

The Narrated Self and Characterization: Paul Auster's Literary Personae

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Introduction

Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, published in the period 1985-1987, has been read as a typical example of postmodern literature. One important feature is the theme of complex identity, and the novels can be read as an exploration of identity problems in the postmodern age, where the idea of the autonomous subject has given way to an understanding of subject and identity characterized by instability and complexity. The trilogy's short novels all depict characters that in different ways and on varying levels struggle to find meaning in what they do, and who are forced to explore their identities during their quests, in confrontation with the antagonists of the stories. Daniel Quinn, who has lost his family, tries to return to life through a hunt for a mysterious linguist. Blue encounters his own self when shadowing the secretive Black. The nameless narrator of the last novel finds himself entrapped in the life of his childhood friend and doppelganger Fanshawe. In his more recent novel, *The Book of Illusions* from 2002, Auster returns to this theme. The main character here finds himself in a state of half-life much like Daniel Quinn, but he is able to find new meaning to his life and solutions to his problems in his encounter with the story of another man's crisis.

An interesting aspect in the study of characters in Auster's works is the importance of narration for creating identity as well as for depiction of literary character. In studies of the modern self, the narrated self has become a central theory. I will suggest that the characters' self-perception relies on their concept of their narratives. Characters in a literary text exist through narration, but in postmodern literature, mimesis is toned down, and their narratives are often fragmented, contradictory and challenge the readers' ability to perceive the characters as personae. I will try to point at

the importance of narratives for the characterization in these novels, applying narrative theory to analyze the function of narration.

Identity and narration

Alasdair MacIntyre introduces a theory of the narrated self in his work of moral philosophy, *After Virtue* from 1981. In his discussion of moral philosophy's standing today, he explains the "concept of selfhood, a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as a narrative beginning to middle to end" (205). He tries to "show how natural it is to think of the self in a narrative mode" (206). Furthermore, MacIntyre links the effect of the failure of these narratives to meaninglessness and the obliteration of self: "When someone complains [...] that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement towards a climax or a *telos*" (217). The necessity of others to correct and adjust the narrative of one's own life is also emphasized:

The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative: I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Moreover this asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives. (218)

Sociologist Anthony Giddens claims that a person's identity can be found "in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*" (1991, 54). But these narratives are by no means unambiguous; the potential facts to select from for such a story are exceedingly numerous, leaving the question of identity rather ambiguous (55). This multiplicity of possible stories suggests the difficulty encountered when writing a biography, or an autobiography. Giddens also states, "the biography the individual reflexively holds in mind is only one 'story' among many other potential stories that could be told about her development as a self" (55). A biography changes according to the choices of the person who writes it.

A narrated structure is often perceived as more real than fragments, since it conveys connections that create meaning. Donald E. Polkinghorne bases some of his theories on MacIntyre's argument, and sees narrative as

essential to the experience of being human, arguing in his work on psychology and “narrative knowing” that

[H]uman beings exist in three realms – the material realm, the organic realm, and the realm of meaning. The realm of meaning is structured according to linguistic forms, and one of the most important forms for creating meaning in human existence is the narrative. The narrative attends to the temporal dimension of human existence and configures events into a unity. The events become meaningful in relation to the theme or point of the narrative. Narratives organize events into wholes that have beginnings, middles and ends. (Polkinghorne 1988, 183)

If one applies this to the narrated self, it is possible to suggest that the self-identities that are based on a strong narrative must be seen as more real than those with less developed biographies, and such a conflict plays a major role for the progression of the characters of Auster’s novels in their struggle with conflicting identities. This is particularly apparent in the trilogy.

The structured, logical, coherent story needed for the narratives of identity, can be viewed in light of literary theory. The plots of stories are the basis of the history of poetics from Aristotle onwards. An element of plot is always required to structure a story: beginning, sequence and end, a sense of time and causality. Peter Brooks states that for anything to be narratable, it must “in some sense be plotted, display a design and logic” (1984, 5). “Plot is [...] a constant of all written and oral narrative [...] Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention” (5). The fact that we structure our conceptions of identity and personality in the form of a narrated story makes the relation between narration and fiction more ambiguous. The perception of a character based on its narration in a text might thus be closer to how we perceive ourselves and other real people than what is commonly assumed in narratology.

According to theories of psychology and sociology, a feeling of meaning can be strengthened through having a secure identity, a sense of *basic trust*, achieved especially through meaningful relations with others, and by sustaining a coherent biographical narrative. One can say that in order to build an identity, one needs to be able to tell one’s story. This requires ability to see connections, relations between different elements, to structure details and understand causality. Such an ability or tendency is closely related to our general need to draw conclusions, even if based on inadequate information, to smooth out inconsistencies and to make all details create a rational whole. This process is closely related to storytelling

and reading, which are activities where these skills apply to a very high degree. Brooks explains how we perceive plot as a minimum of causality and temporality. Only suggested connections will still function as connections for the readers, since readers ordinarily fill in the bone structure of information provided (1984, 113, 177, 315).

Throughout *The New York Trilogy*, play with identities is a central aspect in order to understand the quest for meaning, which is usually seen as the most important theme in the novels. Each main character tries to re-define himself, related to the encounters with others who challenge the character's previous view of himself. The palimpsest identity and the assumed roles and masks that replace autonomous identity, and the importance of narration for a concept of self, are here explored through literary texts. The incomplete narratives of the protagonists are linked to other, parallel identities, in such a way that the structures of these fill in the missing parts in those of the main characters. The three novels are literally packed with cross-references to parallel identities, within each novel as well as between the works (see Springer 2001a).

The confusion of identity experienced by Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*, is caused by his grief after losing his wife and son. Transitional moments like a personal crisis can often lead to a change in one's perception of self-identity (Giddens 1991, 143). Crises as an important factor in Auster's works have been treated extensively by Springer (2001b). In *The Book of Illusions*, Zimmer notes a quote from Chateaubriand's book that Hector Mann has underlined, which seems to point directly at the key to understanding both characters in terms of crises: "The book fell open somewhere in the middle, and I saw that one of the sentences had been underlined faintly in pencil. *Les moments de crise produisent un redoublement de vie chez les hommes*. Moments of crisis produce a redoubled vitality in men" (238). Transitional moments acquire the form of peripeteia, climax, end, and subsequently possibility of new beginning in the biographical narratives of the characters, thus attaining a narratological function beyond psychological effect.

As MacIntyre has explained, the unity of self is determined by the unity of its narrative, and for Quinn, the fragments of his characters' stories take this place, since they are the only form of narrative he is exposed to in his isolation. This leads to a complexity of characterization in the novel. Since storytelling is such a powerful element in the sustenance of identity, Quinn is drawn to his fictional characters rather than to experiencing his real self. He fluctuates between three separate

identities as the story begins, the more fictitious of them experienced as the more real to him, and as the plot begins to develop, he involves himself in even more complicated role play and masquerade in order to solve the mystery of his "case". Quinn writes his not very ambitious detective novels under the name William Wilson, a pseudonym named after the narrator of an Edgar Allan Poe short story about doppelgangers. Wilson is also the name of a centre-field player on the Mets baseball team. He has no life story, for Quinn never invented one for him. Quinn's detective narrator, "private eye" Max Work, is on the other hand a character he strongly identifies with. He is his "private I" as well as the main literary character of his works. Work was the one "who gave purpose" (6). "If he lived now in the world at all, it was only through [...] Max Work" (9). He is an identity born from the telling of stories. Nobody is there to tell or listen to Quinn's story anymore, while Work's story has an audience, shown in the scene with the reading girl on the bench. Thus the Work identity feels stronger and more real to Quinn than his own self, "it reassured him to pretend to be Work as he was writing his books, to know that he had it in him to be Work if he ever chose to be, even if only in his mind" (9). It is through this identification that Quinn is able to react to the mysterious telephone request for "Paul Auster," private detective. He starts to pursue the Stillman case and initiates a change in his life. Losing his own identity is the ultimate consequence of this role-play, however, as he loses more and more of Quinn while he becomes the detective, and also since he gets lost concerning the case. Posing as "Paul Auster" he has no knowledge of any story, "memories or fears, [...] dreams or joys" (61), and feeling secure in this identity is difficult, because there is no meaning beneath it, no biographical narrative to reflect. When he discovers that Auster is an author like himself, the picture is torn, and Quinn moves another step towards selflessness. The last of Quinn's multiple roles, the bum he is transformed into through his ascetic project, has a strong resemblance to old Stillman on his strolls around the New York streets collecting junk. He adopts Stillman's biographical story, and replaces it for his own self, when the inner identification as the good detective falls apart. When the Stillman case that had been his motivation and goal for so long has lost all its importance, Quinn is depicted as a totally dissolved self, only living to express words, continuing Stillman's project of recreating language; his self is completely engulfed at this point.

Characterization in this novel could be described in James Phelan's terms of *foregrounding the synthetic*. According to Phelan, the three basic

constituents of mimetic, synthetic and thematic dimensions (qualities of a character seen in isolation from the work) create a literary character. The synthetic is what he calls the “artificial” component, what makes the reader aware of the linguistic construct (1989, 2-3). The depiction of Quinn starts out as mimesis; he is described as a realistic person with certain characteristics or qualities. Phelan explains the *mimetic* dimension as the “realism” of a character, “this person,” the elements that make the readers believe in the characters as people. The mimetic dimension is not always developed, especially in modern and postmodern literature. Dimensions can become *functions* if they are significant for the text’s plot or progression (9). Quinn’s attributes of interpretative skills, loneliness and seclusion are part of what makes readers consider him a possible and realistic person, and in the course of the novel’s progression, the reader believes in his downfall because it is highly related to his qualities and situation. The progression of the novel becomes possible because of Quinn’s character attributes of insecure identity; they become mimetic function as well. This mimetic function is necessary to make the reader believe the beginning of the plot.

Moreover, these attributes also lead to the novel’s themes of postmodern identity conflicts, and accordingly turn into *thematic* functions (the significance of a character as a representative entity of themes in a text) of the character Quinn. They are necessary for the novel’s progression; Quinn’s decision to follow Stillman is dependent on his having such qualities. The absurdity of the “Paul Auster” identity, which is so similar to the real author’s biographical facts, is another example of foregrounding the synthetic dimension of the characters. The functions of a character relate to the progression, which in turn consists of narration: causality and temporality. When these elements are scarce, as when the synthetic function is pronounced, it points directly at the identity crises of the characters, through the breakdown of their narrated selves. Literature applying such devices emphasizes the reader’s awareness of the novel being a construct, and the characterization’s objective to explore a theme rather than describe a realistic person. It is interesting, however, to see that it is this foregrounding of the synthetic dimension of the literary characters that makes it possible to describe the complexity of identity related to postmodern ideas, very different from more conventional literature applying mimesis as the main device of characterization.

The very idea of narration implies a narrator to tell the stories; accordingly the choice of narrative technique is important for the reader's perception of the different characters, as "characters are constructed by the reader" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 119). At the beginning of *City of Glass*, one can identify an *extra-heterodiegetic* narrator (Genette 1972, 248) who does not participate in the actual story, but uses external *focalization* or perspective to relate the events from within, having access to the main character's mind, as well as all other necessary information available. In the use of *we* in the second paragraph, "We know, for example, that he was thirty-five years old" (3), the narrator seems to include the narratee in his account of the situation. In the course of the first pages, the narrator passes many judgments on Quinn's character, explaining to the reader about his past, his current activities and preferences. The narrator has access to any characters' thoughts from within, which is apparent in three identical passages referring to Quinn's dreams: "In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself [...]" (9, 72, 106). In spite of these traces of external focalization, however, most of the novel is narrated through an internal focalizer, from within Quinn. Apart from the use of the third person pronouns, this comes very close to a first person narration, and limits the access of information to the focalizing character's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. This is how Quinn's narrative is presented to the reader; every other character is perceived through him, and the reader may only find out facts that are also known by Quinn. Only in the very last pages of the novel do we realize that the use of this narrative technique has been a game. The "I" of a narrator appears, revealing his detective-like work of trying to reconstruct Quinn's life and the Stillman case. In this sense, the narrating "I" is also a detective, appearing to use Quinn's notes and the talks with Auster to retrace Quinn's story.

The narrative technique is important to achieve the reader's perception of Quinn's disappearance. The visual and temporal perspective is moved away from Quinn as the focalizer changes to external again. When the narrating "I" appears, the use of "we" is suddenly turned to mean him and Auster, his friend, and the narrator is a *homodiegetic* one, a character in the story. However, from a thematic perspective, this is an impractical construct. The story of Quinn is the most important, it is his mind we as readers are trying to penetrate in order to understand his narrative, and the most important aspect of the "I" is how its use creates an additional effect of distance to Quinn and accentuates his narrative fading out of the actual story.

Similarly to *City of Glass*, the narrator of *Ghosts* is seemingly extra-heterodiegetic, outside the story. The focalization is internal, inside the events, from within Blue through most of the novel, and sometimes the narrator follows his perspective very closely, coinciding directly with Blue's thoughts. However, in certain passages, particularly in the beginning and at the end, there is an ironic distance to the main character, and everything is seen through an external focalizer, having access to knowledge beyond the characters' thoughts. This focalizer is placed close to the narrating situation, here from an unknown future, looking more than thirty years backwards in time. The narrator places the beginning of the plot very accurately in 1947, and here the distance in time is clear: "Little does Blue know, of course, that the case will go on for years" (136). The reader is also positioned as distant from the events through the addressing of a narratee, "who are we to blame him" (157). The narrator never uses the focalization of other characters. Even if the narrator does not see Black's perspective, we get evidence that he has knowledge of the truth about him and White (163), as when he mentions that reading slowly would give Blue the full understanding of the case. These passages with external focalization give the impression that the narrator wants to tell this story to underline a point, and that obtaining the realism of a detective novel is not the purpose. The narrator gives a strong sense of structuring, interpretation and control in relating the facts in the beginning, for instance when he states how it all begins with White walking in through the door. The narrator gives his view on what is important, and the selection of facts is apparently very deliberate, keeping most of it to a minimum. The narrator's position is still not neutral; he evaluates Blue's actions and thoughts from the outside, in a way that only a narrator from a distance in time and place can do: "To be fair to Blue" (135), he says about Blue's lack of critical questions in the beginning. Sometimes he passes judging comments as if he were a typical "omniscient", all-knowing narrator from the early 18th century novels: "For Blue is a solid character on the whole [...] This is perhaps his greatest talent" (157).

The narrative "I" comes in at the very end of *Ghosts*, just like in the first novel, underlining that the uncertainties of facts are strong, since this happened such a long time ago. But here the narrator seems to give up control of his fictionalized character; since the story is over, "[a]nything is possible [...] I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out west to start a new life. [...] In my secret dreams I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China" (195 – 196). The narrator chooses to let go of Blue, a character he

has created, and the creative power and control that the author normally has, pretending to know as little as the reader: "From this moment on, we know nothing" (196). Black/White writes Blue's story, and thus his life becomes the narrative of the isolated man doing nothing but watching in the window. The external focalizer of these two novels functions as an illustration and thematization of the difficulty of penetrating the mind of others as well as a means of structuring the fragmented parts of the characters' lives as coherent narratives, pointing at causality and temporality.

The narrative technique stresses the foregrounded synthetic dimension of the characters in *Ghosts*, maybe even more so than in the other two novels. The focalization is external and the narrator overt to a stronger degree than in the others, and the introduction of the setting works as an invitation to read the story as a hypothetical situation. The use of present tense in the main narrative also points to depicting a hypothetical situation more than the relating of a story, and this applies to the whole text except from the retrospective parts, when Blue thinks about the stories of others or his own past outside the scope of the narrated time. The pretence of uncertainty is also shown at the novel's closure: "Let it be China, then" (196), and in the above mentioned quote: "I myself prefer to think that he went far away" (195). Unlike the narrator of *City of Glass* who expresses helplessness in finding out Quinn's fate, the narrator here deliberately shows his control, through ironically displaying alleged ignorance. The distance creates a certain opacity of Blue's narrative, blurring his identity.

The minor characters of *Ghosts* also have a mainly synthetic dimension, but even if they play very small parts, the thematic dimension is still important, as they add to the issue of fragmented identity. All names in this story are colors – it is not psychology that is important, but thematic consequences, and the more hypothetical aspect of the whole story: not to focus on realistic plot and characters, but on the sketching out of a situation to demonstrate an idea. The characters are not provided with much of a biography; their stories are only hinted at. Avoiding conventional realism foregrounds the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of the novel. The use of narration as identity creation in characterization is here stripped down to a minimum of fact.

The narrative technique of *The Locked Room* is different from the other two. Even if there is a narrator-protagonist relating his own story, he is placed in an extradiegetic writing situation, above the actual diegetic or story level, seven years after the events of the main plot start: "Seven years ago this

November, I received a letter from a woman named Sophie Fanshawe” (199). Since the narrator is homodiegetic, telling his story in the first person, focalization and voice is mainly his. “[M]y struggle to remember things as they really were, I see now” (209) shows how there is a marked difference in time and experience between the narrator’s writing situation when all is over, and when the story starts seven years earlier, although he is never quite clear as to what insight he has achieved. The narrator’s extradiegetic level is concerned with the narration itself outside the actual events depicted, creating a distance in time, and this is shown through various comments on his part about his failing judgments at the actual events: “I understand now how badly I was deceiving myself” (242). The retrospect of the narrator’s story creates some distance to the material; however, some of the events, especially the final scene, are told without signs of this hindsight, as if nothing had happened afterwards. The effect on the novel is that the reader perceives this as an *end*, and links the tearing of the notebook scene to the closure of the narration as a whole as well as the ‘answer’ to thematic questions raised. The characterization thus approaches closure, and achieves completeness of structure. Unlike the other two stories of the trilogy, where the narrative technique creates a distance to the narrated events as if stepping back, however obscured or opaque the view becomes, this closure is different since it shows the character’s reaction at the time, and as such it becomes crucial to our perception of Fanshawe’s obliteration, and the narrator’s return to a new life.

The internal focalizer, which would ordinarily be the same throughout a text written in the first person, is also somewhat ambiguous. Auster observes in an interview that “certain sections of it are actually written in the third person” (1997, 317), where the narrator describes the events as from an external focalizer seeing Fanshawe from the outside. The main parts of the discourse circle around Fanshawe’s narrative, trying to penetrate his secret inner self, while the narrator reveals that his own self also becomes opaque for him. In this way, Fanshawe is as present in the text as the narrator is. His invisibility at the end, behind the door, again adds to the idea that he only exists as an idea in the narrator’s mind. All the three novels show various degrees of blurring the characterization for the reader, through the choice of narrative techniques that create distance.

Reflexive Identity

The actual narrative situation is connected to the reflexivity of the self: Auster points to the fact that “[a] story [...] posits the existence of others” (1982, 152). In his novels, there is always a play between reader and writer, both within the novels and as overt comments to the reader on the actual reading situation. Auster claims in an interview with Finn Skårderud that “a book does not exist unless it is read. It is always a relationship. Writing is an act of love” (2002, 79, my translation). But as an opposition or contradiction to this, there is the fact that writing is done in solitude, which is necessary to create art, but problematic for self-identity. This conflict between the creation of art and the need for communicative context is especially shown in *Ghosts*, where Black hires Blue to ensure his own existence.

There are many references to the silent, solitary artist in Auster’s works, and also the disappearing artist can be said to be a motif exemplified in Quinn, Hector Mann and Fanshawe. Solitude is necessary and liberating, but if used destructively, it might approach solipsism and involve the negation of self-reflexivity. A narrated Self needs the audience of an Other. The typical postmodern identity conflicts of meaninglessness and existential doubt arise from the difficult balancing act of keeping one’s self-image intact in a context of numerous choices. This can be seen in relation to the writings of Jacques Lacan, who is also mentioned by Auster in interviews as having influenced the writing of *The Invention of Solitude*. Auster observes that “Lacan calls it the ‘mirror-stage,’ [...] we can only see ourselves because someone else has seen us first. In other words, we learn our solitude from others” (Auster 1997, 314-315). Lacan states that formation of the self only happens through an acknowledgement of the Other: “I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*” (1966, 4). Lacan speaks about this theory in terms of infants and animals, but there are also general applications for this effect. Mirror images can be seen as a way to define one’s self as divided from the surroundings, as roles in society, to realize who one is through seeing oneself in the reflection of others.

In *Ghosts*, the main character’s world has so far consisted of simple, concrete things, while now he begins to *speculate*, to see truths as they are conveyed in a mirror, that is, reflecting back on himself. Blue only

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becomes aware of the meaninglessness of his existence through realizing that he is the mirror image of Black. The Algonquin bar scene where Black tells Blue he is a private detective watching someone, describing Blue's situation to the last detail, is an absurd episode, but it is also a clue to the roles they play in each other's lives. "My job is to watch someone," Black tells Blue, and the irony here is that Blue needs Black to act out the part of watcher in order to see the situation, as if he were really watching himself through the mirror. Black tries to enlighten Blue further: "I think he's writing about himself. The story of his life. That's the only possible answer [...] he needs [...] my eye looking at him [...] to prove he's alive" (181). Black uses Blue's reports as a reference from the outside and can therefore see himself in the "reflection," while Blue at this point loses himself in his solitary observations that he cannot make any sense of.

The middle story could be read as an exploration of the forming of a reflexive self, where the plot functions on a metaphorical level as a description of formation of self and the mirror stage that occurs in all infants' lives their first 6-18 months. *Ghosts* is set at the actual birth date of Paul Auster; White comes to Blue's office on 3 Feb 1947, and the developing identity-plot is necessary for Blue to discover the Other to form a self. The separation of the self from the other is illustrated by Blue's killing Black. At the end of the short novel, the narrator comments on his own placement in time: "For we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood" (195), implying that the writing situation takes place much later. The successful narration of self is dependent on the Other in the function of audience. Black needs Blue to write his continuous biographical narrative, literally speaking, since he is sequestered from all other contact with real life, to keep his last link with life as he writes his book. The solitude of the writer treated by Auster in "The Book of Memory" (1982) is thereby exemplified and problematized in Black's project. Black needs the solitude to be able to write, but that also means that he has no life apart from his writing. When he talks to Blue disguised as the bum Jimmy Rose, he tells Blue that "[w]riting is a solitary business. It takes over your life" (175). At the final confrontation, Black explains:

... I've needed you from the beginning. If it hadn't been for you, I couldn't have done it.

Needed me for what?

To remind me of what I was supposed to be doing. Every time I looked up, you were there, watching me, following me, always in sight, boring into me with your eyes. You were the whole world to me, Blue, and I turned you into my death. You're the one thing that doesn't change, the one thing that turns everything inside out.
(194)

It is quite apparent how this illustrates the role of the Other as a mirror reflection of oneself. Blue loses the feeling of control of his world when he realizes that he has been lured into a sham, and that his function was to be Black's reflection in the mirror, or rather through the window. He has no choice but to try to kill him to be released from his entrapment.

Relations with others are central not only to the formation of identity through the mirror stage, but also to sustaining it in a secure way. Giddens discusses the *pure relationship*, which is defined as "reasonably durable sexual ties, marriage, and friendship" (1991, 87), sought only for what the relationship itself can bring, and characterized by its continuous, reflexive nature. It is "a key environment for building the reflexive project of the self, since it both allows for and demands organized and continuous self-understanding" (186). Hope and trust are generated (186), especially via the creation of "shared stories" (97). In Auster's novels, the characters' lack or loss of these relationship ties are at the heart of their crises, and for the two characters who are able to return to a life, the new relationships are important anchors in their new life situations. *The New York Trilogy* and *The Book of Illusions* can both be seen to explore how the interplay with other human beings influences the way a person defines who he is.

The third novel of the trilogy also deals with identity linked to others, illustrated by the doppelgänger motif. The nameless narrator experiences identity confusion related to the disappearance of his childhood friend Fanshawe, in many ways his double; through this encounter, the narrator experiences an existential crisis, resulting in the novel's quest for the truth about Fanshawe. In contrast to *City of Glass* where the hunt leads to disappearance, the main character of this story has to confront and assimilate his double, as hinted at in the intermediate *Ghosts*, where Blue attempts at confrontation to solve the mystery. In the course of *The Locked Room*, the narrator-protagonist gradually takes over the life of his childhood friend, but the identity problems this causes are difficult to handle. Fanshawe has been the narrator's friend since their earliest childhood, from before language, consequently before consciousness of any other life. As a child the narrator is strongly influenced by Fanshawe, copying his interests and ways, but the fact

that “I don’t think I was ever entirely comfortable in his presence” (209) shows the ambivalence of his admiration. The narrator’s feeling inferior to his friend is a character attribute that becomes a very important thematic function of his character. The main character’s story is like a pale version of Fanshawe’s story, and this is what makes his identity confusion possible.

The power of the narration strengthens identity, but here also introduces identity problems, of not being able to distinguish who is who. The question is whether these doppelgangers are supposed to be read as one or two characters, since they seem to be mirror reflections of each other (Springer 2001b, 127), while at the same time they are described as characters with stronger mimetic dimensions than the other main characters in the trilogy, that is, they seem to be a little more realistic than Quinn or Blue. This is caused by the use of internal focalization through the homodiegetic narrator, which leads to more “realism” of psychology, as we supposedly read the thoughts of a person seen from within his own mind, instead of focalized through an external narrator as in the other two novels. In this novel, the foregrounding of the characters’ synthetic dimensions is shown through the ambiguity of the two characters, and is not as pronounced as in the other two novels of the trilogy. The issue of character merger is never clear, but it points to the problems of Other and Self, in the form of confusing the mirror image with somebody else.

MacIntyre’s ideas of a narrative to express identity become central in order to understand the narrator’s motives. The plan of writing Fanshawe’s biography appeals to him as a way to gain control over Fanshawe. However, the struggles of writing lead his thoughts to the problem of describing a person through his biographical facts. The narration of one’s identity is essential here: a person will listen to the story about another person, and use the outward facts to create a “real” story about the person, giving the false impression that he knows who the person is. Auster has in an interview said that it is very problematic to relate to the lives of others since we do not know enough, not even about ourselves, to write a reliable biography (Skårderud 2002, 64). Narratives of other secondary or minor characters are in general important in this novel also, as *mise en abyme* (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 93). One of these is found in Fanshawe’s notebook: “Fanshawe shows a particular fondness for stories of this kind. Especially in his notebooks, there is a constant retelling of little anecdotes, and because they are so frequent – and more so toward the end – one begins to suspect that Fanshawe felt they could somehow help him to understand himself” (254). This sounds like a direct

rephrasing of the theory that narration of incidents in other people's lives gives perspective to one's own life, as related by MacIntyre.

In spite of the allusion to Quinn's disappearance (202), *The Locked Room* does not treat the fragmented identity to such an extent as the other two novels of the trilogy. However, it is a continuation of the double-identity problem sketched out in *Ghosts*, in a story that seems to be more realistic, but ends up being just as confusing as the other two. Sophie Fanshawe is a secure point in the narrator's chaotic hunt for truth and himself. His obsession that makes him forget his commitment to her is what leads him into trouble, in a more complex way than in the two previous novels. When the narrator decides to hide facts from her, such as Fanshawe's letter, the intimacy and commitment of the relationship also fall apart and he loses the support he could have received through the creation of shared stories. A clue to understanding the three novels is the role of the women, who represent the reality the lost detectives reject. In *Ghosts* women are barely mentioned, and it is obvious that Blue does not give "the future Mrs Blue" much thought. The men reject the crying, emotional women, but thereby also the intimacy of the pure relationship.

Fifteen years after finishing the trilogy, Auster returned to the same starting point, and wrote a story related to *City of Glass*. The rebirth after crisis of the main character in *The Book of Illusions* is influenced by his encounter with a man supposed to have died many decades earlier. It is the retracing of the disappeared filmmaker's escape from his identity that leads Zimmer back to life. The parallels of different identities are also present in this novel, but the importance of relating to others is explored more extensively. The main character of *The Book of Illusions*, David Zimmer, suffers a serious personal loss and is bereft of his family, parallel to what happens to Quinn, but the story in this novel takes a different turn. What helps Zimmer out of his grief is discovering the narrative of a man who has suffered and experienced similar losses, in addition to creating a mysterious image of himself, that takes quite a bit of detective work to explore. Instead of falling to pieces like Quinn, he has more success in puzzling Mann's mystery together. Hector Mann turns out to be a more constructive and humane character than Stillman was, with more apparent mimetic dimensions than the characters in the trilogy. Mann is recreated through his narrative in the book Zimmer writes, but only after everybody involved, who could verify the story of his life, is dead. Accordingly, the book is turned into a "Book of the Dead", or rather

a Chateaubriand-like *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*; it is the book that brings Mann to life.

The New York Trilogy's extensive use of mirrored identities and characters is repeated in this novel, but in a different way. It is more a question of situations than whole characters that are reflected, as the example of parallels between Mann and Chateaubriand. We find the same relationship between Zimmer and Mann, where incidents of crises and loss are mirrored. For Zimmer, the similarities between Mann and himself serve as signs of a link between them. His identification with Hector Mann increases as he learns his story, and both Alma and Hector have enormous influence on him. Hearing about the death of Hector and Frieda's son Tad, he realizes that they have experienced a similar crisis, and since this is the secret clue to why Mann starts making films again, Zimmer's interest in the films grows. Zimmer's second loss, that of Alma, is experienced as different, because he is able to see how short their relationship was, plus continue his work (314) and focus on their common goal; to tell Mann's story helps him reconnect to his own. The nature of Mann's biography is a mystery that requires investigation and interpretation: Zimmer is able to retrace some of Hector's past life through the willfully obscured facts of the camouflaged interviews, choosing between the many versions of the Mann story. "Put these contradictions together, and you wind up with nothing, the portrait of a man with so many personalities and family histories that he is reduced to a pile of fragments, a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces no longer connect" (83). The fragmented identity is in this novel not represented by Zimmer himself, but by Mann, who is described as having a palimpsest of identities.

