considered as an umbrella concept, and consequently, applied to a multitude of disciplines, it is quite logical and natural in literature to apply it to quite different 'styles' and, it is again quite natural, that this complexity and variety prevents any commitment to a clear-cut definition. Regardless of what we apply this term to, we can affirm that Postmodernism indicates a new condition of man considered in a new context of civilizational evolution. Postmodernism marks a new stage of civilization characterized by instability (flux) or, even, incredulity (skepticism) towards reality and any of the constructs of the mind. Ihab Hassan's term *indetermanence* would reveal the constitutive nature of this reality. This is a reality which is permanently debated, always negotiated and, most importantly, a reality which is made available by linguistic communication.

All the novels by Paul Auster presuppose the investigation into a newer relationship of a hero, usually a writer, or a writer-minded character, with the world. It is this setting that provides the base on

which communication, etymologically understood as the putting in common of ideas, takes place. This presupposes a sharing which, as any sharing, has a basic and fundamental non-prescriptive nature; it is also a sharing which evidences, somehow, the presence of an author tenuously visible through his characters or narrative voices. Auster, in this way, makes himself part and parcel of his narrations. A participation that allows Auster to enter the ironic gap and take a part in fiction with a voice of his own, a voice which is never absolute, even when it points towards an integrating type of knowledge.

In Auster, communication logically focuses on the importance of language as a means of communicating reality. In focusing on language, Auster draws attention to the nature of reality as a construct. Language rightly constitutes the 'house of being' which both delimits and organizes the world of man. Communication constitutes the base for an epistemological-ontological positioning of Paul Auster's narratives. The novel constitutes the essential instrument for a profound questioning of the world by becoming, in its own right, a "metaphor for being," always centered on the human being as its main aim. Auster, as any writer, transforms the world into questions. The "excursions into the make-believe" lead Auster out of literalness and beyond factual reality by re-describing reality and making available a newer and more authentic knowledge about it; one that takes man to the center, since all knowledge must be based on a more authentic feeling of "being in the world."

We can consider this concept of communication in Auster as an exercise focused on "wholeness," an exercise of integrating disparity into the singularity of polyphony. It is under these features that communication attempts to attain the ultimate goal of reaching an integral and total perception of reality. In this process, the role of the writer as unifier is highlighted. The writer re-describes reality while being inscribed in the flux of reality; in this way, the writer

reaches a privileged, albeit paradoxical, position: that of being a prime agent in making available reality and knowledge about that same reality while being —or pretending to be— out of reality and reaching the much longed-for philosophical 'point of nowhere.'

Novels, as all the arts in general, must be considered as never being fulfilled and always open to new interpretations. By means of *serenity*, using Martin Heidegger's term, novels serve the purpose of making possible the observation of reality. It is in the contemplation provided by this perspective that the work of Paul Auster must be inscribed. His novels are a means to deal with the world of life in a special way, a way similar to the one of the French *philosophes*. Rightly considered, Auster becomes a Diderot of the Postmodern Age, always keen on offering a perspective of complex character; one that in questioning the world always generates more questions than answers. Auster lets his 'stories' speak for themselves, stories that always grow as appendixes to other stories in a seemingly never-ending production, searching for meaning in the world of reality. In this state of affairs, the value of the storyteller is recovered and the storyteller is transformed by the written word into someone who tries his best to understand the mutability of reality and communicate it as a process mediated by his understanding.

Furthermore, Paul Auster's novels constitute an appeal *tout court* to the reader, similar to that appeal made by Milan Kundera for the prevention of the death of the novel. An appeal that demands from the reader several responses materialized in play, in dream, in thought and, last but not least, a quite different way of dealing with time. As Kundera acknowledges, these elements, nonetheless, constitute the very essence of the novel of all times. In its turn, Auster's appeal constitutes a deeper more direct effort to go beyond the novel itself, to overstep any kind of limits that may have been imposed on the novel in the course of its own existence

as genre. Going beyond any limitations, Auster's novels disregard verisimilitude and call for the fusion between the world of fiction and reality and approach the realm of philosophy in a time in which philosophy tries to approach the realm of fiction. Auster takes an active part in effecting the encounter of both.

In fiction, the act of going beyond reality highlights the importance of the metaphorical structure of fiction. It is in the twentieth century that we come to the knowledge that reality is also an 'army of metaphors' and that metaphors constitute a fundamental premise for going beyond what is probable and imaginary, in order to build knowledge about reality. Literature, with its metaphorical base, surges as an advantage point both questioning and ascertaining knowledge about the real. In doing so, the novel rises above its own nature as fiction by depicting a reality that transcends empirical experience; the metaphor by its characteristic 'suspension of disbelief' assumes the introduction of a world of hypotheses in contrast to a world of literalness.

