PAUL AUSTER AND THE MODALITIES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN HIS NOVELS

Alina-Oana PASCU[G]

Abstract: *Identity is one of the central issues in Paul Auster's novels, be they fiction or nonfiction ones. One of the primary means of constructing identity is through social interaction, as the individual defines himself in relation to the others. Another means of identity construction within the fictional or nonfictional world is through direct narration (or direct definition, according to Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan). Also, identification with a certain group, thus giving up to one's individuality and adhering to the principles of a group, represents another means of identity construction and Auster employs these modalities within his writings in order to create truthful characters as actors on the fictional/real stage of his pieces of writing.*

Keywords: *identity theory, social identity, group identity, direct definition, metafiction.*

Paul Auster is a prominent figure of the American literary world, influenced by European existentialists, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the American transcendentalists Thoreau and Emerson, among others. His Jewish roots are also prevailing in his novels, more obviously or subtly, but the characters' Jewishness does not become a central theme, yet is serves as a background reference for addressing such issues as identity, intertextuality, space, memory and trauma. His early novels gathered under the name *The New York Trilogy* (1984), together with his non-fiction memoir, *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), a real *ars poetica* of the Jewish American novelist, strengthen the purpose of exploring some of the predominant features of the European Existentialist philosophy and mixing them in a creative manner with postmodern techniques and the pattern of metafictional detective stories governed by uncertainty and lacking any distinct resolution.

A discussion of Paul Auster, of identity, and of his native New York, as well as of his own postmodern, metafictional Yoknapatawpha, as it appears in his *New York Trilogy*, may start from an interview with New York Public Library director Paul Holdengraber. Asked to define himself in seven words (which is quite unusual for a novelist who needs hundreds of pages and several volumes to do that, as it will be seen in this dissertation as well), Auster promptly complies with Holdengraber's request: "American, New Yorker, wanderer, father, husband, writer, troublemaker" (Holdengraber).

The author insists that there is no hierarchy in the above-mentioned list of identity markers, as each considerably contributes to *what* and *who* he is. For the reader of Auster's work, it is the way the other stated identities relate to that of "writer" and to another one, which will be of permanent concern throughout this examination of a number of books, not only those belonging to *The New York Trilogy* in this chapter. The "troublemaker" identity marker has to do with Auster being a rebel, not necessarily a social, political one, but in terms of his breaking away from set frameworks, and the metafictional dimensions of his work, from his earliest literary endeavors, are part of the "trouble" he creates in the literary world. One important identity marker not mentioned among the seven is that of Auster being an American Jew, an educated, cosmopolitan

[*] Ovidius University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, alinapascu22@yahoo.com

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

one who, nevertheless, is trying hard to recover some of the ethnic coordinates largely lost in the American melting pot over the last few generations.

From Paul Auster's first novel, *City of Glass*, in what would later become *The New York Trilogy*, to his later memoir, *The Winter Journal*, one can trace the evolution in character definition and representation of the fictional figures, deeply resenting the sense of displacement, some really alienated protagonists that desperately look for the ultimate meaning in their existence, leading uneasy lives, being trapped in their roles, either of their own choosing or imposed on them, and finding it almost impossible to accede to what might be called "the ultimate meaning." Some important tools that have been found useful in dealing with identity formation in Auster's novels are the theories developed by Stets and Burke in their volume on *Identity Theory*, together with other sociological approaches that will be referred to subsequently, as well as theories pertaining to literary studies, since in this research paper the main focus are literary texts and how they are "born" out of a real individual in interaction with literary and "extra-literary" contexts.

In addition to concepts employed in literary studies seen in a very strict sense, elements of social psychology, coming from the works of well-known specialists, such as Stets and Burke, having to do with identity theory and social identity theory, have been found useful in the investigation of what may be seen as "deviant word games", "postmodernist language games," stories invented by authors to engage contemporary literary audiences. However, these tools, applied to the fictional world, may say a lot about ourselves as readers, as individuals and members of "interpretive communities", about the world surrounding the composition, publication and reception of these "word games."

