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Urban Nothingness as a Postmodern Concept in Paul Auster's Fiction

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... hombres despedazados, carcomidos, lluviosos, mujeres polvorientas, crepusculares descompuestas, horizontales y multimillonarios, multimillonarios deshechos sobre el problema de sus pálidos automóviles pálidos, cosmopolitas, amarillos, errantes...

... pedazos de voces hechas pedazos, almas rodando por las aceras democráticas y humildes, figuras, siluetas panorámicas y los ojos épicos e internacionales, cuadrados, redondos o cúbicos como la humanidad, narices, pies, bocas, sexos, piernas, pupilas, pupilas, pupilas, pupilas, pupilas y un silencio

trascendental, un silencio cuajado con el gesto enorme de todos los nidos urbanos,

todos los ruidos urbanos, todos los ruidos urbanos, silencio de mares atónitos... ..

... vehículos sin ruedas caminado, caminando sin ruedas, oh! Imágenes cinematográficas,- devenir de planos y planos y planos sucesivos en la simultaneidad del instante, vida, vida rápida, eléctrica, patológica, dolor de multitudes y muchedumbres unánimes, dolor unánime, dolor unánime y cóncavo...

-¿Qué persigue Ud., caballero?.. ... camina Ud., camina Ud. *demasiado* rápidamente hacia ninguna parte, hacia ninguna parte, hacia ninguna parte; poetas, comerciantes, suplementeros, rameras, ¿qué significáis?, ¿qué?.. ¿qué?.. – mendigo...no tú ya eres algo, eres algo, mendigo, mendigo, porque tú, tú, tú jamás pretendiste orientar el universo andando, soñando;... ..de dónde, de dónde, de dónde venís y a donde váis trashumantes máquinas, trashumantes maquinas sin sentido, y dónde, dónde radica vuestra razón de ser, vuestra razón de ser?...!

...ángulos, triángulos, perpendiculares a una oblicua ESTUPENDA, ¡horror!, ¡horror!, ¡horror de horrores!..patología, cubista, dispersa, deshecha en acciones neutras, desconcertantes, incoherentes y lúgubres, eso, todo eso eres, viejo mar de apariencias inútiles, viejo mar de apariencias inútiles...

La vía pública, La vía pública, cual una estrella triste y romántica, conduce y orienta y conduce millares y millares y millares y millares de seres por los estercoleros de La vía pública; cogiéndoles las manos informes, hermanita, amiguita canalla, ella les dice:

«vamos!., y ellos van, ellos van.....¡vivir por vivir, andar por andar, querer por querer, he ahí el objeto de la vida!.. La vía pública *es* como la vida, como la vida, es decir, no *es*, sencillamente, no es sino la consecuencia de otros seres, de otros seres, la consecuencia de otros seres en los entendimientos borrosos, rudimentarios contrahechos de «la bestia humana»,- barro enfermo, barro enfermo de muertos, ciegos, viejos atardeceres fúnebres y dioses marchitos.

La Ciudad, Pablo de Rokha

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this investigation is to discover and analyze the ways in which Paul Auster, through his narrative, conveys a postmodernist view of man and his environment, specifically through a recurrent theme of his fiction: Nothingness. Nothingness is herewith regarded as a characteristic of the post-modern, fragmented city- urban nothingness- and the effects of this nothingness dimension upon the city's inhabitants is further analysed.

The world we live in seems to be ever changing into a tougher place; it seems to have become more and more irrational and absurd. Chaos and misery seem to dominate our everyday life. On top of it, what looked like a local or focalised catastrophe is now multiplied and enlarged within a global and multinational context.

From a post-modern point of view this chaotic reality has turned the world into a vertiginous and sickening turmoil of existence. Everything seems to converge on such factors as industrialization and technology, as a substantial part of daily life; multimedia communication connecting more and more people everyday; bureaucratic governments that are presided over by specific economical or religious power groups; social movements trying to defend and protect people's individuality and free-will, and a savage capitalist market that threatens to raze everything on its path, most of the time deriving into human misery. Within this huge "machinery" some social segments might feel powerless and impotent, while others will feel alienated and segregated; and yet, somehow heroically as it may be, humans manage to make their way through this complex and intricate systemic network of existence.

