The Process of De-centering; Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*

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Introduction

In his postmodernist fiction, Paul Auster subverts all traditional notions of the genre of detective fiction by consciously providing within his trilogy; *The City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* characters who are not only incapable of solving the unusual cases handed to them but are continuously confronted with hesitation and uncertainty. The novel is constructed on the basis of continuous deconstruction of facts as they are formed so that reason is de-centered every time it seems to provide solution to the cases at hand and hence the entire novel centres on contradiction and paradox. This kind of genre institutes and reinforces a number of paradoxes, sites of disturbances and displacements. Alienation, confusion of identity, and the inadequacy of words are themes employed in all three stories as the so called detectives undergo the process of decentering and deconstruction in their attempt at solving the unconventional criminal cases handed to them, realizing by the inevitable end, the relativity of meaning as they search for it in a fragmented, and detached world of multiplicity and instability.

Traditional detective fictions, according to Bennet and Royle, tend to have "a conservative ideological form" (Bennet and Royle, 1995: 134) since they would basically involve the restoration of the primary sate of society, before a disruption occurs to interrupt its apparently harmonious structure. This conservative structure would require a moral outcome in which harmony is restored by a highly intellectual detective, morally responsible for the burden he is to accomplish and thus fulfil the desires of both the society and the reader. In Paul Aster's *Trilogy* however, no such structure is detectable. The author makes no attempt to provide such conventional methods of harmony disrupted to harmony restored. In fact, what is the main concern of Auster is the very notion that no such harmony exists. All is discordance and fragmentation. The process of discovering clues to the cases in all three stories ends up being futile. Quinn, Blue and Fanshawe's friend loose themselves in their language-bound worlds and the process of problem solving transforms into that of self- expedition. Nothing can be deciphered and the three stories each end at a point, which can serve as a new beginning. Consequently no permanent centre is found to act as the core to meaning. Instead,

the world and its constitutive elements; man, language, words and meaning are de-centered. To achieve such dissident objectives, and to explicate the matter, this paper seeks to explore the function of elements which serve to highlight the process of decentralization throughout the novel an to illustrate how these elements, traditionally taken as occupying a hierarchical position with regard to each other, now become intermingled as the novel develops to reflect the inaccessibility of centralization and fixity in a world of change and mutability.

Detective and Criminal

Auster subverts the traditional notion of detective fiction first and foremost by dismantling the authoritative and hierarchical position of detective and criminal. The stories make no attempt at offering highly intellectual detectives who are about to start a quest for resolving cases and putting an end to the disharmony created by the wrongdoings of an individual or a group. Neither is it a case of the criminal fearing the detective but visa versa; the detective fears the criminal;

> And so Blue gradually comes round, at last giving in to the necessity of the thing to
> be done. But that is not to say he does not feel afraid. From this moment on, there is
> only one word that speaks for Blue, and that word is fear. (Auster, 1988: 187)

In this postmodernist work, detectives identify themselves with the criminals to discover facts. By identifying themselves with the criminals's mode of thinking as rational, they attempt to come up with rational solutions to the problems. This kind of "inspired reasoning" (Bennet and Royle, 1995: 135) in contrast with the rational approach of traditional detective fiction is reinforced by the continual identification of the main characters of the three stories; Quinn, Blue and the narrator of the third story with their counterparts. The central paradox is that the detectives' in all three cases start out with an identification of themselves with their counterparts only to perceive later their differences. This pattern recurs in all three stories as the main characters while coming to identify themselves with their counterparts, realize their difference from them. The struggle for solution to cases in all three stories transforms into a quest for the self but the only outcome to this quest is disintegration and dissolution.

Reason and Unreason

The undermining of the distinction between detective and criminal in these stories opens the way for its deconstruction**;** instead of following a straight line of reasoning,

every time a reason seems to solve the problem, their appears its counterpart; its "other" or "inspiration and unreason" which de-centres the whole process and leaves the resolution unattainable. The detectives need an "other," ironically the criminals, to identify themselves with who prove in the end to be inadequate for their means.

Throughout the novel, contradiction runs through the narrative. Just as we come to think a resolution has been found, a counter idea appears: just as Quinn thinks he is sure he has found Stillman, another man precisely like Stillman appears so that he cannot determine the identity of the true Stillman. By the end of the story, he is not certain whether he has followed the right Stillman after all " He wondered what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman instead of the first." (Auster, 1988: 129) Blue finds that all long he has been the object of Black's intentions. Even Fanshawe's friend finds that he has taken the path already determined for him by Fanshawe.

No decision appears to be genuine. Uncertainty, doubt, hesitation, and indecision reign in the story as no decision can be necessarily a correct one; "Whatever choice he made-and he had to make a choice-would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end." (Ibid: 56) and at any point, the emergence of mistakes is possible. No reason can necessarily mean the resolution to the problem for there always exists the possibility for unreason to emerge and disrupt what appeared to be a fact.