Metafiction, as it is well-known, is not a postmodernist invention, but a mode of writing whose coordinates have existed in literature from its beginnings, although in realist fiction the author tries hard to delete the most obvious traces of the artifice of art. One of the permanent preoccupations of someone reading Auster's work may well be to see how a number of realist and modernist conventions and genres are used in his own postmodernist artistic formula. As it will become apparent, in this approach to Auster's fiction, the special connections between the particularly strong metafictional dimension of the two authors' work and a permanent preoccupation with issues of identity will acquire a central position.

From *The New York Trilogy* onward, Paul Auster's metaphysical metanarrations display fictional games in which the plot, the characters, their identities are no longer based on a stable set of rules, but rather on a continuous shifting unpredictability, which makes the separation line between real and fictional almost inexistent. These are games played in the realm of metafiction, a descendant of such time-honored frame stories as the medieval *Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, mixing modern thriller, mystery novel conventions and rational attitudes with postmodern questions of puzzled identity verging on insanity and irrationality: the self may be its dark "other," the plot is intricate and *dialogic*, the characters are continuously changing their roles and coordinates, and thus we no longer get the illusion that their identity is relatively easy to grasp and relatively stable.

In the overall quest for discovery of one's inner self, the main concern in Auster's novels is how to deal with loss: loss of family, loss of identity and selfhood. Faced with loss of family members, the protagonists are actually facing their loneliness and lack of a coherent role to play and that is why they are aimlessly searching for a purpose in life, after experiencing confusing feelings of isolation and estrangement.

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

In assessing such themes as identity within/outside social context, one has to employ theories belonging to social psychology, but also to literary studies in a balanced way, so as to present how the identity of the characters in Auster's novels works and is eventually perceived by the reader. In a continuously reshaped context, identity, in the postmodern acceptance (as well as in "less postmodern" approaches, such as social identity theory) is a construct, the result of a fine "negotiation" between the text, its weaving, and the readers and their world. The readers are able to account for its meaningfulness, interpreting it according to the life experience, to their own set of rules, to their 'identity standard' (Stets, J. & Burke, P., 2000: 31) and within their conceptual frameworks, which may vary across cultures and time.

"It was the wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not" (Auster, P., 1990: 1). In the first "identity metafictional" game of *City of Glass*, the author of detective novels Daniel Quinn receives a call from someone who mistakes him for … Paul Auster, the detective! The first novel in *The New York Trilogy* falls under the label of anti-detective story, drawing its roots from Edgar Alan Poe's detective stories, but subverting the genre in a pure postmodern twist, by leaving the detective quest without a final outcome. It is the story of Daniel Quinn, a writer that is accidentally introduced into a metafictional game of mirror-selves, having to track a possible criminal, Peter Stillman, who supposedly wants to kill his son, Peter Stillman Jr., the one who appoints Quinn as a private detective in this fictional murder case.

The novel stays under the odds of chance from the very beginning, as the narrator states, after receiving the mysterious call that gets the narrative started:

> Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first word that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell (Auster, P., op. cit.: 3).

Of course, one might say this was an ordinary accident. Later on, the emphasis of this event will be crucial, since it will decide one of the many identities the protagonist of the novel would be requested to play.

In *The New York Trilogy*, one recurrent motif is that of doppelgangers and multiple identities, borrowed from Poe's detective stories. One inevitably draws on identity theory, according to which one usually occupies multiple roles in society, as a father, student, husband, member of a social / ethnic group, etc (Stets, J. & Burke, P., op. cit.: 49). According to this theory, "tied to each identity is a set of meanings that persons attribute to themselves when they are playing out or claim an identity" (Ibid.). Of course, the meanings result from the interactive situations in which one is involved. As such, the protagonist of *City of Glass* will accept the challenge, when requested to play the role of Paul Auster, the detective. Assigned this task, Quinn will take it seriously and will do exactly as such a role/job requires: observe and write in detail about the object of his investigation and all his movements, wanderings about the streets of New York, with the same purpose, fulfilling thus successfully his duties, as he thought it is best to do, from an amateur's point of view: "Like most people, Quinn knew almost nothing about crime. He had never murdered anyone, had never stolen anything, and he did not know anyone who had. (...) Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films, and newspapers" (Auster, P., op. cit.: 8).