Our cities are growing exceedingly large, and sometimes we have the feeling of wandering around a boundless place that swallows us up, like simple specks in a wide prismatic dimension. Man feels lost within a painful loneliness. Absolute nothingness seems to be his fate.

In Paul Auster's fiction nothingness is almost one more character; it is present throughout his narrative, and it pervades the lives of the characters, dictating upon their existence. These characters seem wiped out from their particular environment- New York. In this case, one can clearly identify with them; their essence is universal. Thus, the postmodernist theme of nothingness will be developed in the following research work.

Urban Nothingness as a Postmodern Concept in Paul Auster's Fiction

As modernist society claimed for the need for rationality and the construction of big utopias in areas of human projection - political, social, economical- postmodernism lies in the death or deconstruction of these modernist ideals and great expectations; a post-modernist society is one marked by political and cultural disorientation, insecurity and search. Postmodernism can be seen as the spirit of our époque, one where the atmosphere that prevails is one of “agitation and turbulence, vertigo and psychological rapture or intoxication, extension of possibilities and destruction of moral barriers and social relationships, expansion and disarrangement of personality, ghosts in the streets and in our souls”¹. It is this postmodernist turmoil of fading identities and blurring of spatial and temporal limits that can be called “urban nothingness”. This postmodern nothingness is a paradoxical unit, one of disunion. It throws us into a whirlpool of constant disintegration and renovation, of ambiguity and anguish. In Berman's words, being modern “is forming part of a universe in which all that is solid fades and melts in the air”². The individual is set out alone to survive within capitalistic-technological bureaucratic machinery created by man but actually consuming him to the bones. This view is represented in one of Auster's novels, *In the Country of Last Things* where it can be seen how human evolution is rather a disgraceful involution.

In this novel a dystopian city is presented, one in which destruction and chaos have taken over. The story can be similar to the one of Orwell's *1984* with the “Big Brother” controlling all of the individual's actions in an oppressive and sketched system where free-will is obliterated, or to many of the futurist's attempts to exemplify what the world may

¹ “All that is Solid Melts in the Air”, p.4.

² *ibid*, p.83. Originally, this was a quote taken from by Karl Marx's *Communist Manifest*.

come to be in the future. But *In the Country of Last Things* can be more a metaphor of what is happening today. The young protagonist Anna Blume, goes on a wild journey to the City in search of her lost brother, a missing journalist. Anna, the narrator used by Auster, relates her experience in this savage jungle and describes the chaos and misery of this fragmented place:

“When you live in the city, you learn to take nothing for granted. Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else, and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts [...] not even the thoughts inside you”

(In the Country of Last Things, p.1).

The nothingness of the city trespasses the individual, affecting his mind. Nothing is very clear for the protagonist except that she has to continue surviving “the only thing that counts is staying on your feet” (p.2) Governments change hands rapidly, and authorizes scavengers to roam the streets collecting what is the most precious thing at that point: garbage. The fuel of the city is garbage; anything from corpses to faeces. It is a salvage of remnants of civilization or as the title says “last things”. These are handed to the corrupt Resurrection Agents and sent to Transformation Centres to be made into new products or burned for fuel. The central metaphor of this world of entropy is cannibalism, both literal and figurative³; creation itself has ended and life persists by devouring the past and recycling it.

