

A Thread Of Manipulation & Staged Chance

An interpretation of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*

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Introduction

The first time I read Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* I felt rather confused. It was difficult to make sense of it as individual novels as well as a unit. At a first read it seems almost pointless and lacking of a proper ending. The books each start with one mystery and end with several others. *The New York Trilogy* is divided in three novels; *City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*. It is widely recognized as a postmodern non-conventional detective novel. James Peacock in *Understanding Paul Auster* explains the deviating genre, “[w]hereas traditional detective fiction tends to work toward endings that answer questions, the endings of [...] these tales are inconclusive” (44). W.Lawrence Hogue in *Postmodern American Literature And Its Other* takes it one step further by stating that “Auster uses the detective story to subvert the conventions and expectations of narrative realism by resisting closure and resolution and by unveiling ‘more mysteries’” (66). Realizing that *The New York Trilogy* is no ordinary detective novel it was time to unravel the secret of this book once and for all.

Upon re-reading the trilogy with a critical eye certain patterns started taking shape. I realized that despite the constant references to “chance” as a ruling element throughout the entire trilogy, there was more to be discovered beneath the surface. Initially there seems to be a case of “chance vs. fate”, mainly due to the protagonists’ inability of solving their so called cases, when in reality it is a case of staged chance vs. manipulation. My thesis statement is that *The New York Trilogy* is based on manipulation (by the co-protagonists i.e. Fanshawe, Black/White and Stillman Sr.) rather than the explicit chance events that Auster is so fond of. I think that Auster confuses and misleads the reader with the strong emphasis put on chance and the randomness of

the plots. This eventually leads the readers to the anticlimactic endings where we accept the intended randomness out of confusion. What is more, I think that all three novels are one, in that they each tell different sides of one story while remaining essentially the same, thus leading to the conclusion that the protagonists and co-protagonists of all three novels are in reality only two people, i.e. the narrator and Fanshawe (in *The Locked Room*). Moreover, to truly understand this book there has to be an analysis of the motivations on both the protagonists' and co-protagonists' part. In my opinion this is due to the narrator's lifelong identity crisis as well as his need of validation and what he *imagines* to be Fanshawe's co-dependence, because after all it is his story we are told and not Fanshawe's.

I have divided my chapters into the following three parts. Chapter one, "Music of Chance", will illustrate how the chance events are presented, how they build up the mystery, how they intentionally confuse and mislead the protagonists and consequently also the readers. Chapter two, "Man In The Dark", will be dedicated to discussing how the trilogy with the help of the third novel, *The Locked Room*, makes sense as a unit, how the protagonists and co-protagonists in all three books are in fact only two people, the narrator and Fanshawe in the last novel, and how only after coming to this realization we can detect the pattern of continuous manipulation throughout the whole book. Finally in the third chapter, "Invisible", I will share my theory on the root of the manipulations and the underlying reason to why the main protagonists let things carry on instead of walking away from these peculiar situations.

Chapter 1 – Music of Chance

As mentioned in the introduction, *The New York Trilogy* is no typical detective novel since it deviates from the conventional detective novel genre. Harold Bloom refers to this novel, in *Paul Auster*, as an “anti-detective fiction” (97). Anne M. Holzapfel, in *The New York Trilogy: Whodunnit? Tracking The Structure Of Paul Auster’s Anti Detective Novels*, describes this as a “parody of the genre” (23) and even Paul Auster has compared his use of the detective novel in *The New York Trilogy* to Cervantes’ use of the romance of chivalry (Holzapfel 27).

