

# The Internal Conflict of Identity in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*

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## Introduction

“Writing is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he’s there, he’s not really there.” –Paul Auster

The treatment of identity has been central in all the books of Paul Auster I have read. Similarly in *New York Trilogy* (2004), the main characters of each book in these separate books, are placed in situations as detectives to solve a problem that is incomprehensible for them, and the reason for it is inexplicable for the reader. They are all “detectives”, that become victims of their cases.

My essay will concentrate on the first two books, *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, mainly because their structure and endings have a similarity that do not concern the last novel, *The Locked Room*. The first two books have, in comparison to the last, a protagonist/main character who accepts a detective function for a case that is unknown and totally disconnected to him, whereas the protagonist in the last novel subsumes under a case that is more closely related to himself and his life. He is not only searching for his identity, but also searching for a lost friend. This results in tracking the identity of the protagonist’s friend through memories and their mutual childhood. The ending in the last book also differs from the rest, since we come to know in the end that this protagonist actually wrote the other two first books. Eventually, the last book offers an outline for the problem that permeates all of the three books.

One thing that is similar in the two first books is that the protagonists are subdued to a philosophy that reality and the case they are trying to solve have a pattern that can be solved through ordinary ways of investigation, by seeing the course of events in a cause-and effect point-of-view to put the enigmatic pieces together. But this angle of approach will lead to their fall. As a contrast, the last book *The Locked Room*, as W Lawrence Hogue claims in *Postmodernism American Literature and its Other*, the protagonist “comes to accept chance as a

part of his world. [...] He also accepts the fact that the story [...] is open-ended”(73), and that the narrator at the end, in contradiction to Quinn, the protagonist in *City of Glass*, who is “unable to decipher the message in the red notebook”, instead “destroys its pages, completing the act of dissolution” (74). And thus, another difference between the narrator in *The Locked Room* and the first two books’ protagonists, Quinn and Blue, is that he “does not go mad or commit suicide”(75) and also, since we come to know that the narrator in *The Locked Room* is the writer of the previous books, he is, as I mentioned above, “[u]nlike Quinn and Blue, [...] able to write *The New York Trilogy*” (Hogue, 75).

One of my theories is that these books are a comment on the act of writing, since, for example, all of the protagonists are writers themselves in some way, or have similarities to the author himself, Paul Auster. The words of Mr Black in the second novel *Ghosts* echoes this statement: “[w]riting is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he’s there, he’s not really there” (178). This essay will therefore concern the act of writing as a metaphysical invention. In my essay, I will apply first and foremost Blanchot’s literary theories, but also useful ideas from Anne M. Holzaphel’s text *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?* *Tracking the structure of Paul Auster’s Anti-Detective Novels* (1996). From reading these analyses and theories, I have concluded that these aspects are suitable to highlight the problems and questions that my essay concern. The aspects include language, literary structures, relationships between the characters and analyses of how we could interpret the ways the author or the narrator relate to the text. My claim is that the protagonists’ search to find, or come closer to their identities, results in fictive dissolving.

My analysis is divided into two chapters. In the beginning of the first chapter, I will present some of Blanchot’s most basic theoretical points-of-views, and afterwards I will analyse the protagonist Quinn and his relation to himself, other characters and the case and see how language and the author can be interpreted. The second chapter will treat the second book’s protagonist

Blue in similar method as the first chapter. I will make an analysis of Blue's relation to his own identity, to his antagonist, language and Blue's view of reality.

## Quinn

Both *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* are texts that have many clues that point in various directions. But one thing that we can see is that their language, fiction and characters are closely connected into a complex system. Concerning language, Blanchot argues that the written word has distanced itself from the thing that it is naming, causing the object under description to be absent, even destroying it. As Blanchot describes it: “[t]he word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being – the very fact that it does not exist”(379). Everything that we read and write is therefore always fiction, never a solid “truth”, in consequence the words in the text, and the stories the writer tries to explain or characterize never can render the “true” object.

There are also many allusions to deconstruction theory and various indications from the narrator of how we should be prepared in order to interpret the structure of the text. In the beginning of *City of Glass* we read that “[e]verything becomes essence, the centre of the book shifts with each events that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end” (8). But later we will see that not even the end gives us any answers.

