

Oliver Strecker

Paul Auster's "City of Glass" in the Tradition of Detective Fiction: a Psychoanalytical Analysis

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**Paul Auster's *City of Glass* in the
Tradition of Detective Fiction:
a Psychoanalytical Analysis**

Bachelorarbeit Anglistik

Vertiefungskurs: Detective Fiction

Von Oliver Strecker

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1 Introduction

The topic of this paper is to examine the detective novel *City of Glass*, published by Paul Auster in 1985, from a psychoanalytical point of view. This analytic approach, combining both detective fiction and psychoanalysis, is more natural than might appear at first glance. After all, the *modus operandi* of the psychoanalyst and the detective are quite similar. A close contemplation of details, a search for hints and finally a development of a theory that unites the small signs in a big picture are crucial steps in both fields. Sigmund Freud laid out the common importance of details as following:

And if you were a detective engaged in tracing a murder, would you expect to find that the murderer had left his photograph behind at the place of the crime, with his address attached? Or would you not necessarily have to be satisfied with comparatively slight and obscure traces of the person you were in search of? So do not let us underestimate small indications, by their help we may succeed in getting on the track of something bigger.¹

Furthermore, Freud emphasized how psychoanalysts are practicing a kind of detective-work as well: “We have to uncover psychic material; and in order to do this we have invented a number of detective devices.”² Due to those parallels, “psychological studies of mystery and detective narratives have a long and varied history.”³ Most of these approaches have analyzed traditional detective fiction. Auster’s very untraditional detective novel, however, plays with the conventions of the genre and creates its very own detective universe, a confusing play of constantly changing identities. This universe shows parallels to the world-view of the French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan, as:

Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a theory of the subject that does without concepts such as unity, origin, continuity. It goes from the assumption of a fundamentally split subject and thus comes up with a model of subjectivity that grounds itself on a constitutive lack rather than wholeness.⁴

¹ Freud, Sigmund (1916-1917): “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis”. In: Freud, Sigmund (1963): *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. London: Hogarth Press. Vol. 15 & 16, 27.

² Freud, Sigmund (1906): “Psycho-Analysis and the Establishment of the Facts in Legal Proceedings.” In: Freud, Sigmund (1963): *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. London: Hogarth Press. Vol. 9, 97-114.

³ Landrum, Larry (1999): *American Mystery and Detective Novels. A Reference Guide*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 5.

⁴ Herzogenrath, Bernd (1999): *An Art of Desire. Reading Paul Auster*. Amsterdam: Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 5.

These parallels are not a pure coincidence as Auster is familiar with Lacan's work and quotes themes of Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁵ Also, Lacan himself applied his theories to detective fiction, such as *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allen Poe.⁶

In this work, the central question that shall be the focus of investigation is: From a psychoanalytical point of view – how does Paul Auster position his main character Daniel Quinn in the context of traditional detective novels?

In order to answer that question, Lacan's theories of how the human psyche is organized shall be presented, and then applied to Quinn's development throughout the storyline. There is a clear set of basic rules traditional detective novels are based on, which create a very specific detective-world. From a Lacanian perspective, the analysis will show both why Quinn wants to live in that world, and why he ultimately fails to do so.

Finally, considering the analysis of Quinn's development, the specific role of *City of Glass* within the genre of the detective novel will be spelled out. Here, the central topics of analytical interest are how the unconventional progress of the main character violates the basic rules of traditional detective novels and how the author thereby puts in question and contrasts the conventions of those novels.

⁵ Cp. Jakubzik, Heiko (2002): *Paul Auster und die Klassiker der American Renaissance*, 166 <<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2007/7259/pdf/AusterUB.pdf>> (01.06.2012).

⁶ Cp. Berman, Emanuel (1993): *Essential Papers on Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York: New York University Press, 270.

2 The Lacanian Triad

Lacan separates between three basic psychic spheres which coexist in our minds: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Here it is important to mention that the Imaginary is not, as might be assumed, interchangeable with imagination, the Symbolic with symbolism or the Real with reality. The meanings of these notions go much deeper than the terms initially suggest – as the exegesis in this chapter will show.

According to Lacan, the constitution of the three spheres begins in the Mirror Stage. From birth to the beginning of the Mirror Stage, the baby only sees parts of its body, and thus experiences itself as a fragmented being that lacks in coordination. When it recognizes itself in a mirror for the first time, however, it sees itself as a whole being. This wholeness is new and unknown, so at first, the baby feels a rivalry with its own image. But as this rivalry causes a stressful “aggressive tension”⁷, the infant eventually begins to identify with its image.

The moment of identification, when the subject assumes its image as its own, is described by Lacan as a moment of jubilation, since it leads to an imaginary sense of mastery.⁸

At this point, the ego is created. All the same, due to the fact that the person and the picture are not one and the same, the identification with the own image is simultaneously an alienation. The whole picture of the self lets the baby experience a feeling of wholeness, coherence and coordination, an impression that the uncoordinated body can not yet give at this stage. The infant “falls in love with his image and [...] takes the image of his whole body as his love-object”⁹. This love towards the own image is the reason why the now created ego is also called an *ego-ideal* and it can be said that this first identification process is, fundamentally, a narcissistic development.¹⁰

⁷ Evans, Dylan (1996): *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 115.

⁸ Evans, 115-116.

⁹ Benvenuto, Bice; Kennedy, Roger (1986): *The Works of Jaques Lacan. An Introduction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 54-55.

¹⁰ Cp. Evans, 116.

