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Poetry in and out of *The New York Trilogy*

François Hugonnier

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.

(Auster, *The Red Notebook* 104)

The New York Trilogy set a precedent for the main themes and questions that have kept haunting Paul Auster throughout his career as a novelist. However, this paper stands to show how these early preoccupations had already started to take shape in his concise and intricate poetic work, revolving around the Jewish-American issues of identity, naming and the act of writing. Focusing on Auster's poetics in and out of *The New York Trilogy* is useful in order to decipher his hermetic language of stone and his experimentations with desubjectification. The poet's—and the novelist's—avowed incapacity to translate his perception of the world into words demands a rereading of his fictional games inspired by post-structuralism, Transcendentalism and Kabbalah.

Twenty five years after the publication of *The New York Trilogy*, Auster's position as one of the most influential and ground-breaking radical secular Jewish-American writers seems established. Although Auster stopped publishing poetry in the late 1970s, he featured on Charles Bernstein's panel *Secular Jewish Culture/Radical Poetic Practice* in 2004. Auster's poem 'White', a *midrash* on Noah and the Flood written in memory of Paul Celan, concludes the book of essays with a similar title published by Miller and Morris in 2010. While he often repeats Marina Tsvetayeva's phrase 'All poets are Jews' (like Paul Celan before him), Auster is definitely a one-of-a-kind, radical Jewish-American poet writing fiction of his own. Auster started out as a pioneer poet who helped in the reconsideration of underestimated Objectivist figures such as the 'hyphenated' 'poet of the eye' Charles Reznikoff who experienced 'the condition [...] of being nowhere' (Auster, *Collected Prose* 379) while striving to name things in the aftermath of the fall of the Tower of Babel. Auster also translated Mallarmé's '*modern nothingness*' into English (*The Invention of Solitude* 111) and into his own poetics of absence and silence, generating the hybrid narrative bridges *White Spaces* and *The Invention of Solitude*, and of course, his first novel *City of Glass*. Imbued with the mystical trends of Judaism and the paradoxes involved in the act of writing, Auster places language at the heart of his

semiotic world, where each and every interconnected object is a sign to be read, where every question remains unanswered and leads to yet another question.

Auster's novels have had a tremendous impact on the international literary scene since the publication of *The New York Trilogy*, which offered a new and unclassifiable genre of 'post-modern' writing. Nevertheless, impelled by the unspeakable and playing with the strengths and limitations of words and narrative frames, he has carefully avoided the pitfalls of a reassuring reenactment of mindless *mise en abyme* and metafiction. Auster has overtaken his own conventions and drifted away from his so-called 'postmodernist' twists and turns to assert a new form of 'realism', which is still informed by his poetic ear. Since *City of Glass*, Auster has kept listening faithfully to his narrators' enigmatic voices, and he has learned how to keep himself at a distance. Explicitly quoted in *The Invention of Solitude* (124), Rimbaud's phrase 'Je est un autre' (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 84)—'I is another'—could well sum up the complex metamorphosis that has shaped his prismatic work relentlessly concerned with *doppelgängers* and proteiform reinventions of the Self and Other.

Like most poems and novels by Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* is deeply rooted in contingency, the act of naming and the failure of language to re-present the world. Form may change, but Auster's original creative impulse—motivated by the inadequacy of human language, 'the rift between world and word, the chasm that divides human life from our capacity to understand or express the truth of human life' (Auster, *Winter Journal* 223)—has remained. Starting with his poems, 'nothingness', 'silence', 'absence' and 'the desert' have always been dialectically opposed to 'thingness', 'speech', 'presence' and 'the city'. Auster's *unwords* (words of nothingness, silence and anti-representation which already filled and emptied both his poems and *The New York Trilogy*) still deconstruct the absent buildings and people the texts with shadows.

