The Detective in Search of the Lost Tongue of Adam: Paul Auster’s City of Glass

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When the volumes of Paul Auster’s New York trilogy began to appear, reactions were confused. Reviewers were interested and curious, even excited, but puzzled and rather wary. Rebecca Goldstein in the New York Times Book Review described Ghosts, the second work of the trilogy, as “a mystery novel-of sorts,” a kind of “metamystery” (13); and other reviewers noted the presence of such disturbing elements as complex interplays of doubles and a wilful confusion of fact and fiction that added more mystery to the basic mystery of the detective story form. Some bookstores, on the other hand, showed less readiness to speculate. They simply placed the book on the detective-fiction shelves.

In fact, all three works of the trilogy are examples of the genre now known as the metaphysical detective story, which has been shaped by a number of modern writers from Borges to Pynchon and Nabokov. Its defining characteristic is its transmutation of the traditional detective’s quest into something more elusive and complex. In it, the relatively straightforward business of identifying a guilty person, bringing him or her to justice, and restoring social order is ineluctably subverted into a larger and more ambiguous affair. The identity in question becomes as often as not the detective’s own, and justice and order dissolve into chimeras in a struggle with a reality that has become increasingly ungraspable. In this postmodernist version of the detective genre, rather than the final working out of the initial puzzle, we are left with what Stefano Tani in The Doomed Detective describes as “the decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of non-solution” (40).

The parts of The New York Trilogy are set in such a universe of “chaos and non-solution,” and the Auster detectives find themselves decoyed into a quest of a very different kind from the one they contracted for.

But Auster comes up with another and very original twist by adding a crucial language theme. Many who write about the detective story have pointed
out that the detective is a kind of reader, a decoder of signs, of the clues that the scenario of the crime throws up. Peter Huhn in his article on this topic characterizes the similarities. "Continual rearrangement and reinterpretation of clues" he says, "is, of course, the basic method of reading and understanding unfamiliar texts" (455). Todorov in The Poetics of Prose is even more succinct. "Author:reader = criminal:detective" (49), he states, citing S. S. Van Dyne.¹ In the postmodern world, however, things have become more complicated. Clues no longer point to anything certain; signifiers have drifted away from what they signify; and what Peter Huhn refers to as "a general lack of confidence in the efficacy of reading" has arisen (462).

This "lack of confidence in the efficacy of reading" forms the major theme of The New York Trilogy. Alison Russell, in her article "Deconstructing The New York Trilogy: Paul Auster's Anti-Detective Fiction," identifies the central "crime," and also the central quest of the three books, as "logocentrism," the search for a Derridean "presence," "an ultimate referent or foundation," which is "outside the play of language itself" (72). Locating such a "presence" may ultimately restore something of the lost efficacy of reading.

Although this search is a major preoccupation of all the New York novels, the first one, City of Glass, perhaps presents this theme with the most force and clarity. In this opening work, the detective's quest becomes overtly and inextricably mingled with the search for the prelapsarian language, the tongue of the innocent Adam by which alone things can be re-united with their right names.

For centuries this quest had been a concern of biblical scholars, who speculated that the prelapsarian tongue might be a form of Hebrew; and as John Irwin has demonstrated in his book American Hieroglyphs, it also haunted the works of Poe and Whitman and other nineteenth-century American writers. Whether Daniel Quinn, Auster's twentieth-century representative of American consciousness in City of Glass, ever finds the prelapsarian tongue and—perhaps more important—whether he should, are matters that the book leaves open. However, during the search, interesting questions are raised about the capacities of language and the role of story in the postmodern world.

As befits a work centered on language, Quinn, the central questor, is not a detective but merely a writer of detective stories. His obsessive interest in the genre (he is a committed reader of them as well) arises from a profound sense of loss of a rationally ordered universe that the conventional detective story so reliably projects. As Quinn himself explains it:

In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. . . . Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing
must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence... The center... is everywhere. (15)

Quinn's own world, we soon learn, has been radically decentered. The deaths, some years ago, of his wife and son, unexplained and apparently arbitrary, have dislocated every certainty and have banished forever all idea that the universe makes sense. For him, then, the detective story is a refuge from the metaphysical chaos that he finds around him.