2.1 The Imaginary

In the Mirror Stage, a whole sphere of images is created – the Imaginary. Those are images not only of the self, but also of the world, inner and outer images, “conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, ‘[I]maginary’¹¹ is not simply the opposite of ‘[R]eal’: the image certainly belongs to reality [...]”.¹²

The Imaginary is the first psychic sphere and constitutes the mind before the subject comes into contact with language. But this doesn’t mean the Imaginary is replaced or disappears at later stages, it “is not something that one goes through and grows out – but remains at the core of our experience.”¹³

2.2 The Symbolic

When a child starts to learn a language, another sphere is created in the mind: the Symbolic. Through the structure of a language, this logically structured and ordered sphere is constituted. Whereas the ego already comes into being during the Mirror Stage and the formation of the Imaginary, “Lacan claims that the ‘subject’ is constructed in the [S]ymbolic at the moment of the accession to language; there is, for Lacan, no such thing as a ‘subject’ before entry into the [S]ymbolic [O]rder.”¹⁴ All the rules of interaction, which an individual living in a society inevitably has to live by, are rooted in the Symbolic: these include grammatical rules, social standards and laws.

As Lacan states that “the unconscious is structured like a language”¹⁵, psychoanalysts, who deal with the depths of the language-like structures of the human mind, can also be seen as “practitioners of the [S]ymbolic [F]unction”. Considering that of the mental orders, “the [S]ymbolic is the most crucial one for psychoanalysis”¹⁶, it is the sphere which is most interesting for an analysis of Auster’s *City of Glass*. Not only does it help to explain the changes in Daniel Quinn’s personality: The search for symbolism, for a logical order behind the things, is one of the most central and recurrent aspects of the book.

¹¹ For consistency reasons, the first letters of Lacanian terms were capitalized in this work.

¹² Lacan, Jaques; Sheridan, Alan (2001): *Écrits. A Selection*, xi.

¹³ Homer, Sean (2005): *Jacques Lacan*. 1. Aufl. London: Routledge, 31.

¹⁴ Smith, Paul (1988): *Discerning the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 20.

¹⁵ Žižek, Slavoj (2003): *Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 33.

¹⁶ Evans, 201.

2.3 The Real

As the third part of the triad, there is the Real. It is the counterpart of the other two spheres, and a polar opposite to them. The Real is the term most difficult to describe, because everything belonging to this sphere can neither be put in words nor imagined. Death would be an example for something that is hard to integrate in the ‘ordered’ spheres of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Deeply traumatic events like death are hard to imagine and even harder to put in words, and therefore part of the Real. Things which cannot be ordered in some way (be it imaginary or linguistically) create a feeling of powerlessness and irritation, so the Real is also called Traumatic Real. The Real itself “remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech.”¹⁷ That is why in psychoanalysis, the aim is to make the traumatic events graspable again, to lift them from the sphere of the Real. The traumatic occurrence has to be put in words or transferred into pictures in order to integrate it in one of the other spheres and thereby overcome its traumatic nature. The Real is the “essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Lacan; Sheridan, xii.

¹⁸ Evans, 160.

3 The Development of Quinn's Character

In the beginning of *City of Glass*, the reader is thrown right into the life of its main character, Daniel Quinn, an author of detective fiction in a deep identity crisis. No details are told about his past. The reader 'only' gets to know that he had lost his wife and son, a traumatizing experience which lead to a great feeling of emptiness in his life. In this chapter, the psychological aftermath of this loss shall be analyzed with the help of Lacan's theories. To fight his trauma, Quinn, after having long created detective worlds for his books, finally tries to live as a detective himself.

3.1 The Constitution of Quinn's Different Identities

Trauma: An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization. In economic terms, the trauma is characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically.¹⁹

Looking at Quinn's trauma with Lacan's theory in mind, one could also describe Quinn's problems in working out this overload as his inability to integrate the events in the Symbolic Order. As mentioned earlier, death generally 'belongs' to the order of the real. As the terrible events cannot (yet) be integrated in the Symbolic or the Imaginary, the Real dominates Quinn's mind. Thus, considering Lacan's theories, a possible explanation for Quinn's actions is given right from the start of the book. He is trying to escape his trauma, his Traumatic Real, by focusing on things which clearly belong to the Imaginary or the Symbolic Order.

Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within.²⁰

Accordingly, the "reducing himself to a seeing eye"²¹ can be described as an escape into the Imaginary.

¹⁹ Laplanche, Jean; Pontalis, J.B. (1988): *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac, 465.

²⁰ Auster, Paul (2001): *City of Glass*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 4. Hereafter referred to as *City of Glass*.

²¹ *City of Glass*, 4.

By flooding his eyes with images, Quinn temporarily gets the Imaginary to dominate his mind, thereby ‘silencing’ his Real, and causing a short-term improvement of his emotional state. Quinn is so deeply traumatized by his loss that he is no longer able to write. The Real is dominating in such a strong and painful way that his connection to the Symbolic Order – “essentially a linguistic dimension”²² – is tarnished, what dominates his mind is beyond words. This is why he creates an alter ego by the name of William Wilson, his new pseudonym by which he writes and publishes novels. Quinn isn’t able to find words, so Wilson has to do it for him.