The voice of the narrator elucidates the thoughts of Quinn, and gives directions to the reader, for example “[t]he question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell” (3). Therefore, the story in *itself* will not give us any answers. As a consequence, it becomes the reader’s task to decipher and give the text a meaning. One of Blanchot’s theories is that the text in itself is just an object, it does not mean anything, does not refer to itself. The reader is in fact for Blanchot the one that “makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is the real author, he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing” (Blanchot, 364). Similarly, as the detective Blue later discovers in the book *Ghosts* after

writing down the “clues” of the case in the red notebook: “[f]or 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” (149), the protagonists are left to create a meaning of the text and see beyond the meaning of the words, just as the readers.

We also come to know that “[l]ater, when he [Quinn] had time to reflect on these events [...] he would manage to piece together his encounter [...]. But that was a work of memory, and remembered things, he [Quinn] knew, had a tendency to subvert the things remembered. As a consequence, he could never be sure of any of it” (13). Therefore, Quinn can never be able to interpret reality as a whole since he never can interpret it with all his senses. Nor is he omnipotent, in comparison to a ‘god’. Likewise, as we readers concentrate on reading, incidents around us will not be given as much attention, since our occupation is elsewhere. Also, because of forgetfulness and the fact that our memory might distort what we see, we can never be sure of “reality”. One of Celan’s theories implies that art in itself is a “self-estrangement” and that it causes “self-forgetfulness” (Blanchot/Celan: *Unterwegssein*, 89). What Quinn does with this case that he embarks on, is that he goes into another character to “forgets himself”, just as the reader perceives a book and “forgets himself”, paying attention to the plot, the characters and the art. The reader “acts” like a detective, trying to put the pieces together, just like Quinn, since the main task that Quinn undertakes in the novel is to find the “truth”; to put pieces together to create a whole. As Holzaphel says, the reader then “will be led away from the actual text” (Holzaphel, 52).

The beginning of the novel introduces the protagonist Quinn’s future development of his inner life, that will alter throughout the text. For example, we read that “[m]uch later [...] he would conclude that nothing was real except chance.” But “in the beginning, there was simply the events and its consequences” (3). The description of Quinn we get from the narrator is limited. The author even says that “there is little that need detain us. Who he was, where he came

from, and what he did are of no great importance. We know, for example, that he was thirty-five years old [...] had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead". The narrator also tells us that he also "wrote mystery novels"(3). Here Paul Auster makes a metafictional connection to himself, since he also is a writer of mystery novels.

An example of another connection that creates a more profound complexity between the author and Quinn, could be seen in the term 'Private eye' which Quinn reflects upon and concludes the term to have a triple meaning: "the letter 'i', standing for investigator, it was 'I' in the upper case, [...] also the physical eye of the writer". Moreover, he knows that "the writer and the detective are interchangeable" (8). This does not only denote the internal relationship between Quinn and Auster, but also the relationship between the author Quinn and Work, the investigator in Quinn's own novels. This statement causes the reader to read the text in several levels at the same time, and confuses the reader to be unsure of the reference of these sentences. Therefore, the notion that "[t]he centre, [...] is everywhere" (8) has been established, and the readers do not get a specific direction to construct the plot or Quinn's identity, or how we as readers should interpret the meaning.

Another reference to the writer Paul Auster and also to Quinn's inner division is the fact that Quinn writes books under the name of William Wilson, because "Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although [...] Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself"(4). But even though Quinn is a man with an empty inside "[...] he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson was the same man"(5). But William Wilson's private eye-narrator, Max Work, "had become very close to Quinn. [...] Work had increasingly come to life" (6). Here we can see that Quinn has a scattered inner life, divisions of the self, and has a problem with signing his own name on the books he is writing. As a result of Quinn's inner detachment and his characteristic of playing with his inner roles, he therefore can accept being "Paul Auster" when the phone rings in the middle of the night and a voice asks for



“Paul Auster. Of the Auster Detective Agency” (7) or rather asking for “[t]he one who calls himself Paul Auster” (11). This could be interpreted metaphysically, referring to the text itself and its characters, since the voice is searching for someone to play a role, not necessarily the right ‘Paul Auster’.

The one who hires the author Quinn is Peter Stillman Junior, who needs him to follow Peter Stillman Junior’s father, Peter Stillman Senior. Stillman Junior is a character who Quinn has a problem to decipher. But Stillman Junior has similarities to Quinn, since he also changes his names and denies his identity. He says “I am Peter Stillman. [...] That is not my real name” (15). Throughout the meeting, Peter Stillman Junior repeats everything and often contradicts himself, by including the opposite of his statements, like “[y]es and no”(15). Why Stillman Junior says that his real name is something else, is because his “real language” belongs to the “language of God”. Peter Stillman Senior tried to find out if “God’s language” could be restored in keeping his newborn child locked up in a room without any influence by language. Peter Stillman Senior “thought a baby might speak it if the baby saw no people” and therefore Peter Stillman Junior says that “[i]n the dark I [Stillman Junior] speak God’s language” (20).