Quinn's broken condition, rooted in the deaths of his wife and child, is in one sense particular to him. But throughout the work, we are made to see that this experience is also representative, one form of a general late-twentieth-century malaise. This is perhaps best illustrated in an early scene in a diner. Quinn converses, with marked fluency and coherence, with the owner, an old acquaintance. The conversation, however, is restricted to baseball, another example of an artificial world of order in a chaotic universe. Subsequently, we learn that the owner has a concentration camp number tattooed on his arm.

Here, then, is the postholocaust universe, in which the only coherent stories, ones with beginnings, middles, ends, and comprehensive solutions, are told in protected, carefully set-up areas of the consciousness, far removed from the terrible heart of contemporary experience.

That such refuge in games and avoidance exacts its price, however, is soon demonstrated. Writing his detective stories has caused Quinn in some measure to disintegrate, to split into a triad of selves whose relationship to each other he can describe only in a curious metaphor of ventriloquism. In his eyes, the actual writer of the works is no longer himself but a kind of double called William Wilson. The speaker of the words is the fictional detective, Max Work. The self closest to Quinn, because it bears his name, is the dummy, the insensate block in the middle. The dangers of this psychological situation are obvious. As a self, Quinn has lost control of his words. They originate with and issue from someone else. He has become a puppet through which they pass, and hence they no longer seem to belong to him. He did not, we are told, "consider himself to be the author of what he wrote" (9).

The relationship to language indicated here gains even more significance as a comment on Quinn's alienated state of mind when we remember that in his earlier days he was a poet, the kind of writer who presumably is very close to his own words and the self from which they issue. Reversing the implications of his first name (the biblical Daniel was a dream reader), he determinedly suppresses his dreams, just as he refuses to deal in the language in which his inner reality might be expressed. Like Paul Auster's own father, as he is described in The Invention of Solitude, Quinn has become "a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man" (7).

Quinn is roused from this invisible existence when a midnight phone call gives him a chance, like Don Quixote whose initials he shares, to inhabit
and make real one of his own fictions. Don Quixote manages to turn himself into a medieval knight; Daniel Quinn is given the opportunity to play the detective. Like Don Quixote, he is able to do so only by first assuming another identity. The fact that by an amusing trick, this identity is apparently that of Paul Auster himself, the writer of the novel, illustrates the extent to which elements of instability and of self-reflexive fictionalizing have invaded all ideas of self and its manifestations in the postmodern world. Quinn’s case seems at first to take him into the world of Chandler or Macdonald. All the conventional elements of their detective fiction are present. The bizarre crime, in which a member of a rich and distinguished family has locked up and abused his young son, creates an appropriate ambience of money, madness, and damage. A number of familiar genre figures soon make their ritual appearances: the loyal retainer, the voluptuous, ambiguously available wife. Quinn himself moves smoothly into his appointed role, adopting a manner and way of speaking that turn him into a kind of Philip Marlowe:

Quinn smiled judiciously. . . . "Whatever I do or do not understand," he said, "is probably beside the point. You’ve hired me to do a job, and the sooner I get on with it the better. From what I can gather the case is urgent. . . ."

He was warming up now. Something told him that he had captured the right tone, and a sudden sense of pleasure surged through him. (41)

Soon, in typical detective style, he is tailing the father, Peter Stillman, Sr., newly released from confinement, through the streets of New York. At this point, however, elements emerge in the case that suggest that a story may be developing that is different from the one that Quinn thinks he is in. To begin with, Stillman’s seemingly random wanderings appear to be tracing out hieroglyphic shapes that may or may not make certain words. Second, the motive for the crime is untypical to say the least: The father locked up his son in accordance with an old theory that an infant insulated from the world in this fashion would start speaking the language of unfallen man, thus making it available again. Most disturbing of all, as Quinn follows this strange figure, the trail shifts its nature and direction to lead not outward to the world around him but inward to his own self. All the figures and situations in the case turn out inexorably to be in various ways his own reflections, and his wide divagations through the labyrinth of New York only bring him back to the inner world that he has been so assiduously avoiding.