A part of him had died, he told his friends, and he did not want it coming back to haunt him. It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself.²³

Quinn splits his Real, his trauma, from his Symbolic Order. As the trauma and the Traumatic Real are centered in his personality as Daniel Quinn, this part of him has to be locked away. In order for the Symbolic to properly function again, it has to be detached from the Real. Thus he creates William Wilson as a separate representation of the Symbolic. This clear secession becomes evident in the fact that Quinn doesn’t feel like he is the same person as Wilson, even though he created him:

Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart. William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life. Quinn treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man.²⁴

But Wilson isn’t imbued with either character or personality, he only exists to fulfill a function that Quinn cannot fulfill by himself. So through the writings of Wilson, a third identity is created: Max Work. He is the main character of the detective novels Quinn writes by the name of Wilson.

If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn’s life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude.²⁵

²² Evans, 201.

²³ *City of Glass*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Quinn doesn't have any friends or social life after his traumatic experience, so for some years, Work has to live his life for him – even if only in a fictional world. Max Work 'experiences' the adventures that Quinn cannot himself live. His real world (and here the word 'real' works both in the conventional and in the Lacanian sense) is an empty world of pain, fear and senselessness. To compensate for this, Work's world is quite the opposite, so he is created as Quinn's new *ego-ideal*, a perfect and whole self-image.

Whereas Quinn tended to feel out of place in his own skin, Work was aggressive, quick-tongued, at home in whatever spot he happened to find himself. The very things that caused problems for Quinn, Work took for granted, and he walked through the mayhem of his adventures with an ease and indifference that never failed to impress his creator.²⁶

Max Work is a brave, tough guy, and it doesn't seem to be a coincidence that his name sounds like 'makes work': In Work's adventures everything works out, everything can be done. But most importantly: As a detective who is able to solve any case he lives in a world where everything can be made sense of. For Quinn, 'becoming' Work and thus 'becoming' a detective is a step into a world full of meaning. In contrast to his depressive, meaningless existence after the loss of his wife and his son, there is a task for him in this detective world, and work he has got to do. This also explains Quinn's fascination for mystery novels in general:

What he liked about these books was their sense of plenitude and economy. In a good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so – which amounts to the same thing. (...) Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end.²⁷

While before he was living in a world with no essence, suddenly "everything becomes essence."²⁸ In the a detective's world, every minute detail has to be regarded with attention, every little sign could have an important meaning and give a hint that helps solve the case. In other words: By reading the signs and putting them in order, the analytical mind triumphs over an initially inscrutable and cryptic mystery.

²⁶ *City of Glass*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

From a Lacanian point of view, the detective's success consists in fully integrating the mystery in the Symbolic Order, the order of law and structure; the dominance of the Real is resolved. In *City of Glass*, the detective is described as "the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them"²⁹. He is "the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him."³⁰ The detective is the one who has the duty and the ability to restore the Symbolic Order, an ability that Quinn is desperately looking for.

He had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real. If he lived now in the world at all, it was only at one remove, through the imaginary person of Max Work. His detective necessarily had to be real. The nature of the books demanded it.³¹

This is the new equilibrium Quinn has created in his mind. He has locked the Traumatic Real (his Quinn-part) away, and, in Wilson, has created a pseudonym to fulfill the function of the Symbolic, to write and express. Thus, he is able to create Max Work, a new ego-ideal that appears to be more real to him than his old ego. Through Work, Quinn can 'live' in a perfectly structured detective world, which is dominating the world of the Real. In conclusion, one can state that Quinn's whole 'operating system' was reprogrammed to fight the dominance of the Real. Initially, he fights this battle by 'fleeing' into a *fictional* detective world. But with a single phone call, this changes.

²⁹ *City of Glass*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

3.2 Quinn's Attempt to Live in a Detective World

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of the night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not.³²

One night, Quinn gets a call by a Mrs. Stillman. She actually tried to call a detective by the name of Paul Auster, supposedly the best in town, whose help she direly needs. Due to that coincidence, Quinn suddenly gets the chance to transfer his fictional detective life, his fictional fight against the Real, into the real world. By pretending to be Auster, he can be a real detective, not only the one in his books. And unlike pretending or fantasizing to be Max Work, which was solely his choice, now he even feels that it is his duty to become a detective. He was asked for help and there are people who depend on him. Becoming Auster could therefore be seen as the next level of being Work.

According to Lacan, the ego is created through identification with a self-image. With Work, Quinn has already created a fully formed picture of a detective in his head. Now that his 'clients' also already see him as a detective, it's not a big step for him to identify with this picture and to take on the detective-identity of Paul Auster. So Quinn decides to meet up with Mrs. Stillman to get the details of the case she wants him (or rather, Auster) to work on. But just as Quinn doesn't really feel that it is him who writes by the name of William Wilson, he also doesn't feel responsible for what he does as Auster:

[...] it did not occur to him that he was going to show up for his appointment. Even that locution, his appointment, seemed odd to him. It wasn't his appointment, it was Paul Auster's. And who that person was he had no idea.³³

As described by Lacan, identification with an image also entails a simultaneous alienation, as the person and the picture are not one and the same. Thus, Quinn's estrangement also reaches a new level in the course of this new process of identification.

³² *City of Glass*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Meeting up with Mrs. Stillman and her husband, Peter Stillman, he is told that they need him to protect Peter from his father, who might be planning to kill his own son. Stillman Sr., a professor of theology, is about to be released from a mental institution where he had been sent for locking away his son in a dark room for nine years, without any contact to language. In an extreme experiment, the professor wanted to recreate a god-given language, which was, according to his world-view, lost after the fall of the Tower of Babel.

As Mrs. Stillman gives Quinn the mission to protect Stillman Jr., the widower gets a chance to help a son and a wife, when he isn't able to help his own son and wife anymore. This seems to be the first step to face his Traumatic Real in a 'pretend mode': facing a situation similar to his traumatic past without doing it only for himself, but for his new clients, and not as himself, but as Paul Auster.

The effect of being Paul Auster, he had begun to learn, was not altogether unpleasant. Although he still had the same body, the same mind, the same thoughts, he felt as though he had somehow been taken out of himself, as if he no longer had to walk around with the burden of his own consciousness. By a simple trick of the intelligence, a deft little twist of naming, he felt incomparably lighter and freer. At the same time, he knew it was all an illusion. But there was a certain comfort in that. He had not really lost himself; he was merely pretending, and he could return being Quinn whenever he wished.³⁴

His belief in a possible return to being Quinn shows that he is not schizophrenic and he didn't completely forget his old personality. It is just 'put aside' because the trauma is still too strong. Quinn doesn't allow himself to let his past overwhelm him again. But as Auster, he can let the traumatic memories get closer to him.

Quinn remembered visiting tucket with his wife long ago, in her first months of pregnancy, when his son was no more than a tiny almond in her belly. He found it painful to think of that now, and he tried to suppress the pictures that were forming in his head. "Look at it through Auster's eyes", he said to himself, "and don't think of anything else".³⁵

As Auster, Quinn is not in a completely helpless and isolated state anymore, he is able to act and change things. So, for the first time in a long period of time, he lets the traumatic memories enter his thoughts again.

³⁴ *City of Glass*, 88.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

It had been years now since Quinn allowed himself to think of these stories. The subject of children was too painful for him, especially children who had suffered, had been mistreated, had died before they could grow up. If Stillman was the man with the dagger, come back to avenge himself on the boy whose life he had destroyed, Quinn wanted to be there to stop him.³⁶

At this point it seems like Quinn is able to establish a new connection to his own, locked-away self. By accepting to investigate the case, and thus beginning to live in a detective world – a world dominated by the Symbolic Order – it again appears possible for him to face his Traumatic Real without falling into depression. Another indication of a rapprochement to his old identity is given when he suddenly feels a strong need to buy a notebook. He decides to write his own name on it, Daniel Quinn, which is “the first time in more than five years that he had put his own name in one of his notebooks.”³⁷ In this way, he leaves behind the fictional detective Max Work and becomes the real detective Paul Auster. And, for the first time for years, he doesn’t need the fictional William Wilson to write for him, he can write by his very own name.

However, Quinn is not yet at a point where he could write about his personal thoughts or feelings, or try to put his traumatic experiences into words. What he writes down are only observations and thoughts, which are systematic, ordered, helpful for the case. They are only detective thoughts for a detective world. This guarantees that the Traumatic Real doesn’t overwhelm him again. Nonetheless, these developments give the impression that Quinn gets closer to his old identity while he continues to live with his new one as a detective. But as the following chapters will show, this is not the case.

³⁶ *City of Glass*, 57-58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

3.3 The Deficiency of the Detective Methods

Having written detective stories where Max Work solves all the problems with ease and sovereignty, clears all the mysteries and uncovers the truth, Quinn tries to work through the Stillman case in the same manner. But as soon as he waits for Peter Stillman Sr. at a train station and wants to clandestinely follow him, the power of his detective-methods is put in question. There is a second person who shows up, a person looking exactly like Stillman. Without any clues or hints as to which of the two is the right one, Quinn has to decide which one to follow, a decision that cannot be made by rational reasoning – which a good detective should always adhere to.

There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made – and he had to make a choice – would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end”³⁸

At the very beginning of Quinn’s mission, this shows that unlike in the detective novels he wrote and read, here, structural, logical and rational thinking and acting is not a panacea. His choice is arbitrary, left to chance, and whether it is right or wrong is not predictable. There is no logical choice, no choice that would fit the detective world Quinn wants to live in. This event thwarts his immersion in a detective world-view and puts it out of force. His fear that “uncertainty would haunt him to the end”³⁹ can also be interpreted as a fear of the impending return of a dominating Real.

He makes his decision anyway, as he has to, and follows one of the two ‘Stillmans’ to his hotel. For the two weeks that follow, Quinn waits there every morning for Stillman to come out. Every single day, Stillman walks randomly through the city, tailed by Quinn. But on these walks, nothing happens that could be of any importance to the case. Quinn starts to doubt his investigations, his attempt of a rational analysis of Stillman’s actions and begins to believe that “Stillman was a crazy old man who had forgotten his son. He could be followed to the end of time, and still nothing would happen.”⁴⁰ Again, the detective methods don’t seem to lead anywhere.

³⁸ *City of Glass*, 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

Quinn was deeply disillusioned. He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation.⁴¹

Instead of giving up and regarding the wanderings as the errantry of a confused man without any relevance to the case, Quinn decides to analyze the behavior of his suspect by drawing maps of Stillman's daily routes. He doesn't want to believe that Stillman's actions are purely random, so he tries to make sense of them by looking for a concept, an order behind the walking routes. However, he starts to lose faith in his work and becomes painfully aware of the desperate character of this attempt:

"[...] he continued to disbelieve the arbitrariness of Stillman's actions. He wanted there to be a sense to them, no matter how obscure. This, in itself, was unacceptable. For it meant that Quinn was allowing himself to deny the facts, and this, as he well knew, was the worst thing a detective could do."⁴²

Nonetheless, Quinn then begins to recognize letters in the lines he drew on his map, lines that show Stillman's movements across the city. He manages to extract series of letters O W E R O F B A B and supplementing them, concludes the sign T O W E R O F B A B E L. At first he sees this as a clear sign that tracking Stillman Sr. was not in vain and he is indeed planning something. But right thereafter, considerable doubts come up again:

The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he had wanted to see them. And even if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke. Stillman had nothing to do with it. It was all an accident, a hoax he perpetrated on himself.⁴³

As this passage shows, Quinn doesn't trust his detective methods anymore. These rational methods of solving the problems used to provide the stability in his world he was desperately looking for. But as his belief in them fades, the comforting dominance of the Symbolic Order comes to an end. The power of coincidence and his helplessness against it seem to throw him back into the spheres of the Real: "Quinn's mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of wordless things and thingless words."⁴⁴

⁴¹ *City of Glass*, 117.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

3.4 Quinn's Complete Loss of Self

To eventually find out how much danger emanates from Stillman, Quinn finally decides to talk to him – a course of action he previously had avoided in order not to arouse suspicion and therefore risk losing his cover. In the following days, he engages Stillman three times, but each time the old man seems not to remember him or their former meetings. So once he introduces himself as Quinn, the second time as Henry Dark and eventually Quinn introduces himself as Stillman's son.

This was the third time Quinn had presented himself, and each time it was as though Quinn had been someone else. He could not decide whether this was a good sign or bad. If Stillman was pretending, he was an actor like no other in the world. For each time Quinn had appeared, he had done it by surprise.⁴⁵

The fact that Stillman Sr. doesn't recognize Quinn, and even believes him to be his son in their last meeting, indicates that he wouldn't even recognize his real son if he saw him, and therefore could hardly be a real threat. Also, the confusion of identities is mirrored here: The object of the investigation – the very cause for Quinn's transformation into a detective – doesn't seem to make any difference of which person Quinn presents himself to be or what name he calls himself. But the potential murderer not only seems to be harmless and disoriented; the next day, he completely disappears. The morning after their third conversation, Quinn waits in front of Stillman's hotel like all the mornings before, but the professor doesn't show up. Later the receptionist tells Quinn that Stillman checked out. The detective has lost his last trace in the case in which he himself became so deeply involved. Stillman Sr. is gone and there is no way to find out where he could be. Any attempts to search for him would be left to pure chance, a thought that is deeply terrifying to the sleuth:

Quinn could walk through the streets every day for the rest of his life, and still he would not find him. Everything had been reduced to chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities. There were no clues, no leads, no moves to be made.⁴⁶

The ambiguity of things, the impossibility to continue with strategic, logical and systematic detective work unsettles him.

⁴⁵ *City of Glass*, 144.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

But even in these hopeless circumstances, Quinn doesn't give up on his case. He finds out the address of the real Paul Auster (according to Mrs. Stillman, one of the best detectives in New York) and visits him, hoping for help. But as it turns out, this real Paul Auster isn't a detective, but a writer. Quinn tells him the whole story from the beginning, but, of course, Auster cannot offer him much help. Quinn then tries to call Virginia Stillman several times, but cannot reach her.

Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine.⁴⁷

There is no trace whatsoever he could follow at this point. The suspect and the clients are gone and there is no 'super-detective' Auster who could help him. His Symbolic Order – which was supposed to be the dominant order in the detective world he chose for himself – is profoundly shaken over and over again. His feelings of a “neverland of wordless things and thingless words”⁴⁸ and a “nightmare of numbers and probabilities”⁴⁹ sound like an exact description of the nature of the Real. Being a detective didn't help Quinn to avoid the sphere of the Real. He was thrown right back into it, as the detective methods were powerless against the chaotic randomness of the events in this case. The detective world turned out not to be a world of order and law, but as confusing and senseless as his old, traumatic life. But still, Quinn feels a strong duty to protect Stillman Jr. and his wife. He made his decision to be a detective, and even if all his detective methods lead nowhere and there doesn't even seem to be a case anymore, he is staunchly committed to continue. He feels like the case is his personal duty that he cannot escape:

Virginia and Peter Stillman were shut off from him now. But he could soothe his conscience with the thought that he was still trying. Whatever darkness they were leading him into, he had not abandoned them yet.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *City of Glass*, 155.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

With his conviction to go on with the investigations, but without any plan how to do it, Quinn randomly walks through the city and eventually gets out his red notebook again:

For the first time since he had bought the red notebook, what he wrote that day had nothing to do with the Stillman case. Rather, he concentrated on the things he had seen while walking. He did not stop to think about what he was doing, nor did he analyse the possible implications of this unc customary act. He felt an urge to record certain facts, and he wanted to put them down on paper before he forgot them.⁵¹

Up to this point, the red notebook seemed to be a necessary device for his detective work. Now that there is nothing of import left to write about the case, Quinn nonetheless feels the need to write down his impressions. In his confusing situation, where all the pillars he held on to are breaking down, the notebook is the last thing left giving him a measure of stability. By putting observations of the city he made on his walk into words, he tries to escape that “neverland of wordless things and thingless words”⁵², the suffocating presence of the Real. The notebook thus functions as his last connection to the Symbolic Order. Furthermore, by writing down his impressions, Quinn gives them a presence in the physical world, and thereby seems to reassure himself of his existence. While the notebook used to be a ‘witness’ of his detective work, now that the case, the detective world, and the Symbolic Order in Quinn’s mind are falling apart, the notebook becomes the last ‘witness’ of his very existence.

There is no obvious way to continue, but Quinn comes to the belief that his unanswered calls to Virginia Stillman are a clear indication that he can’t stop with his investigations.

In the restaurant he realized that he had come to a decision about things. Without even knowing it, the answer was already there for him, sitting fully formed in his head. The busy signal, he saw now, had not been arbitrary. It had been a sign, and it was telling him that he could not yet break his connection with the case, even if he wanted to. He had tried to contact Virginia Stillman in order to tell her that he was through, but the fates had not allowed it.⁵³

⁵¹ *City of Glass*, 184.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 188.

This time, no rationality is involved in his decision. The unavailability of his clients could simply mean that they are not at home for a while, or even that they are not interested in his services any longer. But in a very irrational way, Quinn reads this as fate telling him not to give up:

It was fate, then. Whatever he thought of it, however much he might want it to be different, there was nothing he could do about it. He had said yes to a proposition, and now he was powerless to undo that yes.⁵⁴

Acting on the grounds of a belief in fate is totally contrary to any detective work. This shows the extent of Quinn's desperation: Now that there are no more signs left to read, he creates them by himself. There is nothing he can hold onto but this case. He became involved in his new detective-identity so deeply that there is no way back for him. Therefore, he decides to return to the house of Peter Stillman Jr. and observes it from the other side of the road, while living on the streets.

At the back of the alley there was a large metal bin for garbage, and whenever it rained at night Quinn would climb into it for protection. Inside, the smell was overpowering, and it would permeate his clothes for days on end, but Quinn preferred it to getting wet, for he did not want to run the risk of catching cold or falling ill.⁵⁵

During this period of observation, his personal condition ceases to be of any importance to him. He doesn't care about his outer appearance anymore. Hygiene, eating and sleeping are reduced to a bare minimum. This unconditional clinging to a mission continuously overrides all his personal needs, even the most essential ones. Quinn doesn't seem to consider himself a human being with human needs anymore. The only thing he wants to avoid is falling ill, as this would constrain his investigations. He puts away everything he was and everything he is for an absolute dedication to his case. After several weeks of living on the streets, the changes in his appearance are significant.

⁵⁴ *City of Glass*, 189.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

After the 84th street he paused momentarily in front of a shop. There was a mirror on the façade, and for the first time since he had begun his vigil, Quinn saw himself. [...] Now, as he looked at himself in the shop mirror, he was neither shocked nor disappointed. He had no feeling about it at all, for the fact was that he did not recognize the person he saw there as himself. He thought that he had spotted a stranger in the mirror, and in that first moment he turned around sharply to see who it was. [...] Feature by feature, he studied the face in front of him and slowly began to notice that this person bore a certain resemblance to the man he had always thought of as himself. Yes, it seemed more than likely that it was Quinn. Even now, however, he was not upset. The transformation in his appearance had been so drastic that he could not help but be fascinated by it.⁵⁶

The metamorphosis is so radical that Quinn even has troubles to recognize himself. But this alienation doesn't only affect his outward appearance. This situation is especially interesting considering Lacan's theory of the creation of the ego in the Mirror Stage. But in contrast to the Mirror Stage, in which a baby starts to identify with its image and thereby creates its ego, Quinn's ego has become instable up to a point where he doesn't even identify with his own image anymore. The extreme process Quinn has been going through finally culminates in something like a 'reverse' Mirror Stage.

It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. He tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult. He looked at this new Quinn and shrugged. It did not really matter. He had been one thing before, and now he was another. It was neither better nor worse. It was different, and that was all.⁵⁷

Quinn perceives his own, drastically changed image with indifference and estrangement. Just like before he wrote by the name of William Wilson or met with Virginia Stillman by the name of Paul Auster without really feeling responsible for it, now it is his very own image he doesn't feel responsible for anymore. While he was convinced he could always go back to being Quinn when he was pretending to be Wilson, Work or Auster, now the protagonist's belief in a stable identity he could return to seems to be completely lost.

⁵⁶ *City of Glass*, 202.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

Having observed Stillman Jr.'s house for weeks, he runs out of money for food and calls Paul Auster. This is when Auster tells him that he read in the paper that Stillman Sr. killed himself. With the death of the suspect, the case is finally and irreversibly closed. Making another final call to Virginia Stillman, a mechanical voice tells Quinn that the number has been disconnected. Quinn returns to his apartment. Arriving there, in addition to the mental incapacity of returning to his old life, a physical impracticality develops as well: he has to find out that the apartment is not his own anymore. Since he hadn't paid his rent in months, all his belongings had been thrown away and the flat was re-let. As his key still fits he enters, and meets the appalled next tenant. For a moment he tries to explain his situation to her, but eventually gives up:

It didn't matter anymore. He could stand there arguing with the girl for the rest of the day, and still he wouldn't get his apartment back. It was gone, he was gone, everything was gone.⁵⁸

With all his belongings gone, all the evidence of his former life irretrievably vanishes. Quinn thereby also loses all the material memorabilia reminding him of his former identity, the memory of which is already fading by then. With the loss of his apartment, Quinn's permanently loses his place in the world, as a territorial loss follows the mental loss he previously experienced. He decides to return to Stillman Junior's house and finds the door open. When he goes inside he finds out that Stillman and his wife are long gone, the house is completely empty. Quinn stays there anyway and keeps on writing in his red notebook.

[...] [T]he case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. Quinn no longer had any interest in himself. 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. They no longer had anything to do with him.⁵⁹

The case dissolved, and with it, Quinn's identity as a detective. During the time he lost himself so deeply in his new role as an investigator, Quinn also lost any connection to his old identity. Ultimately, there is nothing left of him. He considers neither his image nor his words to be his own anymore. When the last page of the red notebook is filled, Daniel Quinn disappears. The battle against the Real is lost.