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

In the same book on identity theory, Peter Burke and Jan Stets (Stets, J. & Burke, P., op. cit.: 112) consider that one of the primary means of identity formation is the one conveyed by the role (*role identity*). In this way, the role imposed by society or self imposed, by the individual, contributes to the construction of the identity of the protagonists. Just as an example, in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the protagonist Daniel Quinn seems devoid of a clear identity, since he has lost his family members, mother, father, son and wife, so he feels forcefully detached from the definite family roles he used to play. The overall context of the novel does not hint at historical facts, data, the action seems ahistorical, in a perpetual time. In order to cope with this harsh reality, Quinn dangles between various identities that the different roles (self imposed or imposed by others) imply. Quinn, after the death of his child and his wife is no longer part of his narrative. The "I" that is devoid of meaning and becomes totally unproductive, assumes another identity – that of the writer William Wilson – that is, nevertheless, isolated from the rest of the world, about whose life no one knows absolutely anything:

> A part of him had died, he told his friends, and he did not want it coming back to haunt him. It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn 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. (Auster, P., op.cit.: 5)

So, Quinn's switch of identity is motivated by the lack of meaningfulness associated to his initial role as "Daniel Quinn", the writer of mystery novels. Interpreted in symbolic interactionist key, which considers that identities "both negotiate and create their roles – that is, the patterning of symbols and meanings they produce" (Stets, J. & Peter Burke, op. cit.: 17), Quinn's cast off of his identity is a consequence of his lack of attributing valid meanings to his self, when placed in a different interactional context.

Ghosts, the second novel of *The New York Trilogy*, deals with the same detective genre conventions Auster uses and abuses in his metafictional games in the previous book. In it, in an initial, puzzling confusion of colors, characters and time coordinates, Blue, a real detective (at least, in the narrator's mind), having been apprenticed by Brown in his trade, is appointed by a certain White to follow Black:

> First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown. Brown broke him in, Brown taught him the ropes, and when Brown grew old, Blue took over. That is how it begins Auster, P., op.cit.: 137).

It all appears to be what a detective calls a simple tail job, as Blue is hired by White to follow and keep an eye on the man named Black for an indefinite amount of time, without being given a story, a clue, motives for his detective work. As simple as it may seem at first sight, the plot of the novel gets further complicated when the chaser, Blue, realizes he has actually been the chased one all along.

The three main characters, bearing names of colors, seem to do nothing more than reflecting each other in an endless game of mirrors. Thus, Auster reinterprets the pattern of the detective novel within a metaphysical search for identity that will prove eventually unattainable. Narrated in the third person, the novel starts directly with the plot around which it will revolve – the detective pursuit of the private-eye Blue that is compelled to follow Black. As absurd as this pursuit may seem to Blue, since he cannot understand, but just assume, what is the reason why White wants to have Black followed (out of jealousy, probably this is a marriage case, he initially assumes), he will nonetheless go on with his task and accept the confinement it imposes.

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

The dullness of the job, nothing more than watching Black reading and writing and occasionally going out, determines Blue to turn inwardly and take an introspective look at his inner self: "He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself" (Auster, P., op.cit.: 171). It is at this point in the narration that Blue admits having lived just at the surface of things and, out of a sudden, with Black's case, he feels it necessary to return to himself and to examine, self-reflexively, his inner world, just as in Jacques Lacan's mirror-stage theory, the French psychoanalyst being one of the primary influences upon Auster's writing. Will Blue, following babies in their mirror stage, recognize his own reflections in the scenes, settings and characters around him, thus getting a better idea of himself as an autonomous self in a process which links the observations of others and introspection?

The introspective look offers Blue the possibility to see the similarities in his personality and in Black's, arriving at a partial identification: "For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself" (Auster, P., op.cit.: 172). In filling the absence of action with invented stories about what Black and White might be up to, Blue is actually accounting for his own emptiness, his shallowness that he has somehow to counteract.

As mentioned previously, the novels in *The New York Trilogy* are not so much insisting on the human interaction, which is rather limited to some key-episodes, but on the development of the characters in the realm of their solitude. In *Ghosts*, the action is reduced to a few encounters between White (who disguises himself with a mask) and Blue, while the most important confrontation takes place towards the end of the novel, with Black meeting Blue, his monitoring watcher, his *alter ego*.