As with each poem, with each novel, Auster rewrites the story of Creation, and more often than not New York City is a new Garden of Eden where characters are unable to name the broken things that litter the concrete streets. After Quinn, Stillman and Blue in *The New York Trilogy*, *Invisible's* Adam Walker is a new personification of the genuine poet wandering in the city, naming the things that 'drow[n] in the fathomless hole / of his eye' (Auster, *Collected Poems* 107). In *Sunset Park*, Miles Heller (whose name exposes the trauma of his brother's death in a car accident and the hell of guilt in which he has lived ever

since) takes pictures of post-9/11 America's 'abandoned things' (3, 5, original emphasis). Auster keeps nurturing the dichotomy between 'things' and 'words' that is central to both his poems and his first novels. In his prose writings, Auster still uses his poetic tools, his senses five. What he refers to as 'a *phenomenology of breathing*' in his memoir *Winter Journal* (1, original emphasis) draws not only from Charles Olson's 'projective verse' and Paul Celan's 'breathturn', but also from Emerson's definition of the poet as 'the sayer, the namer', who finds 'the condition of true naming' in the 'divine *aura* which breathes through forms' (*Essays: Second Series* 7, 28, original emphasis). Unable to *represent* the (real) world by using language, Auster tries to compose a musical phrase that would match his perception, just as breathing provides a rhythm and a constant interaction with the outside world. In his poems, breathing and seeing are described as the conditions of 'survival':

a means
of survival by breath
alone. And if nothing,
then let nothing be
the shadow
[...]

('Gnomon', *Collected Poems* 128)

In his essays and interviews, Auster speaks of writing as an 'act of survival' (*Collected Prose* 326 / *The Art of Hunger* 183), a 'mode of survival' (*Collected Prose* 368), or else a 'matter of survival' (*The Red Notebook* 123). As essential as writing, breathing is described as a 'means of survival' in 'Gnomon'. In this poem, Auster rewrites the story of Creation ('let nothing be / the shadow'). Darkness and nothingness lurk below an artificial linguistic surface, but the white space offered by this enjambment enlightens the shadow of the word. The inside/outside and life/death polarities expressed through breath are also transposed and overcome through the eye:

He is alive, and therefore he is nothing
but what drowns in the fathomless hole
of his eye

('Disappearances', *Collected Poems* 107)

Auster's American heritage is marked by both the acknowledgement and the rejection of his Objectivist and Transcendentalist influences. This stanza comprises a crucial aspect of Auster's poetics of the eye/I, and above all, of nothingness. Auster rewrites Emerson's famous words taken from his first essay on 'Nature': 'I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God' (Emerson, *Essays & Lectures* 10). The relentless reading of signs in *The New York Trilogy* also calls to mind Jewish mysticism and American Transcendentalism, not to mention New England's Puritanism. As Aliko Varvogli thoroughly demonstrates in *The World that is the Book*, Auster addresses a satire to the Transcendentalists in *The New York Trilogy*. In the final analysis, Auster's various tones and modes, alternating from metaphysical insights to parody, resist any form of dogmatic or academic etiquette. In 'Disappearances', Auster turns Emerson's 'I am nothing' into 'he is nothing' (*Collected Poems* 107, emphasis mine) thanks to his desubjectified third-person subject. The 'fathomless hole / of his eye' (107) echoes Emerson's 'transparent eye-ball' and Thoreau's 'lake': 'It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature' (Thoreau, *Walden* Ch. 9). In Auster's poems, the recurrent verb 'drown' connotes the impossibility of breath and words. It draws the boundaries of human language and experience, and pays homage to Paul Celan, 'one who drowned' in the Seine ('White', *Collected Poems* 87).

Writing in the post-1945 era after Samuel Beckett, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, Paul Auster struggles with the poetic act of naming in a world of fragments and ruin. Like Quinn, Stillman, Heller or Fogg (describing the city streets to a blind man in *Moon Palace*), Mr. Blank, the main character of *Travels in the Scriptorium*, confronts a linguistic 'chaos' as he tries to put the proper labels back on the things that surround him in his room. He actually goes through Blue's worst nightmare, as it was described in *Ghosts*:

It will not do to call a 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 just proved the existence of the world. (*The New York Trilogy* 148)

Playing with the ineluctable difference between sign and object, Auster alludes to the linguistic creation of the world, and consequently to the symbolic—sometimes almost fictive—quality of human existence. *The*