Fact and Fiction

Auster's novel brings together two different worlds of real and imagination, fact and fiction instead of opposing them to reinforce the inability to mark their distinction. This is why fictive characters enter the realm of the real world while real characters see themselves as fictive and the author himself the creator, enters the world of his creation, and consequently challenges the distinction between reality and fiction. The employment of such conscious narration emerges as the story begins with introduction about the author, rather than character. Quinn is obsessed with his fictive character, Max Work, brought to the foreground while he himself fades far into the background. By doing so, the author draws our attention towards language for it is through language that we can perceive the world around us. And yet this very means proves inadequate "it's as though his words, instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the world, have induced them to disappear." (Ibid: 147)

The detective's quest for a solution to the mystery is here transmuted to the search for meaning in the world and in the language that renders the world into words. There exists

no clear-cut distinction between the two worlds, as both can be either real or imaginative. It can no longer be held that a fact existing in the real world opposes fiction in the imaginative world. Thus instead of drawing the two worlds as parallel lines, never to cross each other, Auster's depiction of them is a cross, where the two worlds meet. Consequently the intersection is a result of the inseparable worlds of fact and fiction and any attempt at separations will result merely in frustration.

Madness and design

Since writing a novel is similar to creating a world and language as the very basis of this world is not fixed, consequently the world has no permanent centre. Therefore what is real is not necessarily a true reflection of the world around us, but a picture of what has passed through language. Therefore the author has no control over his text and does not know what becomes of his characters "as for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now." (Ibid: 132) Characters escape the confinement of the world the author has created for them by writing their own stories and leading their own lives.

The main characters of the three stories are obsessed with language and words. Quinn and Blue come to realize the relativity of language; that words are not fixed entities, and therefore, come to the point of the relativity of the worlds they inhabit. Since language cannot accurately convey reality, fact and fiction intermingle, Quinn believes Max Work has a truer existence than himself, and he himself belongs to the world of fiction, Blue finds that all along he has been the object, and not the subject of the story he has narrated, and the nameless character of the third story finds himself at a loss when confronted with Fanshawe for all along, Fanshawe had been controlling and watching him contradictory to what he thought had been happening. In fact a crucial remark is made by Blue in *Ghosts,* applicable to all three stories; "we are not where we are, he finds, but in a in a false position." (Ibid: 168)

Even names and naming becomes enigmatic, mere signs with infinite signifiers, and therefore traditional names are avoided, especially in *Ghosts* where colours stand for names with no specific symbolical meanings to imply multiplicity of meaning and rejection of being reduced to specific meaning. In fact the reference to language is so strong in these stories, explicitly reflecting the author's desire to engage in the act of using language as a means, which no longer holds the world or even individuals in place. This fragmentation, Stillman claims happened after the fall of man:

> A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. Names became detached from things; language had been served from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language. (Ibid: 43)

All attempts at seeking design in a fragmented world of flux results in vain. Paradoxically, the only design and order attainable is the recognition of the world's instability, the identification of madness as the ultimate reigning force in the world.

Author, Character and Reader

There is no insistence on authority in the novel. Auster, perhaps aware of Barthes' claim on "death of the author", destabilizes his own stance as the ultimate, authorial governor of his work, rejecting any attempt "to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing." (Lodge, 2000: 149) and hence" once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile." (Ibid) As the distinction between fiction and reality are blurred, the figure of the author vanishes, and the more the reader becomes involved in the act of reading, trying to fill gaps and find connection between different facts, the more he is frustrated for their really exists no connection between them! Or at least not merely one but multiple possibilities are opened up and there is no attempt on the part of the author to solve any problems or to privilege one over the other. The novel exemplifies, therefore, Ingarden's notion of the intrinsic complexity of literary works. At the same time as being *heteronomous* or existing autonomously (McHale, 1987: 30), such literary works depend upon the conscious interaction of the reader's consciousness, as it is actively engaged in producing meaning and filling in the gaps, left open consciously by the author. It is this resistance to fixity of meaning, which paves the way for polyphony in the novel.

Characters lead on their own lives after they are created, while their creators see the world through their eyes; "He had, of course, long ago stopped of thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work." (Ibid: 9) Not only words but also even stories come to stand as sings with infinite meanings. Author, reader, and characters are rejected superiority in this novel; they are all equally important and actively involved in the process of solving the mystery.

In this case, we do not have a story with a plot; a beginning, a conflict, resolution and an end; instead just as it seems the problems are beginning to be deciphered, new possibilities emerge; the intervention of the author is by no means the authoritative one,

characters and readers are permitted to play an active part in generating meaning, which is never fixed.

Conclusion

Undecidability becomes the final outcome of the novel converting into a value in itself, as the validity of decision- making becomes suspended and traditional notions of a unifying whole are challenged. Since beliefs in a transcendental system leads to oppression and confinement, the novel suspends reason, to present the possibility of unreason. Fragmentation and dissemination reveals to be the outcome of reasoning of all three stories ending with no resolution; a point where nothing has been resolved; narrator, character and author seem interchangeable as non are privileged and the polyphony of voices and infinite play of signs reinforce the relativity of meaning and man's place in the world.

The detectives are never after the right people and they are never able to approach the right person. Each story begins with the detective's quest for a case imposed by external forces, gradually transforming to a quest for self-discovery, revealing the true nature of the case as one of role –reversal and ultimately reveals the impossibility and futility of explanation and rationalization in a practically multiple, and versatile world. The major point of the story is mouthed by the nameless character of *The Locked Room*:

> In general, lives seem to veer abruptly from one thing to another, to jostle and bump, to squirm. A person heads in one direction turns sharply in mid-course, stalls, drifts, and starts up again. Nothing is ever known, and inevitably we come to a place quite different from the one we set out for. (Auster, 1987: 251)

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