Drawing inspiration from role identity theory (Stets, J. & Burke, P., op. cit.: 7), one may assert that Blue, the detective-protagonist, conforms to the task assigned by White and sends him weekly reports, having a rather dull job; thus he complies to the expectations attributed to his role-identity. Trapped in the monotony of the detective role, Blue suspects he is the mere object of a plot between White and Black, turning thus from the subject into the mere object of a devious game of observation and detection. It is at this point that Blue starts self-reflexively to see himself as the *other*, the embodiment of an enclosed being, trapped in a room.

One of the most important means of identity formation is through social interaction, so the influence of the environment upon identity formation is crucial. Nevertheless, in *Ghosts*, as well as in the other two novels in the Trilogy, the protagonist is an observer, mainly and reduces human contact at the minimum. In their search for identity, the protagonists seclude themselves from the world and rationalize as much as possible their necessities. Solitude and retreat from society are the options of most of Auster's characters, and solitude is extrapolated at the whole realm of the book, as mentioned in the nonfiction *The Invention of Solitude*: "Every book is an image of solitude" (Auster, P., 1992, 136). Solitude is the *sine qua non* condition of the writer and of writing itself. In Auster's trilogy, social interaction is very rare, it is indeed living in solitude, with one's thoughts, memories, written or unwritten stories, that eventually builds the characters and reveals themselves to the reader.

Allusions to Hawthorne and his 12-years seclusion in his house so as to devote himself to writing echo again the metaphor of the room as the sacred place of the writing act, but at the same time, a place generating feelings of anguish and confinement, deepening the sense of the writer as exiled in his own world:

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

> Take Hawthorne, says Black. A good friend of Thoreau's and probably the first real writer America ever had. After he graduated from college, he went back to his mother's house in Salem, shut himself up in his room, and didn't come out for twelve years. (G, 208)

An important way of revealing certain features of the characters' identity is the recurrence of certain terms, images, symbols, that reflect certain traits of the piece of writing and of the characters' identity. In *City of Glass*, but also in *Ghosts*, the main characters – Quinn and Blue have a notebook – not accidentally, a red notebook, in which they turn into written accounts all the movements of the persons there are supposed to keep an eye on. That is why the notebook represents the symbol of writing, obsession of memory, but also of forgetting at the same time. The red notebook, nothing more than a disguised diary of their alter-egos, functions just as Anne Frank's diary did in times of very dramatic circumstances: a testimony of one's existence, one cannot write a diary unless he/she exists. So the writing of the diary is also a means of constructing identity, of trying to render the actions that take place in someone's life. It is also a testimonial of a particular period in history, revealing an obsession with memory and the past. Nevertheless, it should be regarded with caution, since the diary is a highly subjective instrument and it can be "used" to manipulate the reader. The end of the notebook, in *City of Glass*, seems to reveal the end of one's self-narrative, the impossibility to reveal a sustainable story about oneself and thus a reliable identity to affirm, which equals to the vanishing of one's identity:

> Nevertheless, he tried to face the end of the red notebook with courage. 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. The last sentence of the red notebook reads: "What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (Auster, P., 1990: 156-157)

The end of the notebook puts a highly self-reflexive question, thus interrogating the reliability of the entire story told up to that moment, which ends abruptly and leaves the dilemma unresolved. It also leaves Quinn as a suspended character, unable to utter a word and thus to make his story viable. The unnamed narrator that fulfils his task in the first person dismantles the Auster-character, considering him unreliable, and identifies with Quinn, feeling compassion for him, "As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (Auster, P., 1990: 158). As in *Ghosts*, characters dissolve into one another, into a metaphorical play with *otherness*, as Black acknowledges he is also a private eye watching a man contemplating doing nothing, thus getting very close to being Blue's mirror reflection, much to the latter's dislike, who finds himself being made redundant:

> I'm a private detective, says Black, point blank, all cool and collected, and for a brief moment Blue is tempted to throw his drink in Black's face, he's that peeved, that burned at the man's gall. (Auster, P., 1990: 213)