New York Trilogy is a sophisticated exploration of Auster's precepts established in his 1967 'Notes from a Composition Book', in which he boldly claimed that

The fall of man is not a question of sin, transgression, or moral turpitude. It is a question of language conquering experience: the fall of the world into the word, experience descending from the eye to the mouth. A distance of about three inches. (*Collected Poems* 204)

Like Humpty Dumpty, the main characters of *The New York Trilogy* experience physical and linguistic falls. In *City of Glass*, the insane linguist Peter Stillman locks up his homonymous son Peter Stillman in order to recover the *Word of God*. Auster's characters cannot touch things with words, but they enable him to pursue his poetic experimentations with the strengths and limitations of language. Mostly devoid of images that would further thicken the walls between words and things, except perhaps when it comes to depicting the impossibility of representation, Auster's poems and novels are built on a language of stone. More than an image, the stone is an emblem in Auster's work: the stone *is* the word. At the end of *Invisible* (306-8), when the 'stones' are 'reduced to gravel' in a 'barren field', Auster actually refers back to the building blocks of his poetics. When Adam and his sister Gwynn—whose name, like 'Quinn', 'rhymes with twin [...] And sin' (*The New York Trilogy* 74)—commit a '*monumental* transgression' (*Invisible* 144, italics mine), one is tempted to read the linguistic transgression of man and the subsequent construction of the Tower of Babel. Auster's use of debris and dust is inherited from Beckett, and even more so—as far as poetics is concerned—from Celan, who literally *dug out* his deceitful mother tongue (Auster's poem 'Quarry' induces a similar operation).

Commenting on stones in Auster's poetry, Marc Chénétier borrows the key adjective 'saxifrage' from Michel Deguy (Chénétier, 'On Silence, Space, Stones and Speed: The Poetics of Paul Auster' 2). In fact, before them, William Carlos Williams had already used the word 'saxifrage' to define his own poetics. 'A Sort of Song' illustrates the process of word and stone fragmentation which was later experimented by Auster:

Let the snake wait under
his weed

and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

(Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* 55)

Both poets describe a linguistic transgression ('serpent'). Contrary to Williams, Auster implies that the saxifrage seed cannot turn into a flower and break through the real. Auster's *unwords* cannot bloom among the ruins and rubbles of the Tower of Babel. 'The people and the stones' do not 'reconcile' in Auster's poems, but they still 'compose' his novels, in which they also tend to melt. Like Peter Stillman and Fanshawe in their locked rooms, Auster is actually unable to master the poetic word. Brick by brick, he walls himself up by using a treacherous language of stone, a *pharmakon* condemning him to representation. Similarly, in *White Spaces* Auster describes the Arctic explorer Freuchen, threatened by his own freezing breath in his igloo. In the poem 'Interior', he borrows Walt Whitman's image of 'a scarab / devoured in the sphere / of its own dung' (Auster, *Collected Poems* 67), and comes to a lucid and inescapable conclusion about the act of writing:

In the impossibility of words,
in the unspoken word
that asphyxiates,
I find myself.

(67)

Auster's poems are driven by a compulsory need for words that paradoxically leads to a Mallarmean disappearance of the poetic subject. When Joseph Mallia interviewed Paul Auster about 'what unites his work in such disparate genres' as poetry, fiction, translation and essays (etc.), he answered that it 'has to do with language. [...] It all goes toward exploring the limits of the sayable. It has to do with perception, the connection between seeing the world and speaking the world, what happens in that gap between the two' (*Bomb Magazine*). For instance, in the opening pages of *City of Glass*, Quinn wanders with open eyes like Reznikoff in the New York streets. In this labyrinthine, self-produced 'nowhere' of loss and language, he tries to follow the objectivist principle by literally becoming a 'seeing eye':

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. [...] By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was *nowhere*. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: *to be nowhere*. New York was *the nowhere he had built around himself*, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (*The New York Trilogy* 3-4, italics mine)

