

Echoes of American Romance in Paul Auster's Postmodern Narrative

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The romance as a literary form was the most suitable narrative genre for early nineteenth-century fiction writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose object of fiction-writing was to seek the neutral territory between the Actual and the Imaginary, reality and fantasy. To him as well as other contemporary romancers, the romance was not the means to escape oppressive reality into a fanciful fairy-land, but rather a form of narrative to “present” other possibilities of more reality or truth lurking in everyday life by giving “latitude” of imagination and blending it with reality than that which the novel would claim to “represent.” The unpardonable sin for a romancer, as Hawthorne claimed, was thus not to indulge in his imagination or fiction, which was also harshly denounced in America at the time, but to “swerve aside the truth of the human heart.” It seems that the works of Paul Auster, one of the most popular postmodern writers today, shows much resonance with this narrative form of the “conservative romance,” to cite the definition by Michael Bell for distinguishing it from Jamesean “radical romance,” when he insists in arguing for reality of his fiction that “[e]ven though the situations aren't strictly realistic, they might follow some realistic psychology.” (*The Red Notebook*, 109) Auster regards himself as a “realist” “in the strictest sense of the word,” but his sense of reality seems less based on physical than psychological plausibility.

In whatever way he may commit himself to fictional realism, Auster is usually designated as a representative of “postmodern” writers in that he is very conscious of the fictionality of fiction in a contemporary world where the boundary between reality and fiction itself is obscured by developments in technology and science and the appearance of “virtual reality” they constitute. The collapse of reliable boundaries is thus a characteristic of our time when the system of values or beliefs we esteemed as essential for our understanding the world and ourselves is suspected to be just an assembly of man's narratives or a fiction. Hence Lyotard's epoch-making announcement of “the crisis of narratives” as valid unifying systems. Such is the unstable reality of our contemporary world that Auster may well insist that his works are realistic however mysterious, bizarre

or extraordinary the situations his characters may be plunged into.

Or one might argue that his fiction can be categorized as magic realism which “refers broadly to that fiction propelled by the tension between realistic elements and fabulous, magical, or fantastic elements.” (Chamberlain 7) Lori Chamberlain also continues to say that the fiction of Pynchon or Barth, who are also called postmodern writers, “integrates both an attention to the real and to the power of the imagination to construct that reality.” This need for integration of reality and imagination in fiction is also shared with Hawthorne and other contemporary and succeeding American romancers. Whether Paul Auster can be placed in the position of an exemplary heir of this tradition of American romance is the main question this paper will deal with, for, as anyone can easily observe by the author’s direct references to the romancers of American Romanticism such as Poe, Melville or Hawthorne in most of his fiction, he seems more conscious of and influenced by them in his fiction writing than any other American writers of postmodernism would willingly admit.

According to Richard Chase, whose generic distinction between American romance and the British novel has been often cited, the novel puts its focus on portraying characters or their societies and manners while the romance prefers events to characters; action in the romance is freer from actual probabilities than the novel, and their characters show more abstract or symbolic emotion; marvelous or extraordinary events take place in the romance, and these are often taken as a matter of course there. Readers can see these characteristics of American romance apply to many of Auster’s works when they find very mysterious, sometimes even unrealistic events or situations more conspicuously present rather than any individual personalities. For example, in *The New York Trilogy*, which appears at least partly to employ a conventional narrative form of detective novels, the attention of readers, or perhaps of the author himself seems to be paid less to the characters than to the sequence of events which eventually leads to one phenomenon – disappearance. The mysteries of all three fictions in this trilogy, *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1987), circle around this one phenomenon and various enigmatic characters seem to exit, or rather cease to exist, only to highlight this ultimate event, which then provides most of Auster’s narrators with the decisive motive for their act of story-telling. “The question is the story itself,” says the anonymous narrator in *City of Glass*. Stating that “[w]ho he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance,” the narrator informs us

little about our protagonist Quinn, a writer of detective novels, who by chance plays a role of detective himself and becomes involved in a mystery, which after all leads him to no solution but only to loss of everything including his own physical existence as well as his identity. (*The New York Trilogy*, 3) Even at the end of the story, both the narrator and readers do not get any clue to what really happened to the characters but are only left with a story in the form of Quinn's red notebook in which all events which claim to have happened are narrated. Despite—or perhaps due to—the narrator's announcement that “[s]ince this story is based entirely on facts, the author feels it his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention,” we may become more and more conscious of the fictionality of this story as it develops. (*The New York Trilogy*, 113) Or more precisely, we may come to feel the deceptive nature of the boundary we have drawn between fiction and reality. This blurring of boundaries was also, as mentioned above, the purpose of fiction writing for romancers like Hawthorne, and perhaps this may be applied to Paul Auster to some extent. Auster's fiction, especially this trilogy, is also full of characters who seem to take on abstract images or symbolical meanings. Even in *The Locked Room*, the one least abstract in this trilogy, it appears that the object of the author's writing is not to “depict” characters or their surrounding society but to “narrate” the puzzling situations they are driven into or some ideas and concepts they represent.