At this point in the narrative, it becomes clearer that Black knew all the time he was watched, so he played, in turn, so convincingly that he determined Blue to persevere in his detective pursuit. Black had lived more than a year in isolation, having as sole activities reading, writing and wandering through the endless labyrinthine loops and random itineraries of the streets of New York. Human contact was almost inexistent, both Black and Blue spent most of the time in the room, writing and reading. The latter copies almost all activities the former does - but the sudden encounter with Blue

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

determines Black to behave in a very friendly manner, as if they were old comrades. Blue's disbelief is unavoidable:

> If Black is finally resolved to break out of his hermetic routine, then why would he begin by talking to a broken-down old man on a street corner? No, Black knew that he was talking to Blue. And if he knew that, then he knows who Blue is. No two ways about it, Blue says to himself: he knows everything. (Auster, P., 1990: 211)

The mystery will remain unsolved by the end of the novel, with the final episode deepening even more the mystery of the narrative. It is another confrontation with the *other*, as Blue's criminal intentions before coming to Black's room are actually enacted by the latter, who waits for Blue with a loaded gun, pointed at him and ready to blast him down. The dialogue reveals the positioning of each of the characters: Black, as a sort of ventriloquist, wearing a mask, while Blue positions himself as the *dummy*, the "original funny man" (Auster, P., 1990: 228). Within this scene, Black overtly exposes his intentions: killing both of them, having ready the suicide note, but leaving the mystery unresolved, as the novel ends with Blue beating Black probably to death and the former disappearing, fading out, heading toward unknown realms.

The *whodunit* turns the chased into the chaser and vice-versa, in a never ending game of mirrors, without offering a resolution to the mystery. In dealing with the whole *Trilogy* one cannot do anything else than try to search for a meaning in the multitude of selves that perform on the scene of the novel. Faced with different circumstances, the characters try to adapt and enact a suitable role. Yet, they fail in achieving a coherent identity, as the fragmented selves cannot be united into a coherent whole, instead there are dispersed *others* that try to perform one of the innumerable roles the circumstances impose, the self is no longer what it wants to be, but what the others choose it to be. In the absence of viable interaction situations, the protagonist no longer has a valid story to tell, leaving the end suspended, with Blue fading into the unknown, probably sailing to China (a mere authorial reference to Auster's failed tentative to be a sailor).

The last novel in *The New York Trilogy* brings new light over the two that precede it and, at the same time, further unfolds the mystery of *the locked room*, a metaphor equivalent to the mysterious plot, the secluded self, the inescapable writing as identity. The first person narration apparently offers a more direct, open perspective over the plot, but the identity of the narrator remains unknown to the reader until the last page of the novel, moreover, as it will be revealed, it is the same narrator of the entire trilogy that will be the main protagonist of this last novel. The unnamed narrator is endeavoring in a detective-like pursuit after he receives a letter from his childhood friend's wife, Sophie Fanshawe, asking him to provide help in publishing the books of her husband, after his mysterious disappearance. Taking on Fanshawe's role, the narrator is lured further into the depths of his friend's inwardness and arrives at a partial identification with him.

An intertextual allusion that draws our attention from the start is that of the protagonist that eludes his present role and withdraws from society, out of the sense of displacement and non-identification with the mask he has to bear. It goes back to one of Paul Auster's favorite characters, the eponymous protagonist of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the eternal metaphor of the dream-chaser, but also to Luigi Pirandello, not the brilliant master of early 20th century experimental theatre, but also the author of an early illustration of what is called in this dissertation identity metafiction, the novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*, another character in search of self-discovery that casts off his initial identity and fails eventually to regain it, as everyone considers him dead, a mere "ex",

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

the "late" Mattia Pascal. It is also reminiscent of Hawthorne's *Wakefield*, the protagonist that also deserts his family, out of unknown reasons, so as to turn inwardly and look for his true self that eventually proves to be no more than another mask.

