

Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*: Revisiting Self in the Merging Boundaries of Gothic and the Postmodern

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Abstract—Inevitably wrought by the socio-historical context in which they occur, literary genres transform in the course of history, and gothic is not an exception. Since its rise in the late eighteenth century, the gothic genre has significantly evolved: from ruins, graveyards, and vampires to echoes of romantic imagination and towards gothic science-fiction. This study argues that gothic has renewed itself in the postmodern context, in the sense that the characteristic features of the genre as materialized in the supernatural are replaced with mysteries, terrors, and ghosts that haunt the contemporary self's inner mind. Thus a proliferation of vampires, doubles and ghosts has given way to the haunted vaults and obscure shadows within the characters' inner worlds. In particular, this paper addresses the concept of self and the postmodern gothic as reincarnated in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* by relating the notion of 'self' to space, self-reflexivity, the uncanny, and doubles.

Index Terms—postmodernism, gothic, postmodern self, space, self-reflexivity, the uncanny, doubles

I. INTRODUCTION

Gothic and history are closely associated; in *The History of Gothic Fiction*, Markman Ellis elaborates on "how history is adopted and recycled in the gothic novel", while also considering "how 'the gothic' is itself a theory of history" and "a mode for the apprehension and consumption of history." Ellis uses the term 'history' in its current sense in the English studies, as something more than a context or record of events: here history is a methodology in which the reader is encouraged to focus on the "mutability of ideas and language" (Ellis, 2003, p. 11). To offer a re-conceptualization of the notion of self, this study sets *The New York Trilogy* against the postmodern socio-historical background.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, as Christopher Butler argues, "is not particularly unified" as a doctrine, and "even those who have most significantly contributed ideas to its manifestos sometimes indignantly deny membership [...]. The postmodern paradigm, however, "is certain of its uncertainty", and has therefore "grasped the 'real' nature of the cultural and political institutions which surround us" (Butler, 2002, p. 2). This is to say that postmodernism characteristically evades definition, being more a set of perspectives than a concrete set of theories.

Appropriate to our gothic discourse, Ihab Hassan uses *ghost* as a metaphor to describe the often elusive nature of postmodernism; According to Hassan, postmodernism "is a revenant, the return of the irrepressible; every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back. And like a ghost, it eludes definition" (Hassan, 2001, p. 1). This said, however, Hassan maintains that the mutability of an idea in the course of time is inevitable, and not necessarily a discouraging concern. From this perspective, Hassan argues that, "this is only to confirm Nietzsche's insight, that if an idea has a history, it is already an interpretation, subject to future revision. What escapes interpretation and reinterpretation is a Platonic Idea or an abstract analytical concept, like a circle or a triangle" and that various paradigms will accordingly "shift and slide continually with time, particularly in an age of ideological conflict and media hype" (Hassan, 2001, p. 1).

Clearly, certain characteristic attributes of the postmodern paradigm such as a challenging of claims to universal, absolute truth, an incredulity towards grand narratives (as suggested by Lyotard), or the disintegration of a unified self, may provide a vista to the postmodern gothic as it features multiple blurring between reality and madness, the real and the paranormal, the accurate and the neurotic. In such a matrix, we encounter characters whose identities are derived from multiple, fluid, changeable discourses. In Gothic fiction, Fred Botting argues,

[T]his ambivalence and duplicity [...] has emerged as a distinctly reflexive form of narrative anxiety. It involves a pervasive cultural concern—characterised as postmodernist—that things are not only not what they seem: what they seem is what they are, not a unity of word or image and thing, but words and images without things or as things themselves, effects of narrative form and nothing else. (Botting, 2005, p. 111)

Examining Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* as an insight to the evolution of gothic in the postmodern context, this paper argues that the gothic terror in the contemporary context incarnates in the contemporary encounter with self,

as manifest in the inner struggles of the main characters in *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. A logical, coherent account of self is replaced with the fragmentary, instable and complex shadows appropriate to both paradigms of gothic and the postmodern.

II. A BACKGROUND ON GOTHIC

In its original sense, earlier gothic fiction featured exotic settings (e.g. medieval period, with the locale often being a "gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels") – inaugurated by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 137). In this regard, gothic can be viewed as the genre which first introduced to literature the uncanny realm of chaos, terror and decay, confidently merging the boundaries of passion/reason and rational/irrationality. As Abrams and Harpham observe, early novels endeavored to "evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors [...] and opened up] to fiction the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized mind (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 137). On the other hand, and in its other sense, the term "Gothic" was later "extended to a type of fiction which lack[ed] the exotic setting of the earlier romances, but develop[ed] a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represent[ing] events that [were] uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deal[t] with aberrant psychological states (ibid.).