Thus, the central situation of the case immediately confronts Quinn with an image of his own. Here, too, a son has been lost and destroyed and a father set adrift in the world. Now, however, the situation has taken on a more intense and horrific coloring. In this version of father-son estrangement, the father is unequivocally guilty and the son openly hostile and frightened. Quinn’s own situation has been given the dimensions of nightmare.
As individuals, the Stillmans have a reflexive function, embodying aspects of Quinn's own nature and forming part of the complicated interplay of doubles that confront him. Perhaps most important for the themes of the book, they each embody aspects of Quinn's relationship to language. The speeches of Peter, Jr., victim and puppet as he is, reflect Quinn's own estrangement from language. Their reliance on cliché and their contrived and mechanical delivery express in extreme form Quinn's sense, underlying all his fluency, that the language he is using is not his own:

"No questions please," the young man said at last. "Yes. No. Thank you." He paused for a moment. "I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name. No." (26)

Peter Stillman, Sr., seems to represent the other side of the coin. His aim is to find the non-axlent tongue, the first language of Adam that, by giving everything its right name, will heal this breach between speaker and word, subject and object. In having this attitude, he recalls the earlier Quinn, the poet Quinn. Auster's article on Charles Reznikoff ("The Decisive Moment" in The Art of Hunger) explicitly connects poetry and the attempt to rediscover the prelapsarian language. In the fallen world, Auster suggests, only through the practice of poetry can this language be regained even momentarily (16).

If Stillman's interest in the prelapsarian language recalls the poet, the uses to which he seeks to put this language reveal him to be another version of the detective. He is seeking a solution, and a solution on a cosmic scale. Fueled by a biblical sense of the creative power of the word and by the millenarian zeal of his Puritan culture, he sees the recovery of the Adamic tongue as the means by which the whole world can be redeemed and restored to its original order. He had argued for this idea earlier, under the guise of the seventeenth-century clergyman Henry Dark, in his book on the Tower of Babel and the fall of language it involved.

If the fall of man also entailed the fall of language, was it not logical to assume that it would be possible to undo the fall, to reverse its effects by undoing the fall of language, by striving to recreate the language that was spoken in Eden? (76)

Earlier in this article it was pointed out that in the metaphysical workings of the detective story, the detective-reader often is in difficulties because clues and the things they point to, signifiers and the signified, no longer match up. In repossessing the prelapsarian tongue, Stillman aims to clear up these difficulties. By giving things their right names again, calling back to its signifier the wandering signified, he finally will be able to achieve a reliable reading of the world and formulate, once and for all, the correct, clear, accessible, and unified text of reality. This vision still works in him as, old and broken himself, he now wanders through the city, trying to find the right
names for all the broken things he finds there and thus making whole again the fragmented Tower of Babel of the late-twentieth-century cosmos.

Such is the monomaniacal visionary whom Quinn tracks through the wilderness of the city. Quinn, himself a Don Quixote figure, has encountered another one, more obsessive, more powerful, and madder than he, whom, like Sancho Panza, he now must follow and serve. Thus over the next few weeks Quinn reduplicates Stillman’s every move, going where he goes and trimming his own stride and behavior to Stillman’s. Soon we begin to realize that this shadowing is not only physical. Noting down every detail of his quarry’s behavior in a special new red notebook, trying in orthodox detective fashion to penetrate his mind and manner of thinking, Quinn begins to be drawn into Stillman’s obsessive world. He starts to perform actions that are hard to explain in rational terms. He insists on always using the pen given him by a deaf-mute. If we remember that one school of thought adhered to the theory that the prelapsarian language was preverbal, a language of signs, we can see that, without perhaps being aware of it, Quinn is becoming involved in Stillman’s search. This is further suggested by his obsessive concern about how to hold the red notebook while he tails Stillman. Eventually he hits on a method that will enable him to “[see] the thing and [write] about it in the same fluid gesture” (100–101). This unimpeded melding of subject and object, in which word and thing perfectly coalesce, is again characteristic of language in the prelapsarian world.

Despite these incidental oddities of behavior, Quinn, for the moment, plays the part required of him by the detective story he is engaged in. Then a series of incidents occurs that shatter Quinn. Although for a while he remains unaware of the fact, these incidents cause the story he is in to collapse around him; another story that decisively shifts the direction of the quest takes shape from the wreckage.

The first of these incidents is the disappearance of Stillman; the follower is deprived of what he has been following. The second is Quinn’s encounter with another double in the person of “Paul Auster,” the character who presented him with nightmare images of his situation as it now is, the “Paul Auster” figure presents an image of his unfallen world, as it was in the idyllic past. The visit to “Auster” brings him face-to-face with Auster’s wife and son and poignantly resurrects the warm and close-knit family life, the connectedness that Quinn has lost. The boy, close to the age that Quinn’s own child would have been, increases the sense of inexorable doubling by bearing Quinn’s own first name, Daniel.

This vision of his past, which also, ironically, is a vision of his present, totally unhinges Quinn. From now on his actions seem completely mad, al-
though at first he advances careful rationales for them. On leaving “Auster’s” place he forsakes his home and daily life and stows himself away in a garbage can outside the residence of the junior Stillmans. During the several weeks of his stay there he systematically reduces his bodily needs to almost nothing. His pretext for these actions is that it is his duty as a good private eye to maintain a constant watch over his clients. In fact he has by now lost all contact not only with the case but also with the story of which it was a part. Although at this point he is not yet aware of it, he has started to move into the other story. Viewed from the perspective of this superseding story, his actions make a kind of sense.

Quinn, deeply upset by the vision of his own unfallen world, is taking upon himself the quest that Stillman Sr., left behind. He now is in search of the lost paradise, the world of innocent wholeness that Adam knew, and the prelapsarian language through which it might be recovered. This quest will take over his attention and direct his actions for the rest of the book.

From this context, his immersion in the garbage can has a number of complex meanings. On the simplest level, it is an attempt to make his outward state reflect the inward one, to link up word with thing. After his encounter with “Paul Auster,” Quinn realizes that he “was nowhere now . . . he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing” (159). By reducing himself to rubbish, Quinn tries to express this nothingness. Deeper motives are also involved. The language of innocence can issue only from the mouth of innocence. Such innocence requires rebirth, and to be reborn one first must die.

Something of this pattern and this necessity is revealed to Quinn by his namesake, “Paul Auster’s” little boy. As has been noted, Quinn resolutely forgets his dreams, but this new Daniel is true to the implications of his name. An unconscious revealer and interpreter, he brings to the surface the knowledge and desires that are now beginning to work in the depths of Quinn’s psyche. This is what occurs in the incident with the yo-yo. Present ed with the toy by the child, Quinn finds he can make it go down but cannot find a way to make it go up. His comments and the child’s, however, make clear that one direction may be part of the other.

“A great philosopher once said,” muttered Quinn, “that the way up and the way down are one and the same.”

“But you didn’t make it go up,” said the boy. “It only went down.”

“You have to keep trying.” (156)

Up and down are parts of the same process; one cannot be without the other. This perception, in part, fuels Quinn’s aggressive pursuit of his own nothingness, his determination to seek rock bottom, to throw himself thoroughly away. Only from this near obliteration of the self may a new one arise. Only by becoming garbage can one hope to be recycled.
Quinn's actions in the concluding part of the novel, after he has emerged from the garbage, conform to this death-rebirth pattern. Finding the case in disintegration around him, and the doors of his previous life almost literally shut against him, he moves into Peter Stillman, Jr.'s room. The movement is both physical and symbolic. Physically, he ensonces himself in a room in the now-deserted Stillman apartment and reproduces almost exactly the conditions of Peter's childhood incarceration—the total silence and sequestration in which he spent his first years. Symbolically, he tries to become what Peter then was, the child, the unmarked innocent, pure of all contact with the outer world, through which the language of unfallen man may issue. Thus he divests himself of his clothing, making himself completely naked like the child just emerged, or about to emerge, from the womb.

In this condition we catch our last glimpse of Quinn, sleeping intermittently, eating occasionally, and writing steadily in his red notebook as the darkness falls. A narrator, editor figure, who earlier has given hints of his existence, emerges at this point and takes control of the story. Subsequent investigation, he tells us, has revealed no more of Quinn than the red notebook, left lying on the floor of the room. Quinn himself has completely disappeared.

What are we, as readers and detectives ourselves, to make of this conclusion? Has Quinn found the prelapsarian tongue? Has he achieved anything, or have his endeavors ended in absurdity? The narrator-editor seems to take a gloomy view of Quinn and his life. He refers to him as "a man . . . obviously in trouble," blames Auster (character or author?) for his treatment of him, and ends his comments on a lugubrious note. "My thoughts remain with Quinn," he says. "And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (201). However, in a late-twentieth-century text that continually stresses the subjective element in all experience, we need not take this authorial view as authoritative. Certain aspects of the final phase of Quinn's story require more consideration. During this period he produced writing of a very different kind from his previous detective works. It is described as follows:

He wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were a part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake or a flower. . . . He remembered the moment of his birth and how he had been pulled gently from his mother's womb. He remembered the infinite kindnesses of the world and all the people he had ever loved. Nothing mattered now but the beauty of all this. (200)

Much in this account reminds us of Auster's description of the works of Charles Reznikoff, a poet who he seems to feel came close in his use of language to finding the freshness and creative clarity of prelapsarian speech. Auster sees in Reznikoff's writings such a perfect coalescing of words into
things that they seem to "penetrate the pre-history of matter" (Art of Hunger 16). As a poet, he seems to be seeing rather than speaking, or speaking "from his eye" (16). Influenced by the imagists, he has learnt from them "the value—the force—of the image in itself, unadorned by the claims of the ego" (18). Into these images the poet disappears. He becomes transparent and "invisible" (19).

Such qualities are recalled in the description of Quinn's final writings. Here are words that turn into things, images of such force and clarity that they seem able to take their place in the world of objects, to become matter. And here, too, is a testament to his invisibility and transparency—in the sense of his words becoming severed from himself. Earlier he felt that his words had become severed from himself because they were not his own. Here, the feeling of severance seems to arise from the fact that he has effaced himself in them.

Perhaps then, in some measure, Quinn achieved his quest. He made his difficult way back to language's unfallen core and gave it utterance. However, he achieved nothing on the scale envisioned by his mentor, Stillman, Sr. He was not able to come up with the correct text of reality. He did not importantly alter reality. Above all, he did not achieve any cosmic solutions. Fragmented, fallen, the world at the end of Quinn's quest remains in much the same plight as it was at the beginning. Quinn's contact with the pure prelapsarian word has been partial, momentary, and personal. He was granted only a series of glimpses. In giving utterance to these glimpses, however, Quinn again laid hold on his vocation as a poet; in the process he became reconciled to the world he could not save and sensitive again to what it has of beauty.

Much in both City of Glass and in Auster's other works suggests that this partial, glimpsed achievement of truth is the only possible and genuine one in the difficult world of the twentieth century. Throughout the book we are continually reminded of the unknowable nature of this world. In the Babel of New York, things stream across the eye in a series of disconnected atoms, and subject and object blur each other's image until we feel trapped in a universe of mirrors, a city of glass indeed. As the novel pointed out, in Poe's tale of the journey of Arthur Gordon Pym, the hieroglyphs that the hero discovers and that might be a form of the first tongue of Adam, though undecipherable, are inscribed on solid rock. The hieroglyphs that Stillman's wanderings seem to inscribe upon New York are inscribed in air or may simply be a figment of Quinn's imagination. Over the intervening century, the decipherment of the world has become so much more difficult. To seek for absolute knowledge and final solutions is, therefore, a form of madness. The career of Stillman, Sr., bears this out. The effects of his totalitarian vision are fearful. In the end, they destroy everything human, all connection, all community, and life itself.
Discussing *Hunger* by Knud Hamson, Auster suggests that a truly modern art, the only one relevant to our current condition, "begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers" and cites Samuel Beckett's statement that this art must "be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is something else" (*Art of Hunger* 13). For Auster, the profound and unassuageable metaphysical insecurity of twentieth-century man is symbolized in the condition of the hero of the novel. Perpetually hungry, he obtains only enough food to stop him from starving, never enough to satisfy him. In the same way, modern man can know only enough to see him through the day, to enable him to go on feeling his way along. Metaphysically speaking, in the late twentieth century, there is no such thing as a complete meal. Quinn's crucial understanding of this fact is perhaps demonstrated by his refusal, in his last confinement, to eat more than a small portion of the lavish trays of food that appear before him like mysterious temptations.

At the end the text we are left not with Quinn's final pieces of writing, the examples of vision achieved, but the story of the search for that vision, the novel *City of Glass* itself. Perhaps this is a reflection of Auster's sense of the nature of the modern condition. Auster's reworking of the detective story as a quest for the definitive language finally tells us that it is not the correct and final text of reality but a text about the text that is the most appropriate one for the postmodern world. Stories about stories, books not of answers but of questions: these are the forms in which the difficult reality of our time finds its best embodiment.

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NOTES

1. The view of the reader as a decoder of signs is central to modern theories of narrativity. See, especially, Shlometh Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 117-129.

2. During the course of this paper, I will refer to Paul Auster the character in quotation marks to distinguish him from Paul Auster the author.

WORKS CITED