Another theme that is announced from the very first paragraph is that of the double, the reflection of oneself in the mirror, the inescapable *other*. The unnamed narrator in *The Locked Room* confesses from the first page of the novel that he cannot conceive himself as a person without referring to Fanshawe:

> It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am. We met before we could talk, babies crawling through the grass in diapers, and by the time we were seven we had pricked our fingers with pins and made ourselves blood brothers for life. 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. (Auster, P., 1990: 235)

Through this statement, the unnamed narrator acknowledges he would not arrive at considering himself meaningful unless in relation to his friend, the now-absent other, which can also be seen from the perspective of the Lacanian mirror-stage. Even if we are now referring to an adult, people and their fictional counterparts, the characters as adults may undergo this stage in fulfilling the internal need of identification with another person/character, in order to gain self-esteem and self-confidence. The novel turns more than the previous two in the *Trilogy* to introspection and reflection on man's purpose on this earth, a real quest for self-discovery.

Sophie Fanshawe is the one that brings back Fanshawe in the narrator's life, but at the same time, the image of the old friend dissolves into the past: "He was a ghost I carried around inside me, a prehistoric figment, a thing that was no longer real" (Auster, P., 1990: 236). She briefly informs him that Fanshawe disappeared and that neither the police, nor the private detective she hired managed to trace him. Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, reappears in *The Locked Room* as the private eye that nevertheless gives up searching for Fanshawe after only six weeks, as the case seemed to have no valid clue to be solved. Quinn's appearance in the last novel of the trilogy might be considered an attempt to render him more trustworthy, both as a character and as a professional: "Quinn was no charlatan" (Auster, P., 1990: 239), as Sophie considered. Later on, it will be proved that Quinn turned from the chaser into the chased, as Fanshawe's wit managed to subvert all the clues Quinn might have found and to lead him astray, along deceptive paths. He was turned from the actor in the detective pursuit into the mere object: "I turned everything around. He thought he was following me, but in fact I was following him. He found me in New York, of course, but I got away – wriggled right through his arms" (Auster, P., 1990: 362).

Fanshawe has turned himself into a ghost, a dead man, unable to explain his hiding in spoken words, but only in written discourse, but even his writing is deceptive, hermetic, without ultimate meaning. He writes in the same red notebook the explanation for his gesture, as a sort of testament, an account for his deed: "It's all in the notebook. Whatever I managed to say now would distort the truth" (Auster, P., 1990: 368).

The trilogy ends in an ambiguous way. The three novels are mere parodies of classical detective story, subverting the conventions of the genre and putting at the centre of the plot the very act of self-reflexive writing, or, if we were to adopt Michael Cook's view, Auster "foregrounds the metafictional nature of the detective story by allying its characteristics to the nature of writing. The result is a constant round of observation, note taking, following and contemplation – a parody of the investigation

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)

made by the detective in order to locate clues and solve crimes" (Cook, M., 2011: 135). The end does not bring a final resolution; instead, the meaning remains intrinsic, hermetic, locked – a detective story that remains "enclosed", just as its protagonists. There is no absolute resolution.

Beyond the room of the book that went on being written there is the hope of another story awaiting its turn. The image of the train – a metaphor of the life journey, the train that has stopped only to depart to another destination, another life adventure, might be interpreted as the beginning of another symbolic journey into fantasy and is reminiscent of James Thurber's Walter Mitty ("The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"), his extraordinary incursions into the wild fantasy adventures that distract him from his humdrum everyday existence, or of another Pirandellian character, Belluca in the short-story "The Train Whistles," who finds escape every once in a while, from his suffocating daily life, in the imaginary journeys on which he embarks from time to time. In the same way, the closure of the *Trilogy* is not definitive, since beyond the last pages of Fanshawe's notebook there are thousands of other stories that wait their turn, a feature of most metanarrations and frame-stories that go beyond the borders of the book's covers and enter in dialogue with the reader in order to produce multitudes of stories.

References

Auster, Paul. *The Invention of Solitude*. London: Faber & Faber, 1992.
Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
Cook, Michael. *Narratives of Enclosure in Detective Fiction. The Locked Room Mystery*. London: Macmillan, 2011.
Stets, Jan. E. and Peter J. Burke. *Identity Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Electronic Resources

Holdengraber, Paul. "Paul Auster in Conversation with Paul Holdengraber, Live from the New York Public Library." accessed 31.05.2014 <http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/winter-journal-paul-auster-conversation-paul-holdengr%C3%A4ber?nref=90281>

BDD-A14563 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:37 UTC)