Constructing the postmodern characters in Paul Auster’s 
The New York Triology: A Relativistic/Referential Dichotomy

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Abstract: Paul Auster is one of the foremost broadly considered postmodern creators and his books have been broadly utilized as paradigmatic illustrations of the fiction of this movement. Within the light of the later hypothetical wrangle about approximately the passing of postmodernism, it appears crucial to investigate the way in which Auster conceives the nature of this worldview, the issues it emerges, and their conceivable arrangements. The point of this article is to examine two repeating sorts of characters from the Austerian universe that speak to two extraordinary sources of impact on the writer: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s logic and the thoughts from American transcendentalism.

Keywords: Paul Auster, Postmodern Fiction, American Transcendentalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau.

1. Introduction:

One of the recurring features of Paul Auster’s work is the dichotomy of some of the protagonists. These characters become more than mere homage echoes of earlier literature. Because they are expressions of current problems, they are presented either as victims of problems stemming from postmodern relativism or as vain harbingers of suspended projects of modernization. In Auster’s novel these characters are portrayed as Wittgensteinists or Transcendentalists. The former tries to understand reality through words. The latter is intuitive. This dichotomy corresponds to his two ways of addressing metaphysical concepts, based on his two main sources of influence on the author. Overall, Wittgenstein states in his Logical-Philosophical Treatises that nothing can be known that cannot be expressed through language, while he states in Philosophical Investigations that this is the communal It asserts that it depends on the rules of the language game. They are used, and the truth accepted by one community need not be accepted by another. In this way, there are many immeasurable truths that involve the postmodern individual's perception of reality. Emerson's transcendentalism, on the other hand, suggests quite the opposite. In other words, there is an absolute truth that responds to higher-order structures with causal implications. These absolute truths cannot be known through language, the flawed and corrupt expression of human reason, but through intuitive interaction with nature. Auster explores postmodernism through characters that span American and European traditions and works of American literature, anticipating and recreating the metaphysics of the postmodern paradigm. This is certainly related to what Ramón Espejo argues in “Coping with the Postmodern: Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy”: “[h]is fiction will undoubtedly be informed by a contemporary sensibility and concerned with current issues and theoretical debates, but also sympathetic with older narrative structures and forms and certainly aware of the literary tradition” (171). In the novelist’s works the different personas try to make sense of reality at the centre of a society that has lost faith in Lyotardian grand narratives, a society usually represented by the city of New York. This procedure is passive and devoid of creativity. They try to make their way through a reason based on the use of language, which leads them to utter relativism. In order to recover a stable structure, intuitively, some characters act according to transcendentalist precepts. Neither of these two types manages to achieve a coherent identity within the society in which they reside. Language is flawed and leads them to existentialism, solipsism and nihilism. On the other hand, intuitive action is either frustrated
by the character’s own environment—in many occasions by a casual event—or it is only possible outside their usual social environment, for which these characters are ostracized and, sometimes, they even die or disappear.

In the three stories that make up The New York Trilogy, there are characters that develop Thoreauvian characteristics. In City of Glass, we read the following about Quinn, the protagonist of the story:

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 [...] Motion was of the essence. (4)

Quinn becomes an eye, an essential symbol of Emerson’s thought. At the beginning of the story he is a writer, but he slowly turns into pure intuitive action. Leonor Acosta Bustamante expresses that dichotomy between language and action in this story in “Don Quixote in the American Imagination: The Re appropriation of the Icon in Auster’s the City of Glass”, by recognizing two types of characters among all Paul Auster’s doppelgangers that appear in the story:

In City of Glass the protagonist, Daniel Quinn, is primarily a poet, transformed into a writer of detective fiction under the pen name of William Wilson, transformed again into a real-life detective, by incarnating a seemingly ‘real’ detective named Paul Auster [...] this complex structure of the protagonist’s characterization shows the central theme of the novel: the blurring of reality and fiction built upon the blurring opposition between writers (Daniel Quinn/William Wilson/Paul Auster) and detectives (Daniel Quinn/Max Work/Paul Auster). (107)