Indeed, in contemporary philosophy we witness an approach between *mythos* and *logos*. Postmodern literature uses this approach and benefits from this coalescence between two methods keen on making knowledge available, methods no longer to be considered as opposed but as co-operating. In the novels that made part of our study, *natural thought* and *rational thought* are again one and the same as before, with Plato and Aristotle. In Auster, facts and words are placed on the same level; what matters is the story made up of words. Words create the reality of a novel and reality becomes language, as language becomes reality, when used in relation to the empirical world.

By operating on the materials of the empirical world, Auster creates a special location in which he is always reconciling their surface value with their deeper value, in a move that highlights

the engagement of his writing with the world of life. In Auster's choice of Postmodernism, the rational and the imaginary combine in the make-believe to make possible, and effect, a 'leap into sense' that is comprehensive and far ranging. This effort is prodded on by the co-operation of the key terms of the romantic order: induction and deduction which make possible the bridging of the real and the imaginary.

The semiotically real and the empirically real are equated since both share the common nature of signs. The link between the fictional and the real, made possible by the agency of similitude, prevents disruptive modes of writing. Communication is, after all, the bringing together or putting in common a variety of ingredients or, what turns out to be the same, the sharing of information. In Auster's Postmodern writing the encounter of the realm of fiction and the realm of the real, in a way reminiscent of Hawthorne, makes possible, if not the shaking of consciences, our reconsideration of the real and our relationship with it. The term *romance-novel* can rightly be applied to Paul Auster's narratives where it finds a new expression, revealing the superiority of fiction in the revelation of a reality beyond any contingent character. This quest can be summarized by the action of looking into the probable and not the real; a quest that lays bare the duality of a human existence, cleft between the external and the internal reality of the self.

Novels, thus, assume a 'more serious' character, becoming essays in which the imaginative language occupies a marked centrality, operating the dissolution of the borders between fiction and non-fiction, precisely because reality is made up of language. Auster underscores the importance of language in making available reality; any skepticism about reality carries with it, in an implicit manner, the idea that reality has to be re-described in order to be perceived in its fullest force. Reality can be revealed with the new eyes provided

by language; a reality made present by going beyond the surface, and by the systematic questioning of the structure and the procedures for obtaining knowledge which always leave in the open the linguistic construction of reality. Inherent to this perception of reality there is an always present whiff of that Romantic wish for a superior order that becomes a mystery, that somehow regulates existence.

It must be pointed out that in his particular approach to reality, Auster always creates the notion that in the novel there is that much longed-for point outside existence. Reading and writing are part of the investigation of reality, the stress is passed on to the reader as the sole retriever of meaning from a reality that has never been whole. The self, any self, must find unity surpassing and conquering the logical-rational limit. It is the narrative that orders the relation of the self with reality. From this follows a stress on the concept of 'self-awareness' which in Auster constitutes just a first step towards knowledge about the external reality, and only then can a newer more truthful relationship with reality be established. Only through this new and truer relationship with reality do Auster's characters attain a new state of being in relation with the world, one that is close to Heidegger's notion of 'being in the world.' Self-knowledge in Auster's characters brings them awareness about the value and position of both fiction and reality. The value of the meaning of fiction is highlighted, meaning in literature is always deferred; it creates in literature that special situation of *difference* which presupposes its placement out of mere presence. It is meaning which is sustained after a discovery which implies the breaking of a code and the partial unconcealment of a secret. A mystery is always left before the eyes of the hero character, a mystery which is also replicated in the reader. This is the discovery which constitutes the ultimate confrontation with the nature of fiction.

For the hero, and for the reader, reality, in fiction or in the empirical world, will reveal itself only by *abandonment*. Not by a blind submission but, quite on the contrary, by the acceptance of its rules. The self, a hero character or the reader, must become aware of its relationship with the world they inhabit, must become aware of being part of a world which is not just physical.

The heroes of the novels we have considered in this book are, borrowing the words of Richard Rorty, to be considered as characters in their own right resembling 'strong poets,' as forgers of new languages with which to describe and experience their realities. These heroes also represent Auster's preoccupations as a writer, and as a human being, trying to get hold of reality. Ultimately, we have to look at Auster as an ironist who utilizes the narrative in an opposed and complementary way to scientific knowledge; Auster's procedures for obtaining knowledge are of an integrating type.

Finis coronat opus

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