“It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not” (3). Chance is the first thing introduced in *The New York Trilogy* in order to set the tone and to let us know what to expect. Auster presents each novel by introducing its main protagonist, the so called case in question and its circumstances which at first sound simple. There is an old man to follow, a mystery man to watch, and some literary work to help publish. Quinn, Blue, and the narrator are certain they are able to “solve” the cases at hand. What happens next is a series of bizarre occurrences which, if Auster has his way, can only be explained by chance. Brendan Martin quotes Auster on his recurring use of chance in *Paul Auster’s Postmodernity*:

Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives... [sic]. To put it another way: truth is stranger than fiction. What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in. (36)

In *City of Glass* Auster creates an air of surreal mystery by presenting us with the wrong number leading to a case, the strange meeting with young Peter Stillman who is so fragile- and pale-looking that “the effect was almost transparent” (15), and the odd encounter of the two identical Stillmans at the train station. This is perplexing to such an illogical extent that subsequently, as there is no sensible explanation given, we are left with no real choice but to trust the detective and let him take the lead. The problem is that Quinn becomes so obsessed with following Stillman that he practically loses his mind. Initially it is not so obvious that Quinn is losing touch with reality. When Quinn traces out Stillman’s steps all over New York the readers loyally insist on the relevance of this theory because after all he is the hero of this novel and if he is lost then so are we. In an attempt to disregard the element of chance and the futility of the case, Quinn slowly becomes paranoid. As Bloom says, "Quinn imagines that this new, criminal-free world is governed only by ‘fate’. Fate for Quinn implies the acceptance of uncertainty, the slackening of his fierce detectival desire for order" (67). All the while the readers are uncertain of what and whom to trust and unwittingly turn equally paranoid, because we cannot lose faith in Quinn when we have followed him this far.

There is a good chance that Auster wants us to accept chance as the ruling element in this story so fiercely that he contrasts chance and fate in such an extreme way that he has Quinn detecting unlikely “signs” (110), using words such as “fate” and “destined” (111) to make the readers feel the intensity of Quinn’s desperation and paranoia, “[i]t 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”(111). Naturally, Auster wants us to bear in mind what Quinn has told us at the very beginning of his novel, “[m]uch later [...] he was able to conclude that nothing was real except chance” (3). At the end of the novel the readers have sadly come to terms with the possibility of the

pointlessness of the case while simultaneously going over the details to try and find a different end result.

The case of Blue vs. Black and White in *Ghosts* is quite different. In this novel chance as a ruling element is not as conspicuous since it is not uncommon for a detective to be hired to follow or observe someone. “The case seems simple enough. [...] and this one seems no different, perhaps even easier than most” (135). On the contrary the mystery revolves around the true identity of White and his reasons for hiring a detective. Blue, bored with the tedious task of observation instead of action, turns inwards and spends most of his time either reading or being, “increasingly introspective” (Peacock, 44). After a few staged encounters between Blue and white, we find out that Black and White is the one and same person. The reason for the case was that Black needed Blue to watch him in order to prove that he is alive. The real mystery of this case is that White/Black hired Blue, could it have been any other detective or did it have to be Blue? Auster tends to perplex and puzzle his readers; he likes to lead us down a path that may or may not be wrong, depending on which clues we follow. Holzapfel describes it as follows:

It can be assumed that, in order to distract the readers, Auster places the references as a red herring which is a traditional detective novel convention. If the readers follow these traces on all levels, they will be led away from the actual text- as an author-detective, using the clues as aids for detection, the readers then write a new text over the novel which will consequently become illegible. The unambiguous meaning becomes blurred. (52)

The trouble with this type of decoy is that the readers know however much or little as the detective knows. Trying to outsmart the detective and keeping an eye out for possibly revealing

details may be another scheme of Auster's intending to send us off on a wild goose chase. What happens is according to Holzapfel "the reader has taken over the work of detection in the reading process. And the detective has become the one to be observed" (43). This means that alongside the story, we also have to keep an eye on the detective, thus making our labour twofold. Yet the truth is that Auster does not give us any more clues than he deems necessary to keep us in check and follow the detective. Because even though the readers return to the novels for a second detective reading we realize that there is no other path available to us than the one the author has pre-designed for the detectives. And this is where we reach Auster's intended randomness. If he had truly dispersed his clues throughout novel one and two then surely the readers will detect these in the retrace but that only leads us once again to the cul-de-sac of this trilogy. These cases happen to the detectives and it is made impossible for us to trace the clues anywhere else.