The result of the transformation becomes clear from chapter twelve. From that chapter on, the story becomes a transcript of Walden (the quintessential implementation of the intuitive action of transcendentalist thinking). The narrative style becomes descriptive, in a very similar fashion to the tone used by Thoreau in his book. Quinn’s voluntary withdrawal from society and frugal eating resembles the isolation and diet that the transcendentalist followed at Walden Pond. There are passages that make direct reference to Thoreau’s work: the narrator says that, once Quinn retires form society to live in an alley “he began to understand the true nature of solitude” (Auster 118), while Thoreau states: “I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (1839). The narrator relates the way Quinn subsists dividing this relation into themes—exactly as in Walden. In the sections, the narrator gives an account of the problems he has to cope with: economy, food and shelter. Quinn, like Thoreau, notices with minute detail the changes in the environment, especially the only part where he can observe nature from where he is: the sky. After his retirement, adapting again to his previous life becomes impossible. By transforming into an intuitive character (“a seeing eye”) and leaving words behind—[h]e 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” (131)—it is impossible for him to adapt to the world of relative language again.

In Ghosts, the protagonist, Blue, does not try to go beyond empirical data, his conjectures are pure metaphysics, in clear allusion to Wittgenstein. Metaphysics is something not to be discussed, since it cannot be made sense of through language. Nevertheless, Blue seems to be getting deeper and deeper into it at the beginning of the story. The Thoreauvian retreat to which he is subjected gradually makes him more transcendentalist and less Wittgensteinian. He thinks, like the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, that he can equate action with words, that he can come to understand reality with a discourse based on a referential language. However, as the story advances, Blue begins to doubt the very linguistic framework he has always trusted: “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” (Ghosts149). While he was able to explain the world in a referential way, Blue did not consider anything that could transcend a reality that made sense to him. The moment words begin to mean something that does not have a unique correlate in reality, Blue starts to suffer the anguish caused by postmodern relativism. He resorts then to intuitive action: he receives a message in the mail that he does not know how to interpret, and his reaction to this event is the following: “[a]fter thinking it over for a while, he decides that it makes no difference. One way or another, the key to the case is action” (170). He decides to make sense of reality intuitively, through action. This change, however, leads him to a future different from the one he had planned, outside society as he knows it.

In The Locked Room, the two main characters are two sides of the same coin. Fanshawe and the unnamed storyteller. The former represents transcendental intuitive behavior and the latter represents verbal thinking. Fanshawe is a talented writer, but he cannot get rid of the postmodern problems we have so often pointed out. To find out the truth,
he leaves home with his wife Sophie (Auster's daughter's real-life name) and his son Ben (Auster's real-life middle name). The Locked Room is a symbolist story. Symbolism is a romantic apparatus in general and a transcendental apparatus in particular. This is one way to achieve lost referentiality through broken language usage. According to Isaiah Berlin, “Symbolism is at the heart of all Romantic thought. It has always been pointed out by all the movement’s critics” (115). In explaining this concept, Berlin claims he has two kinds of symbols. First, the conventional symbols associated with semiotics and language – Auster’s language-related letters use these symbols. They are symbols with specific meanings because there are rules that justify them (Wittgenstein). Another type of symbol Berlin is talking about is less traditional. To illustrate this, he cites the meaning of the flag and national anthem. He also clarifies it by saying:

Suppose someone asks, ‘Would you spell out for me what it is that the Word ‘England’ stood for in the sentence ‘England expects every man to do his duty’ when Nelson said it? [...] it does not simply mean a group of persons, with names and addresses known to Nelson [...] It plainly does not mean that, because the whole emotive force of the word ‘England’ extends over something both vaguer and more profound. (116–117)

Berlin discusses the idea of symbol in Romantic terms as a way of representing something that cannot be represented with conventional symbols, with words. It is a forward impulse of an indescribable action on the part of reality (117), of something that is infinite, while conventional symbols are finite, they have a limited scope. The Romantic symbol would be the way to talk about concepts for which language falls short: “[y]ou seek to convey something which you can convey only by such means as you have at your command, but you know that this cannot convey the whole of what you are seeking to convey because this whole is literally infinite” (Berlin 117). Nonetheless, if something is inexpressible, it seems absurd to keep trying to express it. According to Berlin, for Herder, one of the conditions of the human being is expressionism (67). Not expressing yourself is equal to not living. For the Romantics, living is doing something; action is the expression of one’s nature. However, that nature is one with the universe, which is infinite and in perpetual motion, making it inexpressible. That is, the nature of the individual is nature itself, and this cannot be expressed by conventional means. The only way to form an image that can somehow apprehend that reality is through symbolism. Transcendentalists also adopted symbolism to express what Wittgenstein latter believed that should not be spoken about. Along these lines, Emerson expressed the idea that every event that occurs in nature is a symbol of a spiritual fact and that these symbols are the root of all natural language—which becomes corrupted with the passage of time—. While those pristine words are signs that represent nature, for Emerson, nature is a symbol of the spirit:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.