Thus, works of gothic which "initially conjured up visions of a medieval world, of dark passions enacted against the massive and sinister architecture of the gothic castle", triggered "by the end of the century [...] a] whole paraphernalia of evil forces and ghostly apparitions" (Childs and Fowler, 2006, p. 100). More recent studies of gothic, however, tend to establish a critical distance – so as to approach the gothic fiction from a psychological, philosophical, or historical standpoint. As Wolfreys et al. suggest, contemporary studies of gothic are inclined to accentuate:

the role of the reader, questions of gender, the gothic interest in the abject body and corporealisation in general, and the inner feelings or phenomenological perceptions of the gothic terrain on the part of its principal protagonists. Distinctions have been made between the gothic narratives of the eighteenth century, with their emphasis on mystery, and those of the nineteenth century, which explore the inner condition of the protagonist. (Wolfreys et al., 2006, p. 47)

Steven Bruhm also suggests that the contemporary revival of the Gothic genre as a literary mode can articulate the fragmentation of self and identity – and by implication the loss of meaning and truth; therefore, regarded as a means of narrating the lingering trauma experienced in the postmodern framework, gothic is called upon because,

[...] the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us – a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe – and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic (Bruhm, 2002, p. 273).

Thus, not only the gothic genre has not been exhausted, but also it is resurrected in the postmodern paradigm to articulate the enduring sense of terror resulted by loss of truth, self, and identity. A novel apparition appropriate to our contemporary times, gothic haunts realms of both postmodernism and postmodernity. Maria Beville declares that, defining the genre *Gothic-postmodernism* highlights "the intrinsic links that tie the Gothic and the postmodern in literary and cultural terms and declare the Gothic as the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity; a mode that is far from dead and in fact rejuvenated in the present context of increased global terrorism" (Beville, 2009, pp. 7-8). This is to say that terror potently connects gothic and postmodernism.

Beville also argues that some common issues are explored both in gothic and postmodern fiction, including, "crises of identity, fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing" (Beville, 2009, p. 53). While gothic fiction primarily animated "our lack of access to reality" as presented by echoes of the "supernatural", "surreal" and the "ghosts", "the postmodernist imagination" also favors fantasy over a narrow conception of reality (ibid.). Subsequently, gothic plays an essential role in conveying the postmodern experience of "darkness, confusion, and lack of meaning and authority" (ibid.).

On the other hand, Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* "has been read as a typical example of postmodern literature" (Berge, 2005, p. 101), while it is also replete with the terrifying elements of Gothic, heralding the advance of the gothic genre and the way it addresses the problems of self to convey its intrinsic tales of horror. Here self is studied within a spectrum of contemporary concepts, including space, self-reflexivity, the uncanny, and doubles.

III. POSTMODERNISM AND THE SELF

According to Charles Baxter, "the achievement of Paul Auster's fiction [...] is to combine an American obsession with gaining an identity with the European ability to ask how, and under what conditions, identity is stolen or lost [...] *The New York Trilogy* gives us a set of wondrous mazes of identity, peopled with mysterious observers, authorial surrogates, mirrors facing mirrors, and persons missing to one degree or another (Baxter, 1994, pp. 41-2).

The notion of self in the postmodern paradigm is not a unified, bounded and stable whole, but it offers a new account of who we are. In *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*, Walter Truett Anderson refers to the terminology used by some postmodernists to address the problem of the shifting, multiple identities. These include *multiphrenia*, or the many voices in the postmodern culture who tell us who we are; the *protean* self, which keeps changing in order to adapt to the present circumstances; the *de-centered* self, which implies that there is no self at all;

and *self-in-relation* – which is often discussed in feminist studies. Clearly, any of these concepts elaborate on the various aspects of the decentralized postmodern self. As in gothic, in postmodernism the long-established absolutes of self and reality are also undermined. Petra Eckhard declares that "Postmodern subjectivities and realities, indeed, seem to be uncontrollable and indefinable." She argues that "Self-reflexivity, pastiche, intertextuality or the blurring of fact and fiction not only can serve the purpose of metafictional play or stylistic radicalization [...] but can also generate highly uncanny effects (Eckhard, 2011, pp. 12 & 13).