⁵⁸ *City of Glass*, 212.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

4 *City of Glass* in Contrast to Traditional Detective Fiction

A Mystery detective story usually contains a detective of some kind, an unsolved mystery, (not always technically a crime), and an investigation by which the mystery is eventually solved. There is another component, however, that may be present in varying degrees, or may not be present at all. This is the so-called ‘puzzle element’: the presentation of the mystery as an ongoing problem for the reader to solve, and its power to engage the reader’s own reasoning abilities.⁶⁰

As these genre-rules are probably known to most readers who open of detective novels, it is natural to assume that *City of Glass* will be read against the background of these conventions. This, of course, leads to quite specific expectations of how the story will proceed. In the beginning, Auster’s novel seems to fulfill those expectations. There is a detective (or at least Quinn pretending to be one) and an unsolved mystery (the intentions and plans of Stillman Sr.). Those genre-typical elements encourage the reader to assume the book to be a genre-typical exemplar. Therefore, they encourage to expect Quinn’s investigation to eventually solve the mystery, and to understand the unfolding events as part of this mystery, which is supposed to be constantly scrutinized by the reader. Due to this puzzle-element, the reader himself becomes a kind of detective who is trying to put the puzzle-pieces in the right order. There is a constant inducement to get the whole picture, where everything can be seen clearly, where everything has its logical and right place. As a mystery is defined as something that is difficult to understand or explain, difficult to put in words, it is clearly outside the Symbolic Order. In fact, a mystery is a prototype of something belonging to the sphere of the Real.

So this puzzling is also an attempt of the reader to re-establish the Symbolic Order, to integrate the occurrences of the story into a logically structured and ordered sphere. Thereby, just like Quinn, the reader gets involved into a fight against the Real. Though the Real itself “remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech,”⁶¹ the mystery doesn’t. The mystery, representing the Real, loses its mysteriousness in the end of a traditional detective novel.

⁶⁰ Rzepka, Charles J. (2005): *Detective Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity, 10.

⁶¹ Lacan; Sheridan, xii.

The analytic experience, the power of the order of language, the power of the analytic mind, eventually triumphs over the ungraspable nature of the mystery. The satisfaction of experiencing this triumph is one of the main reasons why detective fiction is so popular. As William V. Spanos points out, “the form of the detective story has its source in the comforting certainty that an acute ‘eye’, private or otherwise, can solve the crime with resounding finality by inferring causal relationships between clues”. Therefore, the conventions of detective fiction could be seen as a mirror of the “‘form’ of the well-made positivistic universe.”⁶² “The detective genre presumes that an astute investigator can make sense of the world by uncovering hidden or misunderstood causal relationships among events.”⁶³ That’s why for Spanos, “the isomorphism between positivistic consciousness and the detective novel is grounded in shared notions of causality and finality.”⁶⁴

In *City of Glass*, this positivistic universe is constantly deconstructed. Right from the start of Quinn’s investigations, with the appearance of Stillman Senior’s Doppelgänger, the impossibility of inferring causal relationships is pointed out. It becomes clear that reading the signs, drawing conclusions and analyzing rationally are not the tools that can give all the answers in this case. The whole operation starts with a decision based on nothing but chance. Moreover, Auster’s deconstruction of the positivistic world-view is already hidden in the title. In traditional detective fiction, the investigator is supposed to be the one who “looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him”⁶⁵. But unlike the title *City of Glass* implies, here, the investigator cannot see through things. The truth remains hidden, the connections between occurrences blurry. The instability as a recurring, central aspect of the book implies a second, contrary interpretation of the title: In this city, everything is fragile, nothing is totally steady and unwavering. All things and even persons can quickly be broken into pieces, and it is hard or maybe even impossible to reassemble them.

⁶² Spanos, William (1995), “The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination,” in Paul A. Bové (ed.), *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 17-39.

⁶³ Gosselin, Adrienne Johnson (1999): *Multicultural Detective Fiction. Murder from the “Other” Side*. New York: Garland Pub, 21.

⁶⁴ Schweighauser, Philipp; Schneck, Peter (2010): *Terrorism, Media, and the Ethics of Fiction*. Transatlantic Perspectives on Don DeLillo. New York: Continuum, 166.

⁶⁵ *City of Glass*, 13.

This seems to be exactly the point Auster wants to make, as he accordingly mentioned in an interview:

[...] what I'm talking about is the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the powers of contingency. Our lives don't really belong to us you see – they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding.⁶⁶

This view of the world as a place without understanding is clearly illustrated in *City of Glass*. Auster shows a world of confusion, coincidence, mis- and overinterpretation: a world, where moving “through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them” leads nowhere. The *City of Glass* is broken; it consists only of shatters, of small incoherent segments. Accordingly, the identity of its main character is split into different parts.

A deconstruction of the conventions of the genre can be found in almost all aspects of Auster's novel. When Quinn believes to recognize letters in his drawings of Stillman's chaotic walking-routes, it is left completely unclear whether they were intended and meaningful, or only a creation in the mind of the desperate protagonist. Another clear opposition to the traditional storyline, as usually, the

[...] centered worlds of mystery rest on the non-arbitrariness of the sign; mystery's signs, its clues, are finally and fully motivated. In a conventional mystery, the investigator discovers the motivation of signs by demonstrating (usually in the last chapter) that signifiers (clues) are indissolubly tied to signifieds (meanings).⁶⁷

In Auster's novel however, the connections between clues and meanings can only be guessed at and are never totally clear.

⁶⁶ Auster, Paul (1995): *The Red Notebook and Other Writings*. London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 117.