2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.

3. Nature is the symbol of spirit. (1080)

To reach true knowledge of the spirit, one must first pass through the mediation of words between it and nature; it is a second-hand find. However, nature is a symbol of one’s identity, it is a dynamic trope, since it is changing, it flows. These symbols are universally true, since they are not mediated by an interpretation. Understanding the symbolism of nature is the way to get to one’s own spirit without having to use language. Through the observation of nature, the individual can observe him/herself, his/her own identity. These actions that Herder talks about are what constitute the symbols of Auster’s action characters, who are always frustrated and misunderstood by others who have lost the capacity to interpret those symbols as a consequence of the effects of postmodern linguistic relativism.

In light of all this, and continuing with The Locked Room, the fact that Fanshawe is closer to transcendentalism through intuitive action is reflected in phrases like: "One morning, Sophie continued, she woke up after a difficult night and understood that Fanshawe would not be coming back. It was a sudden, absolute truth, never again to be questioned” (205). The symbolic act becomes an absolute truth. At one point, the narrator describes Fanshawe almost as a transcendentalist hero, as one of Emerson’s representative men—as opposed to those described by his friend Thomas Carlyle in On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History, fundamentally, because of their universalistic nature—. These representative people are not special by nature, but that they manage to be so through intuition and self-reliance. Auster describes Fanshawe as follows:

Fanshawe was not a bookish child [...] one had the impression there was nothing he did not do well [...] He was the best baseball player, the best student, the best looking of all the boys. Any one of these things would have been
enough to give him special status— but together they made him seem heroic, a child who had been touched by the gods. (216)

However, after this epic description of his friend, he clarifies the following: “Extraordinary as he was, however, he remained one of us. Fanshawe was not a boy-genius or a prodigy; he did not have any miraculous gift that would have set him apart from the children his own age. He was a perfectly normal child” (216). The character is not exceptional because he was born that way; he is an absolutely normal child. Yet he is in harmony with himself because he is precisely that, a normal child, Emerson’s ideal of knowledge of the truth.4 A little later he is described in Thoreauvian terms, as an individual eager to experience life: “Fanshawe would talk to me about the importance of ‘tasting life.’ Making things hard for yourself, he said, searching out the unknown” (217). Like Thoreau, Fanshawe wants to make the most of life by deliberately dealing with its difficulties. All the characters that are related to intuitive action in The New York Trilogy end emulating Thoreau through their actions. All three leave society and are ostracized or, in Fanshawe’s case, die.

2. Conclusion:

This article set out to show how Auster, through the representation of two very different types of characters, manages to expose in his works, on the one hand, the cause of the problems of solipsism, nihilism and existentialism that plague the postmodern individual and, on the other hand, the transcendentalist solution, which is the cause of frustration—since it is impossible to put it into practice due to postmodern relativism. After The Brooklyn Follies, Auster’s novels show a change in sensibility as a result of the shock in which Americans—and what it meant for the rest of the world—were left by the attacks of September 11, 2001. However, even though the change is visible in his work, the author continued to use the same postmodern resources that have always been his trademark. His view on the recovery of a mental structure that can create a structure for the individual’s reality continued to be very pessimistic. The language/intuition dichotomy exposes the author’s intellectual influences. Ultimately Auster seems to be well aware that the solution to the problems caused by the relativism brought about by postmodern language games is a recovery of the unfinished project of modernity—as conceived by Jürgen Habermas in “Modernity versus Postmodernity”— through an implementation of the thought that is at the root of the grand narrative constituted by the Romantic symbol, in Berlin’s terms, that is the United States: a failed Romanticism represented by Auster’s admired American transcendentalism.

References: