

I not in Communion with Self: Subjectivity in Auster's City of Glass, Ghosts and The Locked Room

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Abstract. Paul Auster's earlier works playfully confuse identities through multi-layer means of representation. Neither major nor minor characters can independently think of their *self* as a sovereign entity. This paper is aimed to examine, in practice, the linguistic and social mechanisms- employed in three stories of Auster, namely *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*- which are seeking to unsettle the impulse for coherence and oneness of subjectivity. Progression of the research relies on a reading strategy developed through the poststructuralist approaches to text and textuality. At the linguistic level, it is shown that Auster's subject(s) are entrapped in a chain of plural and infinite signification. It is indicated that due to the lack of stability of subject position and game of signifiers in language, we never experience *I* in the authoritative position round the time. Besides, the discussion reveals that identity of Auster's living subjects, in the linguistic and social contexts, is defined and redefined constantly through the existence of *Other* culturally featured.

Key words: self, subjectivity, Auster, post-structuralism, identity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Humanist school of thought has privileged self with sovereignty, coherence, determination of will and purposefulness. In the same way, rationalists place person on a firm ground by justifying his/her existence as being fully present in what he/she thinks, says and does. Within this tradition, human being is viewed as a unified and stable entity and in full communion with him/her self. In their eyes, self is an irrefutable center which one's every will is derived from and man's every intention refers to. In fact, by stating that "I think therefore, I am", Cartesian rationalism wants to lay claim on this unquestionable truth and to construct a transcendental subjectivity, a unifying external point of reference, upon which to assemble this ultimate meaning of being. Through this "essentialized" signified, one is expected to interpret everything, to load willful meaning to objects and concepts, and to construct reality. Metaphysical philosophy preferred this proposition because it identified body with self, and self with subject simultaneously and prevented confusion. Over the past decades, linguists who found a route from the philosophical jargon to literary institutions opened new chapter in cultural studies with identity as a crucial topic.

Contemporary art, however, has posed serious challenges to the classical creed and its operating coherent subject. Non-humanistic studies of language have sought to represent it as less coherent, disjoint and decentered. The role they ascribe to language means to destabilize the subject by depriving it from gaining a unified and sound signification. Terry Eagleton (1996) expounds that "... to us signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not my meaning, indeed, but me: since language is something that I am made out of ..." (p. 130). On the other hand, recent trends contend that the extent to which we suppose our selves as present is itself a plurality of

infinite number of other texts, “inherently unstable” without a center and structure; hence a unified and absolute self is a fiction and I is a locus for conflicting fragments.

In addition to the plurality of agency, the advocates of language entrap subject in a chain of infinite signification. Lack of centrality and instability of position implies its constant flow and failure to anchor. Due to the game of signifiers in language and lack of authoritative subject, we never experience I in the central position round the time. I becomes you as we take turns in conversation, or when you chose to reply to me. I even becomes the absent she or he as the third person is involved in the conversation with my partner. According to Emile Benveniste (1958), these subject positions are containers for the self to be remolded into diverse functions, signifying temporality, impermanency and continuous flow of meaning. Eagleton writes on poststructuralist view of language and argues that “it is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write. Not only can I never be fully present to you, but I can never be fully present to myself either” (p. 130). The game of absence and presence, in this view, discourages self from claiming to harbor.

From a different route, Jacques Lacan (1966) also ventures to upset the illusions for stability of identity. His tool, in deconstructing the rationalist I, also lies in the performance of language and culture. Lacan believes that we and our identity are the construct of language as the language user is born into it and acquires a position within it. According to him, our self and meaning are based on unconscious which has the structure similar to that of language. He suggests that in the process of unconscious development, child enters the Symbolic stage, when he/she loses a feeling of wholeness and of undifferentiated being, hence living with a sense of lack. In the same way, identity of individuals appears, throughout Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* (1988) comprising *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*, to be playfully deficient. To study the correlation between I and self and for testing the hypotheses of this research which is outlined below, the recent theoretical studies on the language and fiction of Auster serve as the experimental grounds. In theory and in practice, it is assumed that ‘If the subject fails to experience presence of being with whatever he/she does and thinks, then it would be an object of incoherence, plurality, temporality and decentered consciousness’.