The city is crumbling, falling apart and everything is collapsing. There is a military government that is no longer interested in the community wellbeing; they are rather repressing people from escaping, as these keep on losing their humanity, the only condition that differentiates them from animals, and the one condition some are starting to lose. Moreover, they are constructing the Sea Wall Project to “guard [them] against the possibility of war” (p.86) but it seems more likely that it is to prevent citizens from emigrating. Nothing makes much sense in the city and this absurdity is extrapolated to the individual reasoning that “every time you think you know the answer to a question, you

³ Contemporary Literary Criticism, vol. 131, p.5

discover that the question makes no sense” (p.85) Wandering and scavenging through the streets of the city is like walking in circles in a trap or maze, “bit by bit the city robs you of certainty [...] there can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you.”(p.6)

As human beings decay and die in the city, **language**, its most important instrument or characteristic of their humanity, dies along with them. As things or objects start to disappear, humans are forgetting they once existed. This makes communication collapse as “each person is speaking his own private language [...] the instances of shared understanding diminish” (p.89). As reality seems to fade out, with language there is a similar “ineluctable process of erasure [...] words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked”. Nothingness comes and takes over everything now. People, obsessed by their hunger talk the “language of ghosts” (p.10). The idea is to drift into the words of others, entering the “arena of the sustaining nimbus”, where nothingness just takes you away in an endless unsustained talk that will lead you to a state of oblivion and, eventually, to death. But the interesting paradox is that from this nothingness, Anna Blume tries to create something. As Powell notes, she “confronts a grimmer and grimmer degeneration each day, she tries to generate more words from it”⁴. But “it takes a long time for a world to vanish” (p.28) and Anna Blume is the last manufacturer in the New World; in her writing we encounter the vestiges of the fall of a civilization:

“Let everything fall away, and then let’s see what there is. Perhaps that is the most interesting question of all: to see what happens when there is nothing, and whether or not we will survive that too.”

(In the Country of Last Things, p.29)

Gargett sees nature in Auster as a “dynamic principle or force”⁵. Nature seems to act by its own will, far beyond from man’s control. It is not static and as it annihilates things, it

⁴ Padgett Powell, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol.47, p. 16

⁵ “Cruel Universe”, p. 4.

creates a void. This void is that of urban nothingness and it leaves the protagonist Anna Blume in an immense feeling of loss and desperation when she realises that “everything disappears, people just as surely as objects, the living along with the dead” (p, 113). There isn’t even a “certainty of death to console me- nothing more than a kind of blank, a ravening null.”(p, 114)

Most of Auster’s characters inhabit a postmodernist city in the late 80’s- beginning of the 90’s, usually New York. This is the city where all things blend into others, the city that Quinn in *The New York Trilogy* describes as:

“An inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhood and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well”

(*City of Glass*, p.3)

The “ravening null” mentioned by Anna Blume takes the form of a city like New York and the individual seems to lose himself within this great space. The city is portrayed as a labyrinth or maze, a motif that refers to the sense of hopelessness of its residents; in *City of Glass* New York is a symbol for discontinuity and chaos, a fact that is clearly expressed in Stillman’s words:

“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. [...] The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap.”

(*City of Glass*, p.78)

This is urban nothingness- a fragmented space where a centre-oriented point of view is difficult to achieve; here the search for meanings becomes almost impossible and the world seems governed by supremely irrational events. In its chaotic nature, nothingness leaves out any hint of rationality while logic is no longer valid to understand existence. Many of Austerian characters sense how this irrationality shapes their lives: “the world is governed by chance and randomness stalks us everyday of our lives.” (Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night*) or “[...] the strings of bad luck, the miscalculations, the growing weight of circumstances. Our

lives are no more than the sum of manifold contingencies.”(Ana Blume, *In the Country of Last Things*)

From an urbanistic point of view, the postmodern hyperspace- as a macrostructure- has been able to definitely transcend the capacity of the individual to locate himself within it, to perceptually organize the space of his surroundings and to map out his position in an outward representational space⁶. This extreme point of disruption between the self and the exterior urban space or dimension generates a difficulty in mapping the huge decentralized communicational network, which is multinational and global, and constitutes the postmodern world in which the individual finds himself trapped.

In *Moon Palace*, the big cosmopolitan New York where Marco Fogg wanders can be regarded as a metaphor of the desert, as seen in the narration of Thomas Effing’s journey. A parallel is established -the protagonist himself thinks of this character as a “kindred spirit” (p.183) - as the old man narrates how he went off to the desert, leaving everything behind him (wife, son and fortune); a pilgrimage towards nothingness, leading his existence into oblivion as Marco remarks “that was the moment when Julian Barber (Thomas Effing’s real name) was obliterated: out there in the desert...” (p. 165). The nothingness of the city as lived by Marco Fogg is similar to the nothingness found in a desert. He goes through the same processes of self-absorption and inwardness, slowing down his existence to its barebones essentials. Both the man that wanders through the city and the individual walking across the desert head their steps towards the same point: nowhere.

Glaze in “Auster’s Austerity” talks about the scepticism of a highly individualistic man, which is the postmodern individual. His individualism will take him to what the author refers to as “**autistic pleasure**”⁷ through the negation or abstinence of material needs, the mortification of his soul and the break-up with his entire social ties. He will conduct himself to the chaotic and existentialist void of nothingness. But what Glaze emphasizes in her essay is not the urban nothingness surrounding Auster’s characters, but their internal

⁶ “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, p.97

⁷ “Auster’s Austerity”, p.6

process of “**becoming nothing**” both ideas obviously intertwined like two aspects of the same phenomenon of postmodernism.

In *Moon Palace* we see the case of Marco Stanley Fogg, who drifts into a life of abstinence and high mortification (both spiritual and physical) on account of his uncle’s loss:

“My life had become a gathering zero, and it was a thing I could actually see: a palpable, burgeoning emptiness. Each time I ventured into my uncle’s past, it produced a physical result, an effect in the real world.”

(*Moon Palace*, p.24)

Marco regarded the moment he was asked to guide Thomas Effing (who was blind) through the streets of New York, functioning as the eyes of the old man, as:

“A kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn: humility, patience and rigor... I began to consider it a spiritual exercise, a process of training myself how to look at the world as if I were discovering it for the first time”

(*Moon Place*, p.119)

An “autistic pleasure” involves an enjoyment for the little things as opposed to the ambitious, materialistic modern view. Regarding man’s vital needs, Anna Blume also goes through this process; “it is also possible to become so good at not eating that eventually you can eat nothing at all”(p.3). There is an ascetic behavior of abstinence and self-control:

“You must get used to doing with as little as you can. By wanting less, you are content with less, and the less you need the better off you are. That is what the city does to you. It turns your thoughts inside out”

(*In the Country of Last Things*, p.2)

The notion of the city as a catalyst is stressed in the novel through the process of “becoming nothing”. The city exerts a powerful influence on the flow of its inhabitant’s lives and it is the embodiment of the dimension of nothingness where Anna Blume is held “prisoner”, since she can’t get away from it. A similar sense of uncertainty and helplessness is what Jim Nashe, the character of *The Music of Chance* feels also after a meaningful loss (his wife left him and he has to leave his daughter to his sister care):

“it would have been impossible to imagine leaving the department, but that was before his life had turned into a soap opera, before the earth had opened around him and swallowed him up [...]”

(The Music of Chance, p.8)

Jim Nashe also comes through feelings of self-punishment “acting as though he meant to punish himself into conquering new barriers of endurance” (p.19) while constructing the wall with Jack Pozzi. Just like him, Daniel Quinn the writer of detective novels in *City of Glass* has lost his wife and son in an accident. Quinn takes on the identity of a detective also named Auster and is hired to follow a man, Peter Stillman, an ex- convict who is now out of prison. It is his son, Peter Stillman Jr. who hires Quinn by mistake, thinking he is a private detective. At some point and after several weeks following Stillman along the city, Quinn’s subject disappears. He then decides to settle down in an alley outside the building where Virginia and Peter Stillman Jr. live, in order to be able to watch if Stillman Sr. winds up there and to hence defend Stillman Jr. Quinn develops a routine, searching for food, but eating as little as possible and limiting himself to only three ours of sleep, distributing these hours along the day “to maintain maximum vigilance.”(p.115) Quinn reduced his existence to this minimal routine and “remarkable as it seems, no one ever noticed Quinn. It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city” (p. 116). This was stressed when Quinn entered Stillman’s apartment and found it empty. He then decides to go on writing in his red notebook so as to keep a detailed record, first of the case and then of his existence. When there are few pages left in the red notebook, meaning his writing is coming to a completion:

“he wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into the air, into the walls, into the city, even if the light never came back again.”

(City of Glass, p.131)

Until one day he simply disappears. Quinn had let himself go, walking into that room, staying there just like Peter Stillman Jr. did several years ago when his father locked him up, while carrying out his experiment of discovering Adam’s original language, before the “Fall of Man”. Only that Quinn headed directly towards nothingness.

All of the Auster characters herewith mentioned share their fate of flowing in and out of a postmodernist nothingness, an example of the spirit of our times; immersion in a constant mood of anguish and abulia, of a fragmented existence typical of a late XX century spirit.

The city acts as a catalyst for the process of human devitalisation and, also for the embodiment or representation of the nothingness dimension, invigilating the individual's movements, rectifying them and thus leading them to oblivion. In *Moon Palace*, the protagonist falls in a state of "self-absorption [...] so intense that [he] could no longer see things for what they were: objects became thoughts" (p.54). He dives into his own consciousness, breaking away from any ties with the external surrounding and finding himself in a strange dimension, that of urban nothingness. In his own words: "this was New York, but it had nothing to do with the New York I had always known...it was devoid of associations, a place that could have been anywhere" (p.56). So he slept in Central Park and in his solitude he separated himself from the rest of the world, but at the same time he blended "into the environment." (p.57). The surrounding world helps in the process of divesting the character from self-awareness, reducing his whole life to a minute by minute existence in the park, a delusion that pulls him towards a state of invisibility and near-death, similar to the case of Quinn in *City of Glass*. The idea of oblivion pervades many of Auster's novels. Several Austerian characters are paralysed and fall into oblivion, a state in which everything is reduced to a minimum counting of details, a very ascetic routine in which everything, including desire and hunger are mutilated or cancelled out. The character submerges in a state of solitude, which is different from loneliness- nothingness consuming him more and more everyday. The awareness of this solitude from the part of the individual comes up when he feels himself on the verge of falling into this nothingness:

"[...] it was only now, as his life continued in the alley, that he began to understand the nature of solitude. He had nothing to fall back on anymore but himself. And of all the things he discovered during the days he was there, this was the only one he did not doubt: that he was falling."

(*City of Glass*, p.117)

Auster's characters wander about the city, losing their connections with the social world around them; the urban nothingness has stolen their identities, relationships and histories.

The individual goes through a process heading for absence, until he reaches a vanishing point. In *City of Glass* Peter Stillman, the old man that Quinn is hired to follow at some point of the story just disappears, leaving no trace behind and for the detective “the old man had become part of the city. He was a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks.”(p. 91) But in this search Quinn loses himself in the city as well.

“Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he new 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.”

(*City of Glass*, p.104)

Until he actually reaches a vanishing point and disappears. This disappearance or reaching the point of non-existence is related to an important theme that is treated in the author’s narrative: the nature or essence of **identity**.

The new post-modern space has literally abolished distances, including critical distances⁸; limits are blurred and it is difficult to distinguish between one thing and its opposite. Identity also undergoes this process, acquiring a prismatic nature. Moreover, urban nothingness dispossesses individuals from their identities, thus, the loss of identity can be regarded as a factor or cause that leads individuals towards nothingness.

Auster’s main characters are mutable, changing with the environment; they are impermanent, evolving through different moods or frames of mind, losing identities and reaching the already mentioned vanishing point. A clear example of this is the *New York Trilogy*, where generally two principally distinct characters melt into one another or also, a facet of one identity is echoed in another⁹, this usually being the case of the protagonist. All this is mediated by urban nothingness.