Quinn embodies 'the poet as solitary wanderer, as man in the crowd, as faceless scribe', as Auster wrote in his essay on Reznikoff (*Collected Prose* 378). Quinn used to be a poet, and like Reznikoff, he is a 'faceless scribe' writing mystery novels under the pen name William Wilson. Since he is a writer, his activity consists of the daily repetition of the real 'transgression' of man—naming. By the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn is completely lost in his self-built 'nowhere', and he is only filled with 'nothingness': 'Quinn was *nowhere now*. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing' (104, italics mine). In the first sentence of the eleventh chapter, the word 'here' stands out between two 'now's. Quinn has gone from 'nowhere' to 'now here'. The 'nowhere' of literature and imagination offers new perspectives on

space and time, and it creates a tricky sense of presence. Wherever fictional illusions and linguistic riddles may lead them, Paul Auster, his characters and his readers are all blinded by a great language void.

Whether as a poet or as a novelist, Auster himself has always been a ‘wanderer’ and a ‘faceless scribe’. In a letter to William Bronk, he alleged that he had no idea where the ambiguous narrative voices of *The New York Trilogy* came from, and that, like Quinn, he had kept walking ‘blindly’, step by step, advancing ‘word by painful word’ (Bronk, undated). Quinn is eager to get out of his ‘nowhere’ and to speak with the voice of another when the phone rings and he impulsively steals Paul Auster’s identity. As the plot takes off, Quinn meets Peter Stillman Jr., aka ‘Mr. Nobody’, the whitewashed and neutral archetype of a pure, invisible and indecipherable poet. Like Stillman Jr. and Quinn, Auster’s characters are always, at least to some extent, ‘Mr. Nobod[ies]’ who belong ‘nowhere’. Among them is the wanderer Hector Mann, a silent movie actor who disappears and changes his name to ‘Herman Loesser’ in *The Book of Illusions*. The narrator David Zimmer considers Mann’s ‘last film’, ‘*Mr. Nobody*’, as ‘a meditation on his own disappearance’ and ‘a film about the anguish of selfhood’ (*The Book of Illusions* 53). The ‘mirror scene’ (53) in ‘*Mr. Nobody*’ is but one of Auster’s numerous ‘Portraits of the Artist as an Invisible Man’, so to speak. From a retrospective vantage point, the ‘anguish of selfhood’ and the artist’s ‘disappearance’ can be assessed as defining aspects of Auster’s poetics and aesthetics.

In *Invisible* and *Winter Journal*, Auster gives useful clues to measure the implications of the poet’s loneliness and invisibility, which are linked to the fiction writer’s—and the characters’—need to ‘leav[e] himself behind’ (*The New York Trilogy* 3-4). The writer can access vision and expression only by becoming invisible, by opening himself to various identities and by freeing himself of I’s ego, to paraphrase Charles Olson’s words. In *Winter Journal*, hinting discreetly at the poetry magazine *Living Hand* he edited as a young poet (1973), Auster quotes Keats’s marginal poem ‘This Living Hand’ (*Winter Journal* 164-5). Auster reveals the method that propelled his entire oeuvre. In order to know Paul Auster, Paul needs to get out of Auster, to observe his hand, his body, his face and his subjectivity from the outside, from the perspective of another. Auster’s autobiographical work *Winter Journal* is indeed entirely written in the second person. This pattern was gradually sketched out in his poetic work and in *City of Glass*, in which Quinn ends up visiting Paul Auster’s family. Stillman’s monologue is also a caricature of this creative process. The

narrative shift from first to third person, as it is clearly dichotomized in *The Invention of Solitude*, is represented through Stillman's strange character in *City of Glass*:

I am mostly now a poet. Every day I sit in a room and write another poem. I make up all the words myself, just like when I lived in the dark. I begin to remember things that way, to pretend that I am back in the dark again. I am the only one who knows what the words mean. They cannot be translated. These poems will make me famous. Hit the nail on the head. Ya, ya ya. Beautiful poems. So beautiful the whole world will weep.

[...]