The element of chance is even less prevalent in the third and final novel *The Locked Room*. As expected there is some mystery involved but concerning Fanshawe, the role he has played in the narrator's life and their relationship from the narrator's point of view. Since in this last part the protagonist and co-protagonist actually know each other and have a history, the sense of chance and randomness is largely removed. However, a few mysteries do emerge as to why Fanshawe disappeared, why he reveals to the narrator that he is alive and why the narrator will not and cannot let go of his obsessive search for Fanshawe, "the fact that I did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe, that he was inside me day and night for all those months [...] I was haunted perhaps, I was even possessed (242). This novel fades away just like the former ones and we are left with the impression that the main character walks away with some kind of understanding, it is just not revealed what that is in so many words.

The effect of these tree novels is one of immense perplexity. They leave us with a sense of emptiness as well as a need for closure that we expect and desire to be revealed at some point or another, and the longer it takes the more infuriating the uncertainty. All three novels fade out with no solution or real answers. The protagonists simply walk away and the readers are left to their own devices to conjure up what happens to the characters after the curtain falls. In Brendan Martin's *Paul Auster's Postmodernity*, Auster says, "[t]he one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it's the reader who writes the book and not the writer" (129).

The readers will not reach any answers by investigating *City of Glass* or *Ghosts*, the clues are all available to us in *The Locked Room*. Once we understand *The Locked Room* we can also begin to make sense of the previous novels in the trilogy and how they belong together as a unit. This is what I will discuss in the next chapter, namely how *The Locked Room* explains the other two novels, how it echoes them both in details and the overall form of the story while simultaneously standing out as a single novel. In other words, all three novels are in fact one and the same told from different perspectives.

Chapter 2 – Man In The Dark

The Locked Room holds the key to *Ghosts* and *City of Glass*. Anyone who has read *The New York Trilogy* will agree that the novels' apparent similarities are in that they are all anti detective novels, they all tell the story of a young man struggling to make sense of his new found situation and end with no real solution. The key is to keep in mind what we are told in the very beginning of *City of Glass*, "The question is not the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell" (3). The secret is that all three novels are one and the same, this means that the protagonists, Quinn, Blue and the narrator, are one, just as the co-protagonists, Stillman Sr., Black/White and Fanshawe are one. Once we realize this, we are able to discern the pattern of manipulation running through the trilogy and bringing the stories together as a unit. Only then is it possible to disregard Auster's so called chance events.

Upon reading *The Locked Room*, we begin to notice details that echo the first two novels without really understanding why; Peter Stillman, Quinn the detective, Fanshawe's red notebook, mother and son equation, and literary references to *Don Quixote* and *Walden*. The truth is that this last novel echoes the previous two in more ways than in mere details. Towards the end of *The Locked Room*, before the narrator meets with Fanshawe in Boston, he admits to being the true author of the entire trilogy:

The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. The same holds for the two books that come before it, *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is

about. I don't claim to have solved any problems. [...] I have been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle. (294)

With this confession everything falls into place. Some may not be convinced, questioning the remaining loose ends, not to mention the logical connection between the narrator and true author of all three books. The point is that as mentioned in chapter one, Auster likes to leave a portion of the interpretation to the reader to enable us to create our own connections. Of course, by accepting that the story is not in the words but in the struggle, there is no need for practical details, it is not crucial how the narrator wanted to tell his story, the important thing is that this way the trilogy as a unit *does* make sense.