2 LANGUAGE AND SELF

In *City of Glass*, Auster (1988) from the very outset introduces his protagonist, Quinn, with multiple and confusing identities linguistically featured. Quinn, the detective/writer, lives in his books through the pseudonym of William Wilson, but the private eye of Wilson’s works, Max Work, through his elaborate handling of the cases and through his narrow escapes from dangers, becomes very close to Quinn and little by little becomes present in his life. Quinn calls Work his “interior brother” and “his comrade in solitude” (p. 6). Wilson acts as a bridge to let him enter Work’s realm of existence. Besides, when Wilson is chosen as the name for the author of Quinn’s books, a part of him dies (p. 4). By inventing Wilson and Work, Quinn creates a “triad of selves” which results in the loss of coherence of his identity. In the triad of Quinn-Wilson-Work, “Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself as a dummy and Work was animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise” (p. 6). In this circle of existence, Wilson is a controlling agent with Quinn driven into the unprivileged position of a puppet.

Auster’s picture of personal existence fragmented in the world of language undermines the “logocentric” notion of self as a transcendental signified. Work and Wilson’s roles in Quinn’s life signify loss of integrity of being in the world of words. Auster says Quinn’s influence and power over his personal life gradually fades away as he stops doing whatever he used to do in

the past. Part of him dies and becomes absent, and he does not want to call it back to haunt him again. Through the inclusion of the new parts and exclusion of the dead one, Quinn helps us approach his divided subjectivity. I, once the sovereign reality, is splitted and in conjunction with he, which Quinn uses to refer to his lost part, renders the subjectivity adulterated. His original identity further nears the fringe of non-existence when through a phone call he is persistently referred to as the Paul Auster, a detective. He is asked to be the private eye for someone known as Stillman Jr. By adopting the new name, he is tempted to complicate the web of his self, his existence.

Transformation of the triad of Quinn-Wilson-Work into Paul Auster has its due implications. The day when he gets up and thinks about the appointment that he has set with Stillman Jr., he fancies that “it wasn’t his appointment; it was Paul Auster’s [researcher’s emphasis], and who that person was, he has no idea” (p. 12). Adopting new name and assuming new profession make him change into a new wear and different appearance. On his way to Stillman’s flat, he finds the emerging part of him odd but appealing. On Auster’s side, he finds novelty of livelihood and on Quinn’s side everything seems to be filled with discomfort and displeasure. “To one side of him was park, green in the morning sun, with sharp, fleeting shadows, to the other side was the Frick, white and austere, as if abandoned to the dead” (ibid). The detective does not feel full communion with himself. With Quinn, self, in contrary to the Cartesian postulate, is a refutable center: he thinks, therefore he is not. This is an instance of the reversal of hierarchy and a hole in the subjectivity of Quinn, which is filled with what chance and change offer. Quinn, once the claim for an unquestionable self, now hesitates that his will and origin is ever singular and unique.

In two different occasions, on his way to embark on the case, the detective happens to examine his selfhood to the effect of individuality, but it is a failure. For one, when he opens the notebook to put his initials, DQ for Daniel Quinn, to make the first entry, he finds that he has already lost his “true self” by living brief lives. Quinn muses: “All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster [researcher’s emphasis]” now (p. 40). In the other instance, when he is waiting for Stillman Sr. to arrive at the railway station, Quinn encounters a girl reading his mystery, *Suicide Squeeze*, and fancies that “... it was a book he himself had written”, but immediately William Wilson reappears to claim it his own, “... *Suicide Squeeze* by William Wilson, the first of Max Work novels” (p. 52). By the last pages of *City of Glass*, Quinn’s self, once autonomous and coherent, is divided into fragments. He thinks his names are the signifiers on the printed pages which do not settle on a moment. He thinks “He had come to the end of himself” as “its meaning had been lost” (p. 130). Quinn lived through words and filled the pages with signifiers which not only did not lead to reassertion of an identity but resulted in its vanishing.

In addition to the tale of Quinn, Stillman Jr.’s shaky standing in *City of Glass* is also thematized through his own words. He says that at night I die and I am born in the morning. This reinforces the poststructuralist relativity that identity formation is subject to the temporal and spatial changes. Lacan’s critique of a unified identity is based on the proposition that thinking of a complete and fixed identity is in effect an illusion because one is linguistically and socially bound to the unending reexamination of his/her self. Perhaps, that is why Auster/detective’s client, Stillman Jr., is born anew everyday as a different person. As another example, Stillman Jr. uses language to sway from the authoritative I position to the subsidiary he and you positions, to display its deceptive and playful nature. When Stillman Jr. talks to the private eye, or Auster, about his state in the dark isolated place, he says:

There is the dark then. I [Stillman Jr.] am telling you He [Stillman Jr.] ate with his [Stillman Jr.’s] hand. Excuse me. I mean Peter did. And if I am Peter, so much the better.

That is to say, so much the worse ‘Peter was a boy. They had to teach him everything’ ‘Peter was a good boy. But it was hard to teach him words. His mouth did not work right. And of course he was not all there in his head ... now they to Peter: You [Stillman Jr.] can go now, there’s nothing more we can do for you Peter Stillman you are a human being, they said ... ‘I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name I am I know I will (pp. 16-18)

This strange reversibility of subject position, its constant flow and adjustment, in the example, shows an inherent trait of language. Borrowing Benveniste’s words, while talking together, I refer to my self as I and when you speak to me, you refer to your self as I and to me as you. Even when the third person speaks, he/she refers to himself or herself as the present I and to me as the absent he/she. All these movements and instability of subject position occur in Stillman Jr.’s reference to his self in *City of Glass*. While he speaks to the private eye, depending on the roles and turns that he is given, he amusingly refers to himself as I, me, he, him, his, Peter, you. His standing in the world of words is constantly reversed and the authoritative I is driven into the absent or unprivileged positions. The detective encounters his client’s labyrinth of names and reminds himself of his own, where the game of absence and presence confuses his existence.

With almost equal measures, Blue’s isolated self, in *Ghosts* (1988), also communicates through words. His task of watching Black across from his own apartment, immersed in monotonous activities of reading and writing reports, makes him discover the hidden sides of his self. Blue is isolated, lives and communicates with the outside world through language, words, reports and books. In such a state, he starts “a state of mind ... as one of ambivalence and conflict ... It puzzles him that he should switch so rapidly from one state to another” (Auster, 1988, p. 156). Furthermore, the language by means of which Blue’s consciousness and thinking ego once proved themselves present do not tally exactly with the things they describe. That is to say, the language of once sovereign self, now, cannot articulate itself as present and purposeful. The narrator comments on Blue’s state of mind, saying that “Until now [the words] never impeded his view.... It’s as though his words, instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the world, have induced them to disappear” (pp. 146-7).

As we are presented, Blue does not have access to reality as he did in the pre-verbal life, in the Imaginary stage as Lacan puts it. The emergence of lack results in a “desire” in Blue, which virtually makes him enter Black’s room to discover the facts in close and in person. Auster preferably calls the fresh feeling in Blue “a fresh torment of self-doubt” (p.186). Hence, the quasi-detective narratives of *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* render the foundations of the traditional mysteries weak by refuting the doubtless, sovereign consciousness and irrefutable center of the detective and his selfhood. Auster’s detectives are living in the linguistic and social contexts and their identities are, as well, defined and redefined constantly through the existence of Other.

3 OTHER AND SELF

Blue in *Ghosts* appears behind the masks of name and fake features touched with the life of Black. He grows proximity and fondness to Black and his steps fall in harmony with him while they are still opponents and far apart (p. 156). All this is evolved through words, through the task of writing about the life and behavior of Black. Immersed in the thought and passions of Black, Blue realizes the mirage of feeling freedom and autonomy of standing on himself. With Blue, we also start to realize that identity is not an inscription carved on a

headstone to brand one forever, but one's individuality is incessantly redefined within the context of sociolinguistic arena. Our discussion on Blue's state of being is, in principle, an extension of Lacan's theoretical position in that the Imaginary about the wholeness of one's self is shattered when he/she steps into the Symbolic stage where the world of essential being is viewed through verbal, social and cultural lenses. Black's words are revealing when Blue ventures out into his place to investigate him in close.

Black, who is the subject of surveillance across from the room where Blue resides, talks to Blue about his job and says he is a detective and tasked with watching someone opposite his room. To Blue's amazement, Black asserts that the guy knows that he is being watched and he has got along with it "Because he needs me.... He needs my eyes looking at him. He needs me to prove he's alive" (p. 181). According to Lacan's premise, Blue's existence is realized through what is outside of his self and the possibility of the other's existence. As a matter of fact, Blue refers to himself as I with an implicit reference to Black as he. When Black talks of Blue's need and desire for his eyes, he is cognizant of Blue's mission for a year during which he has lived through Black's life, has developed fondness for him and has been sympathetic to Black's emotions. This makes Blue escape the bonds of his tasks to get closer to Black, otherwise he will suffer a "lack". When he knocks at the door of Black under the guise of fuller brush man, Blue feels "of standing inside those four walls, of breathing the same air of Black.... The door will open, and after that Black will be inside him forever" (p. 184). Confusion of identities in Auster's tales is further resonated in the story of *The Locked Room*.