⁸ “Las Cinco Caras de la Modernidad”, p.108.

⁹ “An Examination of the Identity of Author and Character...”p.2

The protagonist of *City of Glass* has a split identity and from the beginning of the story a multiplicity of identities- one entwined with the others- is presented. His name is Daniel Quinn, but he writes detective novels under the pseudonym of William Wilson and the private-eye protagonist of these is Max Work. The multiple identities are related as follows:

“In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as the ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn’s life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude.” (*NY Trilogy*, p.6)

Moreover, Quinn estimates that Max Work is his instrument for still “existing” in the world and as “if [Quinn] allowed himself to vanish, to withdraw into the confines of a strange and hermetic life, Work continued to live in the world of others.”(p.9) One identity needs the other to exist and what’s more: “the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work’s presence in that world became” (ibid) Regarding the other identity, William Wilson, Quinn created him because after the terrible loss of his wife and son he “was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself” (p.4). So this is now delegated to Wilson. Anne Holzapfel in her book “The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?” suggests that Quinn not only tries to escape from himself through Max Work but also through his walks along New York.

“Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movements 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, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible to dwell on any one thing for very long. Motion was of the essence.”

(*City of Glass*, p. 4)

Quinn abandons himself in the labyrinth of New York, submerging into a nothingness dimension- urban nothingness- that “empties” him out. Escaping the multitude of triple identity, Quinn’s identity shifts from multitude to nothingness. At this point, Auster

mentions the relationship between inner and outer as Quinn's inner world is composed of and alternated with Work and a gapping void. Meanwhile Quinn's walks alter the relationship between inner and outer¹⁰, all this occurring while he follows Peter Stillman Sr. throughout New York:

“Quinn was used to wandering. His excursions through the city had taught him to understand the connectedness of inner and outer. Using aimless motion as 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 himself, he had managed to exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair. Wandering, therefore, was a kind of mindlessness.”

(City of Glass, p.61)

Auster's characters walk through the city, straightforward, in circles. They wander about it, sometimes slowly, other times frantically. Furthermore, walks have no definite aim or purpose; it seems as if each step flows within urban nothingness. But Quinn searches for a clue, a hint something concrete to hold himself of, trying to read through the city. This is the moment he analyses Stillman's Sr. steps and discovers the traces of letters that read THE TOWER OF BABEL, arriving “in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words.” (p.72)

A third point in the splitting or doubling of Quinn's identity is when he assumes the role of Paul Auster. Quinn had received a mysterious call asking for Paul Auster, the private detective. He decides to follow the case and presents himself as Auster in Peter Stillman Jr. and his wife Virginia's house. When following Stillman he finds this new identity convenient for:

“Auster was no more than a name to him, a husk without content. To be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own inner life had been made inaccessible, then there was no place for him to retreat to.”

(City of Glass, p.61)

¹⁰ “The New York Trilogy: Whodunit”,p. 34

This deleting of Quinn's inner self also deletes the relationship of the the inner and the outer. Quinn is now nowhere, part of the urban nothingness- the city- this state being the same as the one achieved by his walks.

Feeling himself as Auster and aware of the futility of just following Stillman Sr. around New York, he approaches him so as to get more information presenting himself to him in a series of interlocking identities. First he presents himself as "Quinn", using his name as a pseudonym (which Stillman recognizes as rhyming with "twin" and flying off "in so many little directions at once" (p.74), implying multiplicity) In the second encounter with the old man, he pretends to be Henry Dark, and Stillman's tells him that this is the name of the fictional character of a book he wrote called *The Garden and the Tower: Early visions of the New World*. In their third encounter, Quinn presents himself as Peter Stillman, and the old man pretends to think of him as his son. From doubling identities, pseudonyms and roles, the character walks straight towards the point of fading out, until he reaches a "zero state". Quinn has walked through the main city avenues and then, as if pushed by the invisible hand of urban nothingness, he has turned into the man he was shadowing (Peter Stillman), mutating into his "other"¹¹. After this, Quinn himself is reduced to thoughts.