Having cleared up that the narrator is the author of all three novels we can easily assume that he is the same person as Quinn and Blue. In the same fashion of reasoning Fanshawe is Stillman Sr. and White/Black. We can now retrace the narrator's tracks in all three stories and draw two parallel lines from *The Locked Room* to *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. With this point of view then it is not difficult to see the different aspects of the narrator's experience. In both first novels his evident frustration is connected to his inability to change his own situation and the sense of being ensnared due to unknown reasons. In *City of Glass* the narrator having lost his family – like he nearly does in the *The Locked Room* – becomes so obsessed with his case that he ends up living on the streets, losing his apartment and eventually even his mind. “It was gone, he was gone, everything was gone” (125). Whereas in *Ghosts* he does not lose his wits until the end when he is so provoked by the ongoing isolation, the emptiness and the purposeless waste of his time and energy, he becomes so utterly enraged that he gives his Fanshawe such a severe thrashing that we can assume him dead:

Black tries to resist, tries to struggle against Blue, but Blue is too strong for him, all crazy with the passion of his anger, as though turned into someone else, and as the first blows begin to land on Black's face and groin and stomach, the man can do nothing, and not long after that he's out cold on the floor. But that does not prevent Blue from continuing his assault, battering the unconscious Black with his feet, picking him up and banging his head on the floor, pelting his body with one punch after another. [...] If he's alive now, Blue thinks, it won't be for long. And if he's dead, then so be it. (194-195)

Killing Fanshawe is something the narrator has desired to do ever since he slept with his mother, Mrs Fanshawe, "I was fucking out of hatred, and I turned it into an act of violence, grinding away at this woman as though I wanted to pulverize her. [...] sexual desire can also be the desire to kill"(266-267).

In Peacock's opinion "[a]n underlying tension in [Auster's] work is that an artist is someone who creates an ordered universe, yet has a responsibility to incorporate random incidents. In such a structured environment, however, nothing is ever truly random" (11). True to this quote, in Auster's *The New York Trilogy* there really is no such thing as randomness. Starting at the end, i.e. *The Locked Room*, it is clear that Fanshawe is the one who has been setting the stage for the narrator during the course of the story. From the very beginning we know that prior to Fanshawe vanishing, he instructed Sophie to contact the narrator if anything should happen to him. In their final meeting Fanshawe confesses that his plan was to find a husband for Sophie and a father for her baby. He knows the narrator so well that he was certain he would fall for her. "It had to work. I didn't pick just anyone, you know" (308). Fanshawe waits until the narrator and Sophie are perfectly happy to send him a shocking letter revealing that he is indeed alive. In this

reality, Quinn is the detective that was spying on Fanshawe (later Stillman Sr) who turned everything around:

He thought he was following me, but in fact I was following him. [...] I got away – wriggled right out of his arms. [...] It was like playing a game. I led him along, leaving clues for him everywhere, making it impossible for him not to find me. But I was watching him the whole time, and when the moment came, I set him up, and he walked straight into my trap. (307)

He is always one step ahead. Even when the narrator does everything in his power to find his old friend by travelling all the way to France and meeting with all the people he might ever have known, he still does not find Fanshawe. “He was gone – and I was gone along with him” (294). He disappeared when he wanted to disappear and will only be found when he wants to be found. Fanshawe becomes the one remaining and ruling element in contrast with Auster’s staged random events. In Dennis Barone’s words, in *Beyond The Red Notebook*, “[Fanshawe] becomes the invisible force of inevitability, one very much like fate, guiding the narrator's movements and mental stability”(90). Fanshawe is to the narrator such an awesome force to be reckoned with that he is even compared to the greatest inevitability in life, death;

This seemed inevitable to me, and rather than deny it anymore, rather than delude myself with the thought that I could ever get rid of Fanshawe, I tried to prepare myself for it, tried to make myself ready for anything. [...] Fanshawe became inevitable, [...] I learned to accept this. I learned to live with him in the same way I lived with the thought of my own death. Fanshawe himself was not death – but he was like death, and he functioned as a trope for death inside me. (301)

The narrator as the true author of all three novels turns Fanshawe into Stillman Sr. and Black/White. First he is posed as the enigmatic Stillman, the academic and creator of words, who becomes the reason why Quinn ends up in the streets having lost everything he had, and next he is the person who with no real reason imprisons Blue for months on end in an apartment.