As many critics have often mentioned, this tendency that a situation or a concept offers a start point for fiction-writing is the very American tradition of romance. As one of the most influential postmodern writer Jorge Luis Borges said how different Hawthorne's creative process—which begins not with characters but with situations—is from those of European writers, to “narrate” situations rather than to “depict” characters has been a more dominant mode of fiction writing for American writers than for European counterparts. Some traces of the tradition of narrating of American romance are clearly found in American postmodern literature. James Tuttleton, for instance, emphasizes in the introduction to Kuehl's *Alternate Worlds* the tie of “antirealism” of postmodern writers to the tradition of American literature, especially to that of American romance, while admitting the internationalism or universality these writers successfully aim to gain.

However, before continuing to examine the relation between postmodern fiction and the American romances of early nineteenth-century, other historical factors need to be taken into account. When we find the strange flatness or certain abstractness of Auster's

characters or seeming absurdity of their actions in *The New York Trilogy*, they remind us of some absurd novels of the sixties. As Auster himself often mentions Kafka and Becket as the writers who influenced him, the effect of existential views of man and the world is a feature which cannot be overlooked in his fiction. In the absurd literature, too, we find the same flat, two-dimensional nature of fictional characters which may reflect the time when human experience began to seem fragmented, uncertain, and unpredictable. Hirotsugu Saito attributes this two-dimensional nature of absurd heroes to the authors' conscious characterization to show the situations in which life is more and more taken over by inhuman powers. "The authors of absurd literature imagined grotesque, comical clowns or created empty and insubstantial figures because they could not find any value in man or even suspected the act of finding values itself." (Saito 176)

Indeed uncertainty about the subject or skepticism about the subjectivity of individuals are seen everywhere in this contemporary world. Absurd literature often show this unreliability of the world with the sense of human helplessness which results from their feeling that man can no longer control incomprehensible events in this absurd universe but just are tossed around by them. As Malcolm Bradbury mentions in discussing American postmodern literature from the sixties to the seventies as a representation of the contemporary American society, these novels evoke images of power or system and of man's desperate struggle to fight against it. Auster's fictional world also contains this kind of thorough desperation and man's sense of isolation which arise partly from his recognition shared with other postmodern writers that language is an inadequate medium for human communication and thus for understanding of each other. If we find a difference between absurd heroes in American literature and Auster's protagonists, it seems to lie in whether they have the spirit of rebellion against such reality. Galloway, the author of *Absurd Hero in Ameircan Fiction*, defines the absurd by maintaining that "the concept of rebellion is fundamental to the absurd" and that "absurdity becomes a defiance of the universe."

A world which seemed to have order now has only a wearing rhythm. Some are lulled back to sleep by that rhythm, but those who resist it and remain awake, are the ones who must finally with heightened consciousness, choose between suicide and life. (Galloway 10)

Auster's characters may also hear this lulling rhythm. However, though most of his protagonists are dispossessed of things or people (their family in most cases, especially their

fathers), and surely some of them drive themselves into non-existence, they do not necessarily give impressions of desperation or deliberate self-destruction. It may be because the conditions of desperation, dispossession, or uncertainty of identity are already part of their –or, for that matter, our–world as a self-evident fact. The narrators of Auster's fiction thus do not feel the need to emphasize these senses of desperation or helplessness, which are apparent in his fiction, though, but rather direct their attention in their act of story-telling to the mysteriousness or unpredictability of the events which may sometimes occur by chance in our enigmatic world. Auster himself explains this when he is talking about his first fiction *The New York Trilogy* in an interview with Joseph Mallia.

The books have to do with the idea of mystery in several ways. We're surrounded by things we don't understand, by mysteries, and in the books there are people who suddenly come face to face with them. It becomes more apparent that they're surrounded by things they don't know or understand. (*The Red Notebook*, 109)

He also states in another interview that he wants to show in his fiction reality of chance, "the presence of the unpredictable, the utter bewildering nature of human experience," or the possibility that "[o]ur life-long certainties about the world can demolished in a single second." (*The Red Notebook*, 117) This is precisely what happens to Hawthorne's young Brown the moment he steps into the forest where witches or the devil himself seems real to him, or to Wakefield at the time he decides to take a step out of his everyday life which eventually turns him an "Outcast of the Universe". Auster's attitude toward fiction, in which he seems to try to show that an apparent supernatural or unreal situation is also one version of our reality, is similar to those of romancers of American Romanticism who tried to broaden the meaning of the truth or reality that people had narrowed to the extent that the concept of the real could be replaced with the ordinary or the commonplace.