The world of Stillman Junior belongs to another time-line, since he has never learned how humans perceive things: “I am new every day. I am born when I wake up in the morning, I grow old during the day, and I die at night when I go to sleep” (18). Quinn also discovers, after Peter Stillman’s speech is over, “[f]or it was only now, after the words had stopped, that he realized they were sitting in the dark. Apparently a whole day had gone by” (23). Just as reading in itself can be a dissolving of time, the presence of Peter Stillman Junior is in itself a way to emphasize the time in the text being arbitrary; it does not follow a time-line. In contrast to the life of Quinn, where the time seems to follow a more linear line.

As a consequence when Quinn accepts the role as a detective, he makes the fictive characters of his mind more “real” than himself, since he is also identifying himself with his fictionalized

character Work, through his invented intercessor William Wilson. As Carin Freywald observes, this could be seen as a comment upon literature itself, that “fiction is more real than fact” (Freywald, 148). Since Quinn is totally peeled off his own power of making any initiative, he therefore can go to the meeting with the man who phoned him in the middle of the night, because “[i]t wasn’t his appointment, it was Paul Auster’s” (12). He simply takes on someone else’s identity which makes it possible to act, leaving his own identity to fill another void. He acts in all names but his own, often using the names of the people related to the case, calling himself both ‘Peter Stillman’ and ‘Henry Dark’, a fictional character in one of Stillman Senior’s writings. These characters are characters that he does not understand, but tries to understand by using their names in becoming ‘the other’, or the ‘opposite’.

From the beginning, writing under a pseudonym was the only thing of substance in Quinn’s life, the only connection to the world outside of himself. The writer sees things through his characters to the extent that he ceases to exist himself. This point of view is also compatible concerning the real author Paul Auster. This means that we can not find the “author” in the text, he is inside of his characters, he is everywhere. Therefore, the *outside* is the only thing left of Quinn. Referring to Blanchot’s idea about the absent centre: “as though the center of the circle lay outside the circle, [...] infinitely far back, as though the *outside* were precisely the center, which could only be the absence of all center” (Blanchot, 460). In this sense, we don’t know on which level we are suppose to interpret the character or the plot, the order is shattered, or rather - there is no order. It is, as Holzaphel claims, that “[t]hrough Work, Quinn enters his own novels, removing himself from his identity so that finally he becomes another character himself” (Holzaphel, 33). Later on in the novel, Quinn reflects on this, quoting Baudelaire: “Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas. It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. [...] Or else, taking the bulls by the horns: Anywhere out of the world” (110). Therefore, Quinn’s strong self-denial makes him search for identity in other identities,

since he “had [...] stopped thinking of himself as real” (9). Because he can not explain the world from his own self, he uses other names and identities to find the truth, to regain an order of the inexplicable. He, as a consequence, is almost always outside of himself, searching for his own self, which is like the plot as a whole– inexplicable and disarranged.

Another connection to various ways of reading we can see in the beginning of *City of Glass* is when we are informed that Quinn likes to walk. We read that he was “never really going anywhere” and that “New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, [...] it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well”(3). Here we can see that the narrator has constructed a similarity between Quinn’s inner and outer self. The inside reflects the outside, which in effect refers to the title *City of Glass*, a fragile place, just as Quinn’s identity is weak. It is also a labyrinth where Quinn and Stillman make their endless walks. Anne M. Holzaphel argues that “the maze is a motif which refers to the hopelessness of Quinn’s and Stillman’s situation” (Holzaphel, 31). When Quinn follows Stillman Senior, he reflects that the objects he stopped to collect “seemed to be no more than broken things, [...] stray bits of junk”(59). Later, Stillman tells Quinn that he “c[a]me to New York because [...] the brokenness is everywhere” (78). Stillman Senior also makes a connection between the ‘things’ and language, since he believes that language is bereft of meaning, after the Fall of Man.

But there are still occasions when Quinn knows that it is important to hold on to his own identity, for example, just after he has bought a red notebook and was beginning the case of following Peter Stillman Senior: “he [...] took off all his clothes, [...] and wrote his initials, DQ [for Daniel Quinn] on the first page”(39). He then writes “[m]ost important of all: To remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. [...] For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? All I can say is this: [...] My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name”(40).