This discovery sheds light on the narrator's experience of the effect that Fanshawe has had on his life but not vice versa. What we are told in each novel is the narrator's version of different aspects of his understanding of the occurrences. It helps us understand that there is no restored order, no real ending to any of the novels, because the narrator himself is still struggling with what happened. And so in the end *that* is the story which we are told, the struggle itself, not the outcome of it. This trilogy is the narrator's way of saying goodbye to Fanshawe who meant so much to him that he nearly ruined his own life to get close to him. The narrator has depicted Fanshawe as someone who has purposely set him up from beginning to the end. We must remember that what we know about Fanshawe is through somebody else's portrayal, we may never know for sure what Fanshawe had planned and for what reasons, but in the narrator's version Fanshawe is a master of manipulation and a force equal to fate and death, leaving him helpless and unable to control his choices.

With hindsight we can see that the narrator is the one responsible for his own choices that eventually lead him to the near brink of destruction. In chapter three I will discuss in detail how the narrator made these poor choices due to his lifelong identity and how he imagines Fanshawe to have needed him to an equal extent because he too felt invisible.

Chapter 3 – Invisible

Having unveiled the keys to unlocking the secret of *The New York Trilogy*, we now perceive the faux chance events as illusions to hide the web of manipulations in order to entrap the narrator, Quinn and Blue. However, we also established in the previous chapter that these manipulations more than likely only exist in the narrator's psyche. After all he is the sole narrator of these novels. Therefore taking into consideration his colourful story and depiction of Fanshawe and the narrator's different versions of them both, it is probably safe to conclude that the narrator is not the most reliable source. In all three novels the narrator indirectly blames Fanshawe through his portrayals for having manipulated him when in reality the choices were his own, Fanshawe merely presented him with the opportunities. He could have walked away at any time. So, why does the narrator continue to chase Fanshawe/Stillman/White/Black?

The narrator has a strange obsession with Fanshawe that started developing in early childhood, perhaps initially as simple admiration;

There was something so attractive about him that you always wanted him beside you, as if you could live within his sphere and be touched by what he was. He was there for you, and yet at the same time he was inaccessible. You felt there was a secret core in him that could never be penetrated, a mysterious centre of hiddenness [sic]. To imitate him was somehow to participate in that mystery, but it was also to understand that you could never really know him. (210)

But admiration easily turns into imitation. The narrator always aspires to imitate Fanshawe; as children they looked so alike that even Mrs Fanshawe could not tell them apart, as adolescents

they both lost their virginity to the same prostitute, and as an adult the narrator went down the same professional path as Fanshawe, only without the talent. “If envy is too strong a word for what I am trying to say, then I would call it a suspicion, a secret feeling that Fanshawe was somehow better than I was. [...] he was more himself than I could ever hope to be” (209).

The narrator has for so long tried to imitate Fanshawe that without him he feels lost, therefore it is only natural for him to step in to Fanshawe’s proverbial shoes and take over his role as husband and father. Basically the narrator is taking over the role of Fanshawe. This charade is explained by an identity crisis that often forms part of Auster’s works. According to Carsten Springer, in *Crises, The Works of Paul Auster*, “It could be argued that Auster’s protagonists [...] are always potentially receptive to entering an identity crisis. [...] This happens when they suffer the loss of a close person” (21-22). In all three novels the protagonists lose someone significant; in *City of Glass* Quinn has lost his wife and son, in *Ghosts* Blue has lost his long time mentor Brown, and in *The Locked Room* the narrator loses Fanshawe in knowing that he has vanished. Despite the fact that the narrator has not seen Fanshawe for years he still means a great deal to him. “The truth is far less simple than I would like it to be. That I loved Fanshawe, that he was my closest friend, that I knew him better than anyone else – these are facts, and nothing I say can ever diminish them” (209).