Peter can talk like people now. But he still has the other words in his head. They are God's language, and no one else can speak them. They cannot be translated. That is why Peter lives so close to God. That is why he is a famous poet. (*The New York Trilogy* 19-20)

Shifting from 'I' to 'he', Stillman pretends to reach an absolute and untranslatable purity of the word. It is something Auster himself strived for as a poet, and recognized in others (William Bronk, George Oppen, Jacques Dupin). As early as 1971, writing about Dupin's poetry, Auster stated that 'the poetic word' is 'burdened by the weight of habit and layers of dead skin that must be stripped away before it can regain its true function' ('The Cruel Geography of Jacques Dupin's Poetry' 78). This stripping bare requires a radical denial of the poet's *subjectivity*, leaving him naked, almost transparent; and a prelapsarian quest leading to the origins of *language*. Norman Finkelstein thus speaks of Auster's search for a language 'prior to language' (53).

In the introductory paragraph of 'The Decisive Moment' (1974), Auster elaborates universal definitions of poetry and the act of writing. In the light of these theories—which would spawn such characters as the two Stillmans, Quinn or Blue—the act of writing is a 'discovery of the real' and the poet is 'the mute heir of the builders of Babel'.

Each poetic utterance is an emanation of the eye, a transcription of the visible into the brute, undeciphered code of being. The act of writing, therefore, is not so much an ordering of the real as a discovery of it. It is a process by which one places oneself between things and the names of

things, a way of standing watch in this interval of silence and allowing things to be seen — as if for the first time — and henceforth to be given their names. The poet, who is the first man to be born, is also the last. He is Adam, but he is also the end of all generations: the mute heir of the builders of Babel. For it is he who must learn to speak from his eye — and cure himself of seeing with his mouth. (Auster, *Collected Prose* 373)

In the introductory paragraph of this essay on Reznikoff's poetry, Auster comes up with a generic definition of 'the poet'. Like the future fiction writer and his characters, 'the poet' is the namer, the one who faces the paradox of using the flawed language of man. As illustrated by this excerpt, and as Sylvia Sölderlind explains, in Auster's work,

poetry is always more closely linked with a kind of authentic relationship between self and world, with a language reminiscent of—or aiming at—the prelapsarian vernacular that the novelist acknowledges cannot be found. [...] We tend to forget that Humpty Dumpty was also a poet, author of 'Jabberwocky,' a particularly difficult poem to translate because of its emphasis on the signifier. (Sölderlind, 'Humpty Dumpty in New York: Language and Regime Change in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*' 9)

Paul Auster tackles the paradoxes of selfhood and reality in his metaphysical thrillers. What Sölderlind calls the 'authentic[ity]' (9) of poetry remains an important area of interest in *The New York Trilogy*. Sölderlind reminds us that Humpty Dumpty is 'a poet' (9) and 'a philosopher of language' (1), and it might be argued that Auster also is. In a proofreading version of *Facing the Music*, a hybrid collection of poetry and prose sent to William Bronk in 1979, 'White Spaces', which was then entitled 'Happiness, or a Journey through Space', contained an unpublished paragraph on The Tower of Babel and Humpty Dumpty. In this excerpt Auster already toyed with the linguistic fall of man. Here in 'Happiness, or a Journey through Space' is the original egg, gravitating from the first to the last poem in *Collected Poems*, and from which the enigmatic narrative voices of *The New York Trilogy* finally broke free:

Question: three blind mice; the four corners of the earth; the five of hearts. Answer: all of them.
Question: Adam and Eve, the Tower of Babel; Humpty Dumpty; London Bridge. Answer: all fall down. Question: ashes, ashes. Answer: ashes, ashes. (34)

Auster poses a conundrum derived from the fall and its biblical resonances, which are largely explored in *The New York Trilogy*. Like Jabès's grain of sand, Auster's eggs, stones and dust are linguistic fragments holding the memory of the world. But they remain silent and oracular. Stillman tells Quinn that Humpty Dumpty is a 'fallen creature' (*The New York Trilogy* 82), and further speculates that 'the moon does look very much like an egg' (83). Stillman's conclusion makes a lot of sense when we consider it from inside and outside the *Trilogy*: 'As you can see, sir, I leave no stone unturned' (83). Paul Auster turns poetry and fiction upside-down. The poet, the fictional detective and the reader need to look at all the details, all the linguistic and symbolic clues, to put the story together.