When Quinn is irresolute of how to act concerning the case, he consults ‘Paul Auster’, whom he thinks is a private detective, but is actually a writer of novels. The fictive ‘Paul Auster’ discusses his essay on the authorship of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* with Quinn. As Holzaphel argues, this discussion could be related to the book *City of Glass*, but also this discussion is “concerning the relationship between author and reader” (Holzaphel, 51). The fictive ‘Paul Auster’ argues that it might be Don Quixote himself who is the real author of *Don Quixote*, that he had “selected the authors” for himself. This makes us wonder if this also concerns the authorship of *City of Glass*. But as Holzaphel states, ‘Paul Auster’ declares that his essay is just speculative (Holzaphel, 51). This leaves us answerless, and the possible Blanchot’s “centre” of our attention dismissed.

There has been several indications in the novel that the fiction itself is just a fiction, and that we should interpret it as such. At the encounter with the fictive ‘Paul Auster’, his wife asks him “[a]re you in the book? Yes, said Quinn, the only one” (102). In one sense, it refers to the telephone book, but in another sense, it refers to the actual book that we are holding in our hands. As well as *City of Glass* does not contain a solution of the plot, the book that Quinn is writing in, when trying to solve the case of Peter Stillman Senior, simultaneously does not contain a solution. The book solely has words that are deprived of the real meaning, the pattern that will solve the case, which can be connected to Blanchot’s idea of the words’ “absence of [...]being” (Blanchot, 379) .

At this point in the book, the reader has undoubtedly noticed the confusion of identity concerning the author-character. But what establishes this confusion even further, regarding the connection to the character Quinn himself, as playing the part of ‘Paul Auster’, or Paul Auster referring to himself as having a scattered self, is when Quinn says “[m]y name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name” (40). This is also a reference to the language in which Peter Stillman Junior is talking, the language that “cannot be translated” (18). Peter Stillman Senior writes in

one of his books that before the Fall of Man, “the thing and its name were interchangeable” (43). The search for the truth for both Peter Stillman Senior and Quinn ends up in language, although Quinn does not know it in the beginning, believing that he only has to continue his task of solving the case. “He had to go through with it. There could not be two answers. It was either this or that” (111). There is a connection between language itself and Quinn’s identity. As Blanchot argues, language “can only begin with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. Negation is tied to language” (Blanchot, 381). Therefore, the fictive character ‘Paul Auster’ in *City of Glass*, is consequently a character as all the others. His existence does not have to carry any closer relationship to the real author than the others do. The presence of the fictive ‘Paul Auster’ is just a conception to implicate the notions of writing and turn the reader/writer identification in another direction.

However, after Quinn has lost track of the case, after he has lost his own apartment, lost track of Peter Stillman Senior, he notices that Junior Stillman’s apartment he had under surveillance to prevent Stillman senior to enter, is actually empty. He is then lying on the apartment floor for an undetermined amount of time. In the dark room he writes in his red notebook sentences that are similar to the language that Peter Stillman Junior speaks, “[f]or the case was far behind now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. Quinn had no interest in himself [...] He wrote about [...] his hopes for mankind.” He feels that “his words had been severed from him, [...] they were a part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone” (131).

But when he finally runs out of pages, the character ceases to exist. This echoes Peter Stillman Juniors words when he says: “I will be doing something else. After I am done being a poet. Sooner or later I will run out of words, you see. Everyone has just so many words inside of him. And then where will I be?” (19). The dissolving of the character Quinn and the lack of a

solution is natural for Blanchot in literature, since the solution is not there “for the glory of some pyramid, but to destroy work itself, along with the sad workers” (Blanchot, 493). The story and the characters within the text are gone - Peter Stillman Junior and Senior, Virginia Stillman and last, Quinn himself, who lived for the solution that he tried to find through the clues that he wrote down in his book.

But when the last page of Quinn’s book is filled with text, he no longer exists. For readers, Quinn exists as long as we read the book, and he will only exist in the book. Interpreting the dissolving of character, in using the theories of Blanchot, this also accounts for the author Paul Auster. Blanchot claims that the author does not exist outside of his work: “before the work, the writer does not yet exist; after the work, he is no longer there: which means that his existence is open to question” (Blanchot, 487). We can therefore never find a solution outside of the work either, because the world that we construct is a world bereft of meaning, and the author himself has taken distance to the words he has written.