The narrator has imitated Fanshawe for so long that Fanshawe has become a part of his own identity, as he has probably never given himself the chance to develop one of his own. In consequence losing Fanshawe is like losing himself and his purpose in life. “It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am. [...] He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself” (199). Even his reaction to

Fanshawe committing suicide is quite unexpectedly intense; “Fanshawe had used me up, and as I heard him breathing on the other side of the door, I felt as if the life were being sucked out of me”(312).

In all three novels Fanshawe is depicted as the one responsible for the meaningless cases. What the narrator fails to comprehend is that he can stop the chase whenever he wants to, yet he chooses to continue. This echoes the narrator’s reflection on their adolescent “weekend on the bum” (215), proving that this is not a new pattern of behavior for him, “for me it was something sordid, a miserable lapse into something I was not. Still, I continued to go along with him, a befuddled witness, sharing in the quest but not quite part of it, an adolescent Sancho astride my donkey, watching my friend do battle with himself” (215). As the adult who has taken over the role of Fanshawe, even though it still is not really who he is, he has also become Don Quixote; one who follows a crazy old man all over New York City, writing meaningless reports and chasing his own ghost all the way to France. Only there is no Sancho Panza to watch over him.

We know the narrator’s reasons for carrying on with the charade, but we cannot possibly know Fanshawe’s since it is the narrator’s story we are told from only his point of view. Even the narrator is oblivious to what goes on inside Fanshawe’s head but that does not stop him from speculating as he so often had to do during their childhood, “I stood there waiting for Fanshawe to come up, trying to imagine what he was thinking, for a brief moment trying to see what he was seeing”(221). As readers we are easily deceived by the narrator who puts false words into White/Black’s mouth saying that he needs Blue, i.e. Fanshawe needs the narrator, to prove that he is alive (181). By remembering that this is all in the narrator’s mind, that these words are fictional we comprehend that the whole book is his way of dealing with and coming to terms with what

happened. As far as we know, according to the information given by the narrator, Fanshawe lives in his own head and has no genuine need for other people, much less the narrator.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been to discover the secrets of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* and to understand it better by putting the novels into context with one another. The main idea is that all three novels are one and that the main protagonists are only two people. This means that Quinn, Blue, and the narrator are only the narrator, and Stillman Sr, Black/White and Fanshawe are only Fanshawe. The ruling element of this single three-part-novel is not Auster's pet theme "chance", but the prevalent pattern throughout the entire story is a case of manipulation by Fanshawe, as imagined by the narrator. The point of the stories then is not so much to narrate a concrete incident but to cope with a lifelong struggle and crises that have only materialized in the span of a few short years.

Chapter one illustrates how Auster places the convincing chance events as red herrings on misguided paths that are in reality pre-destined for the detectives, as well as the reader who makes a fourth detective, thus making it impossible for the existence of a different outcome. Chapter two proves that *The Locked Room* reflects *City of Glass* and *Ghosts* putting the novels into perspective. It is made clear that they all tell the story of a *struggle* and since the narrator himself is still in the process of the aftermath a concrete ending is inconsequential. Chapter three discusses the narrator's own accountability for his near ruin despite his constant and obsessive blaming of Fanshawe. This is chalked up to the narrator's lifelong identity crisis rendering him as an unreliable source.

In conclusion, the three Fanshawes shown to the readers is not necessarily the real Fanshawe but the one inside the narrator's head. The narrator has assembled the first two

Fanshawe's (Stillman Sr and Black/White) by putting bits and pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle from Fanshawe's last confession in Boston and his own blurry understanding of the incidents. Everything we know has been depicted by the narrator who, in adulthood as well as in childhood, has never been able to really get close to Fanshawe in any other way than in mere speculation. And even in the end we cannot tell truth from fiction because Fanshawe neither confirms nor rejects the narration. So in the end, despite the narrator's portrayal of Fanshawe as the chief agent of his misfortunes, we cannot trust this to be completely true, since a partial story is never entirely convincing.

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