Ghosts is the second novel of the Trilogy. Instead of giving names to the characters, the author designates each with a colour. The detective Blue, trained by Brown, his former employer and who had taught him the business, meets a client- White- who hires him to shadow a man -Black- handing in weekly reports, although he is not told the reason for doing so. White rents him an apartment from which he has to watch Black and it is designed so that Blue can sit at a desk and write in a notebook while watching Black, who is also sitting at his desk across the street and writing in his notebook.

The search for identity in this novel is related to a journey into the self; Blue cuts loose from the external world, negating any contact with his social surrounding, including his fiancée. He enters a labyrinth-like situation from which he feels prisoner and from which he

¹¹ Paul Auster's Urban Nothingness, p. 3. This article is taken from an Italian Review of social studies called "Alfa Zeta" from April, 1996.

can't escape: "ever since, Blue has been groping about in the darkness, feeling blindly for the light switch, a prisoner of the case itself"(p.169) He blames White and Black for his sense of entrapment, feeling like "nothing at all."(p. 169) By forcing Blue to shadow Black's (or his) every moves, he puts him in a locked room of existence (as Stillman did to his son in *City of Glass*). Blue starts a journey into his inner world, going deeper and deeper within himself: "Life has slowed down so drastically for him that Blue is now able to see things that have previously escaped his attention [...]The beating of his heart, the sound of his breath, the blinking of his eyes."(p.62) The doubling of identity occurs when Blue has to put himself in Black's place and during his observations he notices that he is also watching himself:

"To speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning mirror or looking glass. For 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."

(*Ghosts*, p.144)

There is a blending of the observer and the observed; now Black has started to shadow Blue as well; hence, both characters seem to become the same person: "it is Black who occupies the position Blue has assumed all along to be his, and Blue who takes the role of Black."(p. 169) Blue is now trapped in a no-solution story, under the persistent vigilance of Black who he finally learns that is White. There is a change of role from Blue being a detective shifting to the role of an author; as the case is unclear in nature he has to fill the empty place of meaning with several different stories that replace the non-existing facts: "For Black is no more than a kind of blankness, a hole in the texture of things, and one story can fill this hole as well as any other."(p.145). In *Ghosts* the city is initially a borderline between two opposite observation stands, where the viewpoints eventually become mutual and fatally converge in the end.¹²

The Trilogy's third and closing story is *The Locked Room*. The narrator is contacted by the wife of a childhood friend whose name is Fanshawe. Fanshawe is missing, and the wife has

¹² *ibid*

instructions of giving the narrator his friend's manuscripts. Time passes; the narrator falls in love with the wife and decides to publish his friend's writings. This is when Fanshawe appears (by sending him a letter) and there is an impulsive need for the narrator to locate his long-lost friend, in spite of his threat to kill him if he does so.

But the narrator's identity becomes coupled with that of Fanshawe and it seems that this has always been this way:

“It seems to me that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am [...] whenever I think of my childhood now, I see Fanshawe. He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself.”

(The Locked Room, p.199)

They grew up together, shared everything, became “blood-brothers” and they even seemed to look alike. As Fanshawe's mother notes:

“You even look like him, you know. You always did, the two of you- like brothers, almost like twins. I remember how when you were both small I would sometimes confuse you from a distance. I couldn't even tell which one of you was mine.”