## Blue

In this chapter I will make a close reading of how the main characters interact, Blue's quest for truth and stability of the self, what the term 'author' signifies, and how the role of the 'author' is depicted in the story. Like *City of Glass*' Quinn, the protagonist Blue in *Ghosts* endures a situation which is signified by an attempt to solve a case which he cannot mentally construct. As Quinn, Blue sees the reality in events of cause and effect, therefore he cannot evaluate the clues that will finally lead him to the truth. The protagonist Blue is a detective from the beginning and is commissioned by the masked man White to follow the man called Black. Blue is supposed to send weekly reports to White and tell him what Black is doing. Later it appears that Black had masked himself to present himself to Blue to be White. Black therefore reads Blue's reports without Blue's knowledge. These texts causes Blue much wonder, since Blue cannot always see what Black is reading, and therefore cannot understand Black.

In the beginning of the book *Ghosts*, the narrator demonstrates the order of the characters. We read that “[f]irst of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown” (137). The fact that the narrator denotes that ‘something existed before the beginning’ can both refer to ‘the beginning of the story’, the ‘plot’ or even the world itself, since this quote echoes the beginning of the Bible’s enumeration of various existences: “In the beginning [...] God made heaven and earth. [...]Let there be light: and there was light. [...]and he separated light from darkness. He called the light day, and the darkness night” (First Book of Genesis, 1). If Brown were there even “before the beginning” we can assume that he has an important symbolic role, we might see him as ‘god’ as well, since Brown is Blue’s former supervisor and guide. We can therefore read the story as a creation tale, where we can see that the protagonist Blue and his antagonist Black were “one” from the beginning, but were separated by the omnipotent creator, which is –the author. The various names of colours could here be seen

as a way to denote the division of characters. If we look at the colours from a colour mixing - perspective, we can summarize that the compound between the primary colours - red, blue and yellow, we get the colour brown. This colour is then symbolizes the 'definite' colour, which also refers to God, since he is the 'definite' being.

Further on we read that "[t]his is how it begins. The place is New York, time is the present, and neither one will ever change" (137). Just like the Bible, the time and the place will never change, the words and the books are constant constructions that will never change. The narrator, who knows that "the case will go on for years" also informs us that "the present is no less dark than the past, and its mystery is equal to anything the future might hold. Such is the way of the world: one step at a time, one word and then the next" (138). As readers we perceive the words "one step at a time", since we read it in a linear perspective. If we see the book as a presence of being, it will also be constituted with the same sentences and words since the story is always the same, the sentence "the presence is no less dark than the past", could be interpreted as a stable institution, the book does only symbolizes the 'beginning and an end'. As Blanchot argues, "[t]he time of the book, determined by the beginning-end (past-future) relation based on a presence [...] itself conceived as a search for a source" (Blanchot, 475). This point to the fact that the only *change* in this story will be the reader's interpretations. The story does not point in a specific direction. In conclusion, the only time that exists is the presence which is the presence of the readers' mind that moves back and forward in the text to construct the story.

As in *City of Glass*, the clues that are laid out for the reader spurts out in different directions. For example, Quinn's surname Daniel might refer to 'coincidence' or the initials, DQ refer to Don Quixote. Also, the narrator in *Ghosts* has named his character and the places in the city by colours, to create a wide range of references and possible clues: "[t]he address is unimportant. But let's say it's Brooklyn Heights, for the sake of argument"(138). But as the narrator continues, he says that the street's name was "Orange Street perhaps. Walt Whitman had set the



first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on this street [...] and it was here that Henry Ward Beecher railed against slavery” (139). Even though the narrator says it is “unimportant” where the street was, we can see here that the narrator himself is the centre of imagination, that there is someone behind the story and creative process trying to delude the reader’s attempt to create a pattern in order to find the “Truth”. In comparison, Blanchot argues that “the story does not explain itself [...]it only announces its own movement, which can lay the groundwork for the game of deciphering and interpretation” (Blanchot, 493). Because the stories are said to be ‘detective novels’, the reader will, as in *City of Glass*, try to construct the case. This, of course, also ascribes to the protagonists Quinn and Blue. Holzaphel argues that the author’s usage of colors are there to “divert the reader’s attention away from external characteristics by giving his characters names of colours. This emphasis of the inner as opposed to the outer is also present in Blue’s parting words with his fiancée” (Holzaphel, 61). The narrator in the last book *The Locked Room*, who ascribes the text as written by him, says that:

”but for the most part I was content to stay within the bounds of realism. When my imagination flagged, there were certain mechanical devices to fall back on: the colours (...), the Presidents (...), fictional characters (...)invent lives that had never existed, that never would exist. It was precisely like making up characters in a story, but something grander, something far more unsettling. Everyone knows that stories are imaginary” (251).

The colours does not only exist to “divert the reader’s attention away from external characteristics”, they thus create a wider range of various clues or side issues, since the colours often are inherent in expressions of language. For example, Blue feels that “[e]verything seems *brown* to him” (168) or “from out of the *blue*, he begins to consider another possibility” (189).

This way of using colours in language makes the reader focus on the language itself to find possible clues given from the author.

The focus in the novel is on the protagonist Blue's thoughts and what he sees in his relation to himself and the character Black: "[a]t one point, Blue thinks that he is looking directly at him [...] but [...] he realizes that it is merely a blank stare, signifying thought rather than seeing, a look that makes things invisible, that does not let them in" (139). Blue can only see a little part of Black's apartment. Consequently, when Black is no longer at his desk, Blue can no longer see him or know what he is doing, and is therefore deprived of a full understanding of the case. He turns to imagination because of the lacking solution, and therefore writes down invented stories that might suit Black's possible reasons or crime, since Blue does not know if Black is a culprit or not. Blue even consider Black to be "a madman, [...] plotting to blow up the world. Perhaps writing has something to do with his secret formula." But he decides that "[i]t's too early to know anything [...] he decides to suspend judgement" (140). Blue tries to see things 'as they are'; and tries to turn away from indulging in imaginative reasons, as Quinn did when he constructed his own case. This detective's point-of-view based on factual devices, as Holzaphel points out, indicate a "model of a hard-boiled novel's tough private eye" (Holzaphel, 57). At the same time, the stories are also a symbol for the reader's own attempt to fill the void of Black's entity.

In the beginning Blue does not understand that he is a part of the case as well, since he has always seen himself to stand outside his former cases, being a person without a role in the context. When Blue starts to write down excursion of make-belief in his reports, he "realizes that they have nothing really to do with Black. This isn't the story of my life, after all, he says. I'm supposed to be writing about him, not myself" (149). Here, he also discovers that "words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say"(149). This echoes Blanchot's thought about language being arbitrary, since "[l]anguage can only begin

with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself” (Blanchot, 381), but also that the author “never know what [he has] written, even if [he has] written only to find this out” (Blanchot, 487). This is equal to *City of Glass*’ Quinn’s problems of not being able to understand Peter Stillman’s scribbling in the red notebook.

Blue has therefore problems in constructing the reality and live up to the role as an “author”, when writing the reports. Blanchot comments upon the writing process of the author, concluding that the author’s “experience is not worthless: in writing, he has put himself to the test [of] nothingness at work, and after having written he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing. The work disappears, but the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing, [...] to be realized as it disappears” (Blanchot, 365). The essential meaning of the described disappears. It is though necessary for Blue to act to solve the problem of the case. As Blanchot puts it, referring to Hegel “[a]n individual’, [...] ‘cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action”” (Blanchot, 361).

Just as Quinn who is filled with voidness, Blue feels that he lacks something essential. The narrator describes Blue to be a person who

“has never given much thought to the world inside him, [...]. He has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember, fixing his attention on these surfaces only in order to perceive them, sizing up one and then passing on to the next, and he has always taken pleasure in the world as such, asking no more of things than that they be there” (145).

In the end, his inability to see beyond reality and see into himself will lead to his fall, just like Quinn. Once, he tries to stabilize language by naming things in his room by their name. Blue

“looks around the room and fixes his attention on various objects. [...] He sees the lamp and says to himself, lamp. [...] and the moment Blue speaks them, he feels a deep satisfaction, as though he has just proved the existence of the world” (150). This is similar to the experiment of Peter Stillman Senior, who wanted his son to speak Adam’s language, before the fall of Man. God gave Adam the task of naming the things around him, a task given from God. Blue’s endeavour to find stability is also a way to reassure himself of his previous world, a stable conception of things and facts. But in this moment he cannot utter Black’s name, since Black symbolizes the uncertain. Blue therefore fails in his endeavour to stabilize reality and language, since he can not materialize the unknown.

However, Blue cannot understand the essential clues that Black is giving him, for example Black’s indication of reading Thoreau. Concerning *Walden*, Blue feels that “this book offers him nothing. There is no story, no plot, no action – nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book. [...] he no longer wants any part of it. But how to get out? How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room?” (172). Although Blue is referring to Black’s writings, that he has not yet understood are his own reports, which indicates that this quote points to Blue himself. Through Blue’s thoughts we can also see that it can be a comment upon the reader’s perception of *Ghosts* as a whole, a double-layered comment that we also have seen in *City of Glass*, concerning the role between author and reader and the various books and texts, since Blue is a reader of Black, and Black is a reader of Blue’s writings, and therefore of himself as well. But “[w]hat he does not know is that were he to find the patience to read the book in the spirit in which it asks to be read, his entire life would begin to change. [...] Little does he realize that this is the beginning of the end” (165). Holzaphel means that “[i]t is not only through the conditions of the case and the detective’s work that the aspect of rest is emphasized [...] also due to the integration of references to literature:

Thoreau's *Walden*, [...] The rest and loneliness stressed in this book offers a programme for this novel" (Holzaphel, 60).

Since Blue is not able to analyze his inner life, the outcome becomes disastrous. The lack of accepting stillness makes Blue make a move and contact Black. Blanchot means that "people who are in favour of action reject literature, which does not act, and those in search of passion become writers so as not to act" (Blanchot, 370). Since Black is the sedentary writer and Blue is the detective and wants palpable action, these two characters therefore create a polarity.

A more expressive quote to show this polarity, is from a part where Blue is looking out of the window and "finds himself thinking [...] If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term – speculation, [...] [t]o speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying [...], it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself" (146). Holzaphel means that this passage "implies that Black shadows Blue, and hence both characters seem to constitute the same person" (Holzaphel, 63). It is interesting to note that the narrator is deriving the meaning of the word *speculatus* from its earlier meaning. This connects the author, or the narrator to the man Peter Stillman Senior, since Stillman sought the true essence of words.

Feeling totally bereft of guidance and clues, Blue tries to figure out what reasons there could be for the hiring of him as a detective. Blue is turned into making an action, since he can not stand the lack of a solution, and his reasoning around the case have turned into very complicated explanations, for example that "there are times, [...] that Blue believes the only logical explanation is that Black is not one man but several. [...] but [...] it's a thought too monstrous for Blue." He says "I can't breathe any more. This is the end. I'm dying" (173).

A couple of months later he "reaches into his bag of disguises and casts about for a new identity" He then puts on clothes that make him look like "an old man who used to beg on the corners". We also read that the final details of his outfit "give him the look of an Old Testament prophet"

(173). Relating this disguise to the idea that the author and characters have various selves, the look of an “Old Testament prophet” could then be related to the beginning of the book, where the narrator uses expressions influenced by the Bible. The narrator has sounded like a prophet throughout the book, for example explaining various events as “this is the beginning of the end” (165). Here, Blue’s role is connected to the role that the author has taken on. It should also be emphasized that Black is also a writer, so the connection to the author’s role is divided into a reader and a writer. The author sees himself outside of himself. These various selves are discussed by Alison Russell in *Deconstructing The New York Trilogy: Paul Auster’s Anti-Detective Fiction*, where she argues that “deconstruction rejects the notion of a single self” and argues that “these novels, [...] also serve as the selves of Paul Auster”. Lawrence Hogue concludes that “[u]ltimately, Auster argu[es] against the primacy of any individual’s sense of authorship over the text. A text must be authored, but the circumstances surrounding the authorship are complicated by the author’s ‘multiple beings’. The narrator, Quinn and Blue then “serve as an ironic frame for Paul Auster’s own logocentric quest for origin and mastery, a quest he [...] continually deconstructs” (Hogue, 79).

Though after Blue, masked as a bun, has talked to Black on a bench, Blue wonders “why else would he have gone on talking to [him] as he did? Not from loneliness, certainly. Assuming that Black is for real, then loneliness cannot be an issue” (179). Here, there is an indication that also Blue might not “be for real”, that he also is one of these ‘ghosts’ that Blue and Black discussed on the bench, when Black starts to make comments upon his work, saying that “[w]riting is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a writer has no life of his own. Even when he’s there, he’s not really there. Another Ghost. Exactly. Sounds mysterious” (178).

In similarity to Quinn’s dissolving, we can see that both characters are indicated to be fictive, because of their closeness as reader and writers. The roles are also even more blurred by Black’s words at the pub meeting with Blue, where he informs Blue that he is “a private

detective” and also explaining his boring job “to watch someone, no one in particular [...] and send in a report about him every week” (182). Blue asks Black if he knows if the other person is aware of him watching the other. Black tells Blue that “[o]f course he knows. [...] He’s got to know, or else nothing makes sense. [...] He needs my eye looking at him. [...] to prove he’s alive” (184).