⁶⁷ Malmgren, Carl Darryl (2001): *Anatomy of Murder. Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 137.

This is why the main character even starts to create irrational ties of clues and meanings by himself, as he does when he interprets an unanswered phone call as a sign of fate telling him to continue. Eventually, he completely loses the belief in his detective-methods instead of demonstrating their superiority in the last chapter. Also, he completely loses his identity in the end of the novel, another factor that points out its deconstructive character:

Detection becomes a quest for identity, as the mystery outside releases the mystery inside the detective. Ultimately, (...) the deconstructive detective novel calls into question the very notion of a stable, consistent self upon which detection and authorship are both predicated.⁶⁸

The mystery outside remains unclear as Stillman Sr. kills himself. Whether he ever had any plans of harming his son, or whether he was just a confused and harmless old man, hence, whether there ever was any case at all, remains unknown. Simultaneously, the mystery inside the detective leads to a point of complete self-abandonment. Demonstrating the disbelief in a stable, consistent self, Quinn finally ends up feeling that he “had been one thing before, and now he was another. It was neither better nor worse. It was different, and that was all.”⁶⁹ Those are only a few aspects which demonstrate an

[...] aesthetic whose artistic thrill is rather attributed to the posing of questions than to finding answers. Auster’s fiction excites ambiguity and intellectual uncertainty, so that, for example, we can never be sure whether a piece of writing leads us into the world of fiction or reality.⁷⁰

Consequently, instead of a clear resolution in the last chapter, the reader is left behind with the subject’s death and the disappearance of the detective and his clients. Just like the detective failed with his investigations, the reader’s attempt to solve the puzzle is doomed to fail. The big picture doesn’t reveal itself in the end.

⁶⁸ Sorapure, Madeleine: “The Detective and the Author”. In: Barone, Dennis (1995): *Beyond the Red Notebook. Essays on Paul Auster*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 77.

⁶⁹ *City of Glass*, 203.

⁷⁰ Eckhard, Petra (ed.) (2010): *Landscapes of Postmodernity. Concepts and Paradigms Of Critical Theory*. Wien, Berlin, Münster: Lit, 129.

Landrum (1999) concluded that the

[...] detective story presents life as agreeable, reassuring, simple, understandable, meaningful, and secure. The problems are simple, with simple solutions. They glamorize the everyday, for example, the city. They portray a secure universe, subject to fixed laws. The detective always wins.⁷¹

In *City of Glass*, every single one of those aspects is turned upside down. To readers familiar with these conventions, and with detective novels where the mystery is presented as an ongoing problem for the reader to solve, the randomness of events in *City of Glass* might seem implausible or even unrealistic. But apparently this is exactly the point Auster wishes to make: Unlike in a puzzle game and unlike in traditional detective fiction, the ‘big picture’, which logically connects everything, is an illusion. Thus, one could describe the reading process of *City of Glass* as a self-experiment to experience the unsuccessful attempt of resolving the Real in order to re-establish the Symbolic Order. This appears to be the most fascinating aspect of the novel: it makes it very easy to identify and to feel with its main character.

For Paul Auster, *City of Glass* still seems to represent reality much more accurately than any detective novel accurately following the conventions of the genre:

In the strictest sense of the word, I consider myself a realist. Chance is part of reality; we are continually shaped by forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives. And yet there’s a widely held notion that novels shouldn’t stretch the imagination too far. Anything that appears ‘implausible’ is necessarily taken to be forced, artificial, ‘unrealistic’. I don’t know what reality these people have been living in, but it certainly isn’t my reality.⁷²

⁷¹ Landrum, 85.

⁷² Auster, Paul (1991): *The Art of Hunger: Essays, Prefaces, Interviews*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press. 269-270.

5 Conclusion

Through the application of the Lacanian Triad to Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the motivation of its main character, Daniel Quinn, as well as his self-destructing development can be explained very well. The whole novel can be broken down to the recurring attempts to of the protagonist to restore the Symbolic order and the repeated failure of these attempts that inevitably follows. This development is in stark contrast to the traditional detective novel, where the detective makes sense of the world, the analytic mind eventually solves the mystery and thereby the Symbolic triumphs over the Real. With his deconstruction of the norms of the genre, Auster puts in question the whole universe that traditional detective novels create. Thereby, he makes the reader much more aware of *their* constructed nature. The storyline in *City of Glass* might seem implausible to some readers because the expectations the genre implies are constantly defied. But this leads to the question if traditional detective novels themselves are more plausible: Auster's novel calls for reflection on the question whether the inevitable triumph of the Symbolic Order in detective novels is really an accurate representation of how things work in the real world. Because even when viewing the world through the eyes of the sharpest analytical mind, there are always events which remain beyond words, beyond understanding. And even if it's an aggravating experience to get lost in the spheres of the Real, it is the counterpart of the Symbolic Order, and therefore an equally important part of this world. In other words: There is always some measure of mystery left. Accordingly, Eckhard (2010) described Auster's work:

Auster is indeed bewitched by books as much as he is bewitched by language. His literary practice is brimming with metafictional puns, ironic doublings and ontological uncertainties, strategies that, more often than not, make the process of reading a disquieting experience. The magic spell that is at work in Auster's oeuvre touches upon many literary and philosophical notions that are characteristic of the postmodern period. Representing a radical counter-discourse to realist fiction and the positivist attitude, Auster's writing playfully points to the virtuality and arbitrariness of language and, in a further step, to the postmodern paradigm that arriving at absolute truth or knowledge is nothing but an illusion.⁷³

⁷³ Eckhard, 129.

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