Like the poet Paul Auster, Quinn is led on a 'blind journey across language and the world' (Dupin, *Disparitions* 8, my translation) which at one point even reminds him of El, one of God's unpronounceable names in the Jewish tradition. Looking at the letters formed on the map of Stillman's wanderings ('OWER OF BAB' [70]), he comes up with the following digression:

The last two letters remained: the 'E' and the 'L'. Quinn's mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words. Then, struggling through his torpor one last time, he told himself that El was the ancient Hebrew for God. (71)

In this passage, Auster pays silent homage to both Samuel Beckett and Edmond Jabès. When Quinn arrives in 'a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words', he actually finds himself 'nowhere', in a 'non-place' to quote Marc Chénétier's (10) and Josh Cohen's (102) identical expressions, or in Mark Brown's terms, in a 'no place' (129-159). Auster uses a chiasmus, a trope typically used by Jabès in order to speak the unspeakable. As Varvogli shows, it also reads like a rewriting of Beckett's phrase 'there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names', taken from *Molloy* (Varvogli, *The World that is the Book* 79). The word 'neverland' triggers an intratextual connection with Fanshawe's book '*Neverland*' in *The Locked Room*, which was revisited later in *Travels in the Scriptorium*.

To complete and nuance Sölderlind's portrayal of Quinn as the archetypal wandering Jew who 'finds his only homeland in words' (10), I would like to underline the fact that, even if Quinn could be described as 'the one who writes and is written' (Jabès, *The Book of Questions*), he only discovers a 'neverland' of absence, fragmentation and unspeakability. The writer is forever on the run, walking endlessly, step by step, 'word by painful word', which means that there is no home to be found in words, no notebook big enough to be called a 'homeland'.

Although this digression on 'El' in *City of Glass* does exemplify how Auster relates to the Jewish Diaspora and Kabbalistic thought, a dividing line might be drawn between the Kabbalists' use of language, and Paul Auster's. In her essay taken from *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, Adeena Karasic evokes the similarity between post-structuralism, contemporary American poetics and Kabbalistic practice. At first sight, *City of Glass* seems to confirm Karasic's claim that '[li]ke in much deconstructionist theory and contemporary American poetics, in Kabbalistic practice, language is at the base of all thinking' (Karasic, 'Hijacking Language: Kabbalistic Trajectories' 410). The origin of God's 'unpronounceable name', as Jabès puts it in his 1978 interview with Paul Auster (*Groundwork* 203), is traced by Karasic as follows:

For Kabbalists, vowels play a significant role in expanding the literal meaning of text. Not only is the Torah scroll written without vowels and therefore pregnant with (in)finite vocalizable potential, but according to the Catalan Kabbalist Rabbi Jacob Ben Sheshet, the scroll of the Torah actually *should not be vocalized* because *no word should be limited*. To pronounce a word **one** way would be to limit and restrict all other possible pronunciations! Each word holds within it all possible articulations, references, associations. This is something i like to play around with a lot—this sense of embedding the text with many possible trajectories stemming from a single word, sound, nuance, reference all radiant, emanating with illuminative possibility. (412, original spelling and emphases)

Auster's subplots, sign-reading and testing of narrative possibilities remotely originate from Kabbalistic thought. However, Gershom Scholem points out that in spite of their differences, all Kabbalists 'regar[d] language as something more precious than an inadequate instrument' (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* 17). Unlike them, Auster is doubtful and ironical when it comes to trusting the power of words. His nostalgia

for the mythical *Word of God*, his cryptic language of unsaying (a brand of negative ontology inherited from Merleau-Ponty) and his characters' ambiguous remarks on theodicy make him stand out as an indefinable multi-faceted secular author. But trying to unveil the misleading authoritative figure hidden behind the fictional mask would be a mistake. It seems safe to say that, be it in Auster's autobiographical prose writings, poems, essays or novels, language is always shown as poisonous, yet paradoxically vital.