After Blue has realized that the man Mr White, who hired Blue for the case, does not exist since he Mr White was a masked Mr Black, he feels that “everything has it’s own colour” (185). He feels a stability in both language and identity, enumerating various words connected to colour: “[t]here are blue and blue jays and blue herons. [...] There are blueberries, huckleberries, and the Pacific Ocean” (185). But this feeling is dismissed when he later finds out that the writings in Black’s room are only Blue’s own reports “all spelled out in black and white, meaning nothing, saying nothing, as far from the truth as silence would have been” (191). Blanchot comments upon the writing, saying that “[t]he writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is only a book, a mute accumulation of sterile words, the most meaningless thing in the world. The writer who experiences this void simply believes that the work is unfinished” (Blanchot, 403).

Before the book ends, Blue comes to Black’s apartment unmasked, where Black is waiting to kill him. Blue asks Black to tell the reasons of his hiring. Black tells Blue that he needed him to remind himself of what he was supposed to be doing: “[y]ou’re the one thing that doesn’t change, the one thing that turns everything inside out” (196). It is also interesting that Black is indicating that the book will not be finished until Blue is dead. Black says; “[o]h no, Blue. You don’t understand. It’s going to be the two of us together, just like always” (195). Black suggests that they will merge into one being, as a ‘death of the author[s]’, since Black knows that they are one character divided in two, the writer and the reader, and he also knows that they both are fictive. The book will not be finished, since Black now has succeeded in making Blue dependent

on Black and they can merge into nothingness without a text. Blanchot wonders what happens if “the book does not even manage to be born, what if it remains a pure nothing? Well, this is still better: silence and nothingness are the essence of literature, ‘the Thing Itself.’” Blanchot denotes that for Hegel “[t]he Thing Itself” is “the art which is above the work, the ideal that the work seeks to represent” (Blanchot, 366). If we see the merging of character from the perspective of the beginning of the Bible, we can see that what God had separated is now “one” again. It is also a denotation of the process of writing. A writer writes and interprets at the same time. Writing in itself is two sides of the same coin. Roland Barthes interprets ‘the death of the author’ as also a ‘death of God’, as Seán Burke discusses in his *The Death and Return of the Author*. “[t]o refuse to fix meaning is, [...] to refuse God and [...] reason, science, law” (Burke, 22).

In the end, Black is the one who dies and leaves Blue alone in the room. The narrator informs us that “the story is not yet over. There is still the final moment, and that will not come until Blue leaves the room. [...] where he goes after is not important. [...] all this took place more than thirty years ago [...] Anything is possible, therefore”(197). The book ends with the narrator philosophizing upon Blue’s disappearance: “I myself prefer to think he went away, boarding a train [...] going out west to start a new life” (198). As Holzaphel notes, Freywald makes in *How Philip Marlowe came to New York City* a connection between the ending of *Ghosts* and “Malamud’s novel, *A new life*, in which the protagonist boards a train in the East and sets out to start a new life” (Freywald, 157). In this perspective, the ending of *Ghosts* indicates that a new fictionalization has taken place. Just as Quinn, the author has here created a fictional dissolving of the protagonist. This denotes a flexibility that the characters have shown before, being able to change roles and identities. It also echoes Blanchot’s words, as I mentioned before: “The work disappears, but the fact of disappearing remains and appears as the essential thing” (365).



## Conclusion

In this essay I have shown the various implications of how the protagonists Quinn and Blue in *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*, develop through the stories and how their destinies are characterized by fictional dissolving. Mainly, I analysed this from the perspective of deconstruction as an analytic method, or to be precise, from Maurice Blanchot's theories concerning the author, character, language and the reader's task to construct the plot. Reading is an encounter between the author and the reader, which means that no logocentric truth can be drawn from the text itself.

In the first chapter, I introduced some of Blanchot's basic theories about the "centre" of perspective, meaning that the "centre" is something that does not exist in the book or in the words that we read, that the word or the sentence is just a "sign" for the what is left of the intended meaning. I also connected the protagonist Quinn's search for meaning with the reader's search for meaning in the text. The author also portrayed Quinn's character as a flexible entity, that in the end makes the fictional dissolving possible.

In the second chapter, I discussed the protagonist Blue and his antagonist Black's function together and indicated that they might be a fusion of two characters. The author is also discussed as being a function that contains a division of the self, resulting in various selves, which then Black and Blue symbolize. I have also discussed how language is used in the book, and have concluded that it is often used to make the case and the whole system of clues more difficult to decipher for the readers.

In conclusion, the question of how we should interpret and connect the system of clues and connection is still left unsolved in *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. But considering the obvious references in the text to the theory of deconstruction as an analytic tool, Auster has succeeded in turning the reader's endeavours to construct the plot.

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