Dennis Barone refers to the concept of fragmented, destabilized self when he observes: "In postmodern investigations of human subjectivities the self can be split into selves to probe the peculiarities of self. [...] Instead of a unified self we have then a self that can radiate toward infinite possible relations. As it radiates, it questions those relations" (Barone, 1995, p. 15). Barone's argument is particularly relevant for the postmodern self as a social construction that has no essence, partly because it is saturated being exposed to the multiplicity and incoherence of images from the media.

IV. SELF AND SPACE

In search of their urban selves, Auster's characters in *The New York Trilogy* change their spaces, but as the impossibility of communication and the failure of language bids, Auster illustrates, the characters undergo "ghostification". As Quinn, the main character of *City of Glass*, declares: "Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself" (Auster, 1990, p. 111). The sentence seems to establish a connection between self and space. On the other hand, the multiplication of settings and selves makes it increasingly impossible for Auster's characters to negotiate their true identities within the framework of shifting urban spaces. According to Daniela Rogobete, "At the core of Auster's fictional universe, fragmentary and alienating, lies a continuous search for identity.... Identity always reveals its shifting and dislocated nature in his novels and is most often marred by a sense of incompleteness and failure." Rogobete argues that "the deceiving concreteness of the metropolis, the overlapping labyrinthine fictional and metafictional spaces and the subtle connections Auster establishes between identity, space and language" are remarkable. (Rogobete, 2014, pp. 36-38).

In *City of Glass*, Quinn leads a normal life before beginning to wander in streets of New York, consciously attempting to lose himself. His wandering through unfamiliar spaces has echoes of postmodernity as the coming together of public and private spaces is chosen and cannot be helped. As he wanders in the city, Quinn becomes more alienated from his older, more unified self. He ends up a homeless who is struggling to meet his basic needs. It is ironic that, the protagonist's intellectual quest turns to a terrifying psychological ordeal in the urban-gothic space. Quinn's struggle becomes further morbid as he not only fails to find his true self, but also finds it increasingly difficult to remember himself.

V. SELF-REFLEXIVITY, THE UNCANNY, DOUBLES

Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of "the mirror stage" explains the formation of the ego through identification with an image of the self. Lacan declares a primary loss at the heart of human subjectivity, suggesting that we have lost an original sense of unity – a loss which is in turn constitutive of subjectivity itself. Thus, "the imaginary is a realm of identification and mirror-reflection; a realm of distortion and illusion." Therefore, the ego's struggle in order to regain the imaginary coherence or unity is futile (Sean Homer, 2005, p. 31). The multiplication of mirrors can be seen in *Ghosts*, in which Blue, a private detective, is trained by Brown; Brown, on the other hand, is spying on a man named Black for a client called White. Blue writes reports to White and is paid for his work. As he becomes immersed Black's life, Blue becomes frustrated and loses himself. It seems that in Auster's fictional universe, the "realm of identification and mirror-reflection" can only lead to more "distortion and illusion."

In *City of Glass*, a detective-fiction writer is also a private investigator who ascends to madness as he becomes involved in a case. The novel examines multiple levels of identity, drawing on multiple Paul Auster and Peter Stillman characters. When Stillman discovers Quinn's multiple identities, he says: "I like your name enormously, Mr. Quinn: it flies off in so many little directions at once." Quinn confirms Stillman's remark as he says: "Yes, I often noticed that myself" (Auster, 1990, p. 90). In their next encounters, Quinn takes on other identities, which is yet another of Auster's triplet of identities. In a seemingly unending process, the protagonist transforms from self to other, without ever reaching a state of coherence or unity. These doubles/triplets can be seen as the embodiment of the repressed or the uncanny. In her article "Doubling, Intertextuality, and the Postmodern Uncanny: Paul Auster's New York Trilogy," Roberta Rubenstein comments on doubling and repetition in Auster's trilogy, regarding Freud's *The Uncanny* as an influential intertext. Auster's "overlapping tales", she declares, are interconnected because each "thematically mirrors", and "narratively doubles" the other (Rubenstein, 1998, p. 246). The protagonist "seeks, discovers, swaps places with, disappears into, or struggles physically with an antagonist who is in fact his double (ibid.). Clearly, a sense of confusion, chaos and horror is conveyed as the characters and their doubles continue to take on each other in all three stories of *The New York Trilogy*. The subject of the "uncanny," according to Freud, "belongs to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror. The uncanny is everything within the boundaries of "fearful". The uncanny is nothing new, foreign or alien, but something familiar and old-established which has become estranged through the process of repression (Freud, 1959, pp. 12-13). The appearance of uncanny doubles in Auster's *The New York Trilogy* is

a compelling source of terror. In *Ghosts*, while watching Black with binoculars from the opposite apartment, Blue realizes that Black exactly mirrors him. When spying on Black from across the street, Blue feels as though he is looking into a mirror. The uncanny feeling Blue experiences, is particularly alarming – as he watches another and it occurs to him that he is looking at himself (*Ghosts*, 1968, p.172). He thinks that there is a "paradoxical connection" between him and Black and feels that he has seen him before, but cannot remember where (*Ghosts*, 1968, p. 181). Blue then steals pages from Black's notebook when he is not home – only to discover that these are in fact, his own reports written about Black. Blue's uncanny encounter with Black creates an air of anxiety, horror and terror. In the last scene the uncanny reaches its peak as Blue disappears into the text after killing Black.

In *The Locked Room*, the mirroring effect of doubling is taken a step ahead, as there is a complex confusion of selves between the protagonist and his former best friend, Fanshawe. While the protagonist has felt close to his friend since early childhood, he also has an uneasy feeling of distance between them: "I see now that I also held back from Fanshawe, that a part of me always resisted him" (*The Locked Room*, 1986, p. 211). This resistance alludes to the uncanny experience Freud regards as a consequence of the act of repression. On the one hand, the narrator thinks that he can never truly get to know Fanshawe. On the other hand, he thinks that he knows him better than anyone else (*The Locked Room*, 1986, p. 211). The two characters endeavor to cancel each other out. Ultimately, the confusion of selves is fully realized when the protagonist seemingly takes over Fanshawe's life. The internal conflict of the narrator and his repressed other eventually leads to a confrontation, which, in turn, results in an ambiguous state for the main character, similar to the ending of the two previous stories. The total assimilation of the various "selves" accentuates the postmodern phenomenon of the fluid and merging identities.

In *City of Glass*, Quinn is drawn to strongly identify with the fictional characters created by himself. As the novel plays with notions of fragmentary self and multiple identities, the protagonist increasingly gets lost in his multiple roles. In the end, Quinn is portrayed as a totally dissolved self. The literary technique Auster employs in characterization provides a context in which the problems of fragmented, contradictory, incoherent identity may be explored. *The New York Trilogy* addresses the complexity of self as a means of exploring the veiled struggles of the contemporary man. As Berge notes, "The literary play Auster employs in characterization, provides an arena in which it is possible to deal with the complexity of narration as a means of forming identities, while the postmodern techniques of narrative self-reflexivity create a possible literary form for these ideas" (Berge, 2005, pp. 118-119).

VI. CONCLUSION

The postmodern doctrine of uncertainty and the gothic code of chilling terror are reconciled in *The New York Trilogy* to set forth narratives of shifting, merging identities and describe a problem characteristic of our contemporary socio-historical context. *The New York Trilogy* can be seen as an elaborate, postmodern display of ghostification of characters and spaces. In a game of unnerving proliferations and relentless identifications between different selves and spaces, the ultimate horror is the confusion and psychological chaos experienced by the reader. In other words, the terror of the postmodern gothic manifests in an encounter with the 'self,' an apparition that haunts the characters' inner world. Indeed, the crisis of the postmodern self is the deep skepticism of the subject. Some postmodern critiques have challenged the belief in the integrated reality of selfhood. The terror of the Gothic, often inherent in its monsters and other bodies, functions as a deconstructive counter-narrative which presents the darker side of subjectivity, the ghost of otherness that haunts our fragile selves. The psychological twists Auster uses add a new dimension to his novels. The real mystery is what is the inner struggles that is taking place within the characters' (and hence the readers') minds.

Auster applies a gothic perspective to questions of the postmodern 'self' and its identity crises. a new literary sensibility to show how the new account of gothic can strike its own terror in the postmodern matrix. Quinn in *City of Glass*, Blue in *Ghosts* and the unnamed narrator of *The Locked Room* relentlessly try different spaces, narrating their lives to themselves and looking to the 'others' to find their own 'self', in order to evade their identity crises. Auster's protagonists are haunted and constantly revisited by the uncanny doubles – which is in turn a representation of the return of the repressed.

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