The story begins with narrator's words about Fanshawe: "He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am" (p. 199). The complementary role of Fanshawe, the rival/friend, to the narrator, from the very outset highlights the uncertain and unstable position of the subject and his dependence on Other. The unnamed narrator, when reviews his memories of childhood with Fanshawe, laments for those days when the life was under the influence and undeniable hidden power of Fanshawe who was a "mysterious center of hiddenness" (p. 210). The narrator's nostalgia resurfaces when he muses:

We lived next door to each other, and our fenceless backyard merged into an unbroken stretch of lawn, gravel and dirt, as though we belonged to the same household... neither of us had a brother: ideal conditions therefore, with nothing to stand between us we were born less than a week apart, and spent our babyhoods in the backyard together... standing up and taking steps on the same day.... My mother recalls that we were so attended to each other that once, when we were six, we asked if it was possible for men to get married. (p. 213)

In the story, this is Fanshawe who confuses the identity of the narrator and defines it. To repeat Lacanian theory of de-centered and dependent identity, a child leaving behind the Imaginary state of wholeness and unity of self enters the Symbolic through Mirror stage. The misrecognition of assuming one and total the outside and inside, I and Others, in the mirror stage become the basis for misinterpreting our self as the center of the world. However, when the individual enters the Symbolic order, the role of outside or Other as a separate entity emerges by the representational systems of language and society. The split in oneness results in a desire, a longing, and a lack which needs to be fulfilled.

The need to join Fanshawe forces the narrator to go through a period of risky experience. Fanshawe has become the invisible force which represents him through a number of things, including his unpublished books. The attempt to write a biography on Fanshawe develops into the attempt to trace him, even to Paris. Fanshawe's dream and desire have so much haunted him that everything has been reduced to a single impulse: nothing would be settled until the narrator could find him (p. 269). However, this attempt is a failure, and even though he gets

closer to Fanshawe, he cannot go inside him or let Fanshawe inside himself. In Paris, the fancy of creating an arbitrary Fanshawe causes him to be beaten to death. Whether it is arbitrary or real Fanshawe, it will not be touched again. The interesting point is that the parted self is always blinking as a desirable nostalgia for him.

In undifferentiated Imaginary world of childhood, they were both together and one. Ideally, there was no imagination of anything or anybody to part them, although later when they grew up and entered the Symbolic stage, this differentiation emerged: Fanshawe shocked him “by his willingness to jump into dangerous situation” of adventures (p. 215) which the narrator detest. He thinks of Fanshawe’s adventures as a “step toward proving oneself- but for me it was only a sordid, a miserable lapse into something I was not. Still I continued to go along with him... sharing in quest but not quiet part of it...” (ibid). This is where unconscious comes to being and repressive aspects of the Symbolic stage suppress the sovereignty of consciousness. Through the tongue of his narrator, Auster describes the instance as the emergence of incoherence in self: “as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence” (p. 247).

4 CONCLUSION

This research aimed at investigating the solidarity between the linguistic and social components of identity, namely, I and self, in three stories of postmodern writer, Paul Auster, in the light of contemporary theories on language. The study was conducted in two parts. Firstly, it was shown that Auster’s portrayal of identity is a presentation of fragmented subject in the world of language, which undermines the logocentric notion of self as a transcendental signified. From the poststructural perspective, Auster’s rewording of subjectivity was a refutation of the Cartesian proposition, and readjustment of it into: he thinks, therefore he is not. His characters, contained in the world of words and language, wake up anew every day and give in to what chance and change offer. The reason is signifiers proliferate incessantly and his agents are lost in the postponement of signified(s). Besides, with reference to Lacan’s theory on language and development of unconsciousness, we showed that since Auster’s detectives are living in the verbal and social contexts, their identity formation is bound with what is outside their selves. It was discussed that I, in Auster’s narratives, is more in communion with Other than with self. Therefore, uncertainty and instability of subject position and the sense of lack, which the rules of verbal stage of life impose on his characters, was an overwhelming trend in the space of his fiction.

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