Mann's new chance with Frieda is a new transitional moment for Mann; at the verge of death he regains identity, but in a new form which enables him to start a new life. After his second crisis, the death of his son, he is lured back to life a second time through a renewed film project, and this can happen because Frieda is there to influence him, he is not isolated like the first time. For Zimmer, the knowledge of Mann's transformations after devastating experiences helps him see possibilities for himself; the stories of Mann create the mirror effect. Zimmer's role in Hector's life becomes a "witness of the witness" (280). Alma needs Zimmer as a witness to vouch for the truth of her work, the biography of Hector Mann, since after his death and the destruction of his works, the only verifiable facts about the film maker will be those already known, the ones Zimmer has used in his book. Alma says "my statements won't be credible unless I have another person to back me up" (105). When every piece of evidence

is obliterated and burnt by Frieda, Zimmer is left alone with his information, and gives it all up as no one would believe what he says. Only as a "Book of the Dead" can he tell the story, which then could appear as fiction – an illusion – just as well as a biography. Playing with these notions and how the reader will interpret the story are part of the reading experience.

The narration of *The Book of Illusions* consists of multiple levels. The use of Zimmer as homodiegetic narrator is in itself quite simple, but it is his relation of other stories through a Chinese box principle, using different diegetic levels and a complexity of story and discourse time span that adds to the plot. The extradiegetic level is David Zimmer's writing situation: he is not yet forty at the point of the accident in June 1985 which is the start of the diegetic level, while the extradiegetic Zimmer in his mid-fifties looking back and describing the events must be set around March 1999. The fact that he at the end says he will be "following Chateaubriand's model" (318), implies that he is dead at the point of publication. There are several hypodiegetic stories, told by Zimmer (all the film synopses), Alma (relating Mann's story on the plane), or Hector Mann (diary extract). Thus, Alma also functions as narrator, as she tells the story of Hector Mann's life after his disappearance in 1929. Quite like the technique applied in *The Locked Room*, characters have developed mimetic dimensions; the synthetic is not as foregrounded as in the sketched out situation described in *Ghosts*, giving *The Book of Illusions* a more traditional form. Zimmer is an extra-homodiegetic narrator, but is still able to keep more of a distance to the events than the narrator of *The Locked Room*, probably because he has had the opportunity to change and develop an understanding that this narrator lacks. As its Egyptian and Tibetan models suggest, Zimmer's "Book of the Dead" has provided him with not only a prescription for dealing with death and after-life, but also for how to live his life. Zimmer as narrator has, through his extradiegetic position, achieved an understanding of his own narrative that the characters in the trilogy never develop; accordingly his identity-narrative is restored.

Conclusion: Stories of the Self

In this article, I have tried to show that the struggles with identity formation the characters go through in the four novels, have different outcomes depending on how well the protagonists are able to create and sustain the narratives of their own selves, as well as learn from the stories

of others. There is a progression in the way these four characters relate to their troubles. Quinn is the extreme version. He identifies too much with Stillman and his stories, and gets lost in his obsession; his disappearance seems unavoidable. When he tries to put the fragments of his multiple identities together, he ends up being nobody, like Stillman's son, and all the dangers of deprivation of human contact are exemplified in the turn of this story.

Blue has little understanding of who he is, as well as limited insight into the mystery of his case, but he becomes aware of himself for the first time through the mirror reflection of a narrative identical to his own which leads to a process of self-reflection. Through confrontation with his problematic antagonist, some self-understanding is achieved, and not stagnation and dissolution as for Quinn. The situation is somewhat similar for the nameless narrator of the third novel, who finds that the narrative of his childhood friend is so intertwined with his own that his sense of self is threatened. Fanshawe's stories tell the narrator nothing, and need to be destroyed to free him; the retracing of his friend's story is ended by his tearing of the notebook, which the narrator substitutes for Fanshawe himself. Fanshawe exists through his texts, and destroying the notebook enables the narrator to let go of his obsession and thus return to the world of other people, represented by his family. Both the narrator and Blue begin to move away from their isolation, and relate to other people and to the outside world again.

For Zimmer, Mann's stories, both his biography and his films, help him to return to something. Zimmer's role as a reader of Mann's biographical narrative changes his view of himself, because he can identify with Mann's crisis, and Zimmer is able to break through his isolation. The narrative of another man becomes a mirror of his own problems. The importance of relationships is shown through Zimmer, whose contact with Alma becomes an important factor in his development, unlike the main characters in the trilogy's first two novels, who fail at relationships, and the narrator of the third, who only returns to his wife after the crisis is over. The narrative technique playing with the narrator-narratee relationships reflects the reader's perception of the characters as personae. There seems to be a turn here in Auster's method, parallel to the characters' development; the narratives that are expressed as more coherent for the reader also approach solutions to these characters' identity crises. 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

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forming identities, while the postmodern techniques of narrative self-reflexivity create a possible literary form for these ideas.

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