Exuding paradox and 'illuminative possibility', the end of *City of Glass* and its narrative voices are undecidable. How could the dubious narrator, supposedly rewriting Quinn's own notes, have known about 'his dream[s], which he later forgot' (9, 71, 106)? The story of 'Columbus's egg' (82) implies that a crack is needed for the poet's egg-words to mean, for his 'oddly shaped' (93) linguistic creations to stand on their ends. Auster's 'nothingness' and 'no places' are made out of *unwords*, and all his books are built on 'a foundation of just talk' (*The Brooklyn Follies* 181). After having wandered endlessly in the city, following Stillman 'who had become part of the city', who 'was a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks' (*The New York Trilogy* 91), the former poet Quinn ultimately becomes another brick in the wall: 'It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city' (116). The graphic novel adaptation of *City of Glass* remains faithful to this idea (*City of Glass, the Graphic Novel* 111) harking back to Auster's book of poems *Disappearances*, in which he wrote that

the wall is a word.

And there is no word

he does not count

as a stone in the wall

And of each thing he has seen

he will speak—

the blinding

enumeration of stones,

even to the moment of death—

as if for no other reason

than that he speaks.

(*Collected Poems* 112)

In *The New York Trilogy*, the city and the ‘world that is the book’ are built on Babel’s linguistic remnants and mystical rhymes as each narrator and each character strive to restore meaning and harmony to a broken universe. Auster’s central concepts of ‘nothingness’ and of words, books and men as ‘stone[s] in the wall[s]’ of a semiotic world are taken further with characters like Quinn, Blue, Fanshawe, Nashe, Stone, Owen Brick and Nick Bowen, to name but a few. If Auster’s poems verify Walter Benjamin’s early theories, according to which human language only communicates *inside* or *within* language, his novels might ward off ‘the spell / That welds step to words / And ties the tongue to its faults’ (‘Spokes’, *Collected Poems* 27). After switching to prose in *White Spaces* and *The Invention of Solitude*, and then to fiction in *City of Glass*, Auster is still reaching for the ‘last step’ in his ‘slow and natural evolution’ (*The Red Notebook* 104). With each novel, he completes his ‘*Unfinished Business*’ (*The New York Trilogy* 93), as the title of Quinn’s book of poems suggests.

Contrary to his silent and ‘univocal’ poetry which he left behind like ‘The dust / of a former self’ (‘Interior’, *Collected Poems* 67), the music of prose, sung by countless ambiguous narrative voices, allows Auster to ‘articulate [his] conflicts and contradictions’ (*The Red Notebook* 133). Auster paraphrases Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ and follows his visionary impulse by giving voice to the multitudes. ‘Like everyone else, I am a multiple being, and I embody a whole range of attitudes and responses to the world’, he argues (*The Red Notebook* 133). In the *Brooklyn Follies*, when Nathan Glass exposes his project of writing biographies for the unsung, he affirms that ‘[o]ne should never underestimate the power of books’ (302). Auster weaves a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ (La Clé des Langues) allusion to the hopelessness of his own poetic work. Such metaphysical conjecture on the ‘power of books’ and language is found in *The Locked Room* too. In the third volume of the *Trilogy*, the nameless narrator thus declares that ‘[t]o care about words, to have a stake in what is written, to believe in the power of books – this overwhelms the rest, and beside it one’s life becomes very small’ (*The New York Trilogy* 223).

Since his debut as a poet, continuing in his first novels composing *The New York Trilogy* and in his later output, Auster has kept testing the various ways in which the act of naming interacts—or fails to

interact—with the world. Prompted by an autobiographic event, Auster's use of his own name inside the fiction is both a metaleptic trope and the extension of his poetic investigations in desubjectification. The characters' alienation and confusing heteroglossia parallel his own transformation from poet to prose and fiction writer, which has been recently reexamined in *Invisible*, *Sunset Park* and *Winter Journal*. From 'I' to 'he' and 'you', fiction's 'nowhere' and 'nothingness' are fertile non-places to create images of the imageless; to translate the voiceless dialogism of a people to come. In line with Wallace Steven's work, the imagination gives Auster the opportunity to test not only the limitations but also the infinite possibilities offered by linguistic representation.

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