(The Locked Room, p.261)

For the narrator the figure of his friend is fundamental in his life not only during his childhood but also during his present: “he was a ghost I carried around inside me, a prehistoric figment, a thing that was no longer real” (p. 200). He admired Fanshawe and describes him as:

“so attractive[...]that you always wanted him beside you, as if you could live within his sphere and be touched by what he was”[...]To imitate him was somehow to participate in that mystery, but it was also to understand that you could never really know him”

(The Locked Room, p.210)

He compares his friend to the rest, making a noticeable distinction between Fanshawe and his peers; he was “visible, whereas the rest of us were creatures without shape, in the throes

of constant tumult, floundering blindly from one moment to the next” (p.210). The author foregrounds this blurring of identities with a story written by Fanshawe in his childhood about the confused identities of two sets of twins.

The narrator starts writing Fanshawe’s biography and becomes obsessed with it: “the book existed for me now only in so far as it could lead me to Fanshawe, and beyond that there was no book at all” (p.268). The search for the vanished friend becomes also a search for the narrator’s identity. When he encounters Fanshawe in an old house, his friend tells him he doesn’t want to be Fanshawe anymore, that’s why he left everything behind. He hands him a red notebook with his notes and then the narrator leaves him there. Urban nothingness is here complete: it has trespassed from the streets into the flats, which are now inhabited by ghosts.¹³

In *The New York Trilogy*, each protagonist or main character finds himself at some point in the story, locked in a room. In *City of Glass*, Quinn closes the circled-structure of the story by returning to the room where Peter Stillman was held prisoner by his father, and in his disappearance he is set free from the locked room, so when the real Auster and a friend get there they find the room “unlocked”. Blue is in a city of glass where, instead of seeing out (to Black’s apartment) the glass is a mirror and he is forced to look into his own locked room¹⁴. In *The Locked Room*, Fanshawe’s manuscripts and writing appear as his “locked room”, the secret and protected side of his identity, whose access was denied to his wife, but not to the narrator. Also when handling his friend the red notebook before dying, Fanshawe is also in a locked room, just as he was in the box he used to separate from the outside world when he was a little boy: “solitude became a passageway in to the self, an instrument of discovery” (p. 277).

Solitude in the locked room seems for the individual like a way of escaping from nothingness, but nothingness is absolute. It would be better to regard the “locked room” as a metaphor of the urban nothingness of the city. They are trapped in this “locked” room just

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ “An Examination of the Identity...” p. 3

as they are trapped and confused in the labyrinth of nothingness. The motion of the city trespasses into the individual, confronting him, blurring his identity and changing his position in the maze until at some point of cathartic oblivion, and the individual heads for absence, this is the moment when he becomes part of this constant, flowing turmoil- urban nothingness.

Conclusions

The postmodernist concept of urban nothingness is an important notion in Paul Auster's fiction; it is present throughout all the novels that we have analyzed. Within this expansive nothingness and under its influence, characters seem to swing from joy to misery (and vice versa), developing and fading, to finally fall into oblivion. The phenomenon of urban nothingness as projecting itself beyond the individual, ironically enough, leads him into a complex process of "becoming nothing". This is the situation of Marco Fogg, Anna Blume, Jim Nashe and the characters of *The New York Trilogy*. In all of these cases, we find an individual being reduced to the loss of his identity, in spite of his effort to liberate himself from a jeopardizing and imminent state of Nothingness.

As spatial and temporal barriers disappear, characters experience anguish and chaos and fall into the realm of postmodern nothingness. Thus, the fragmentation of space leads to a fragmentation of the self. The theme of identity is developed more deeply in *The New York Trilogy*, where characters' identities enter a different identity than their own, and at times they seem to melt into one another. Auster uses a different image to reflect this situation, such as doublings or mirror images. The individual sets out to recover his identity, rebelling himself against this nothingness but finally fails to achieve his purpose.

New York is also an important "character" in these novels; the city exerts a powerful influence in the developing events, and overlooks the "prisoners" of its labyrinths. Thus, urban nothingness has taken over the lives of the city's inhabitants. As nothingness is chaotic in nature, it leaves behind no rational thought or explanation about its dreadful circumstances. Moreover, this irrationality enhances the individual's sense of being lost and helpless within this inextricable urban nothingness.

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