When we contextualize Auster's concept of reality in the "postmodern condition" of our contemporary society as well as in the tradition of American romance, we cannot but notice the similarity of the two views about the relation between the world and fiction despite the fact that the sense of postmodernism began to prevail after we went through realism and modernism. Eagleton convincingly insists that postmodern aesthetics is a kind of parody of modernist (avant-garde) anti-representation, for our art does not attempt the representa-

tion of reality any more not because we aim with modernism to revolt against and innovate the representation of the world at which realism aimed, but because we recognize that there is nothing to be represented, every reality being itself an image or a groundless fiction. If reality is a fiction in the postmodern point of view, it is important for not only Auster but also for any postmodern writer to be conscious of the fictionality of fiction or of “narration” of a story instead of “representation” of a reality. As Matei Calinescu states, the “signs of the new interest in narration and narrative transformations are seen everywhere” in postmodern literature.(Calinescu 157) But this concern with narrating is not altogether contemporary or new. In the article on the meaning of “narrating” in modern American novels, Iwao Iwamoto refers to Hawthorne’s consciousness of “narrating.”

Because the consciousness of a “narrating” author is supported by the subjectivity of his intended allegory, the narrated world is dyed by the author’s individual color, which sometimes arouses criticism as fantastic or unreal. But the point here is how the author’s allegory is harmonized with the world he narrates, and so some detachment from reality can be overlooked. On the other hand, the consciousness of “depicting” is connected with the objective attitude of an author. He is more interested in the object itself which he wants to describe than in his own subjectivity, and tries to represent in print the reality of the object as well as possible. Accordingly, the consciousness of “depicting” naturally goes well with realism while an author who becomes conscious of the act of “narrating” advocates, like Hawthorne, a romance and by protecting his subjectivity offers in a way one version of the limited author himself. (Iwamoto 53)

Therefore, a self-conscious preoccupation with “narrating” of postmodern writers such as Auster or Barth can be seen not only as a reflection of the postmodern condition where objective presentation of reality is no longer possible nor the subject itself is certain, but also as a self-conscious, stylized retrieval of American romantic tradition. This is perhaps one explanation for the acknowledgment of American postmodern writers like Barth or Hawkes that they are conscious of the writers of gothic tales and romances of nineteenth-century American Romanticism. It can also offer an answer other than the art of pastiche, to employ Jameson’s word for postmodernism art, why Auster’s fiction obviously or obliquely refers to the works or names of the writers of American Renaissance again and again.

For example, in *The New York Trilogy*, the obvious theme of the “double”, or the collapse of the boundary between the self and the other, is consciously modeled after Poe’s

gothic tale "William Wilson." In *City of Glass*, Quinn and his pen name William Wilson, his fictional character Max Work, and "Paul Auster" the seemingly existent detective, who he pretends to be, are all Quinn's dubious and deceptive identities. The anonymous narrator, a friend of fictional writer "Paul Auster" in *City of Glass*, explains how Quinn's identity between the real self and fictional ones is obscured and blended as follows:

Over the years, Work had become very close to Quinn. Whereas William Wilson remained an abstract figure for him. Work had increasingly come to life. In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And Work had become a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude. (*The New York Trilogy*, 6)

Readers also learn that Blue and Black in *Ghosts*, where every abstract character has a name of color, are the doubles of each other. So are Fanshawe and the narrator in *The Locked Room*. At the opening scene of *The Locked Room* the narrator states about his friend Fanshawe that "[h]e is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I could hardly know who I am." (*The New York Trilogy*, 199)

Another undertone of this trilogy derived from the works of American Romanticism is the same idea of deliberate self-exile from the familiar life that Hawthorne's tale "Wakefield" typically embodies. In *Ghosts*, the protagonist Blue, a detective, comes to talk with Black, apparently a target of his private-eye job of watching and following, and he learns from Black about the writers of American Romanticism—Hawthorne along with Whitman or Thoreau. He told Blue the story of Wakefield, saying that Hawthorne was "probably the first real writer America ever had." (*Ghosts*, 175) Even Auster's latest fiction, *Mr. Vertigo*, is haunted with the ghost of Wakefield when the protagonist and narrator of the amazing narrative of his own life called the assembly of his friends—Jewish magician, black boy, Native American woman and the protagonist himself as an orphan and flying kid—a kind of pseudo-family, "the outcasts of the universe," which is the same term that the narrator of Hawthorne's tale uses for his protagonist. As Barry Lewis indicated, all fictional characters in Auster's works are, in a way, Wakefields. "Stillman, Black, and Fanshawe are all Wakefields who have stepped aside from the routines of daily life to

follow their own crazy visions, and it is one of the unique ironies of Auster's world that the very figures who look for these missing persons—Quinn, Blue, Fanshawe's friend—are themselves stripped of their former identities during their search. This is a movement which is present in Auster's other work too." (Lewis 55)

One of the reasons why Auster's fiction is frequented by Wakefields is connected with the themes of solitude and alienation with which Hawthorne or other writers of romanticism were also obsessed both because of their characteristic natures and of their positions as fiction writers or romancers in their culture. Solitude is the theme underlying all of Auster's fiction from the start. But his sense of solitude does not necessarily come from or lead to desperation alone; for Auster, complete solitude encourages understanding of one's own identity, his origin, and his connection to others in the past, the present, or the future. Perhaps Auster regards the act of storytelling similar to a medium who listens to the voices of the dead and evokes their ghosts. As long as he continues telling stories, he is surrounded with the ghosts of lost things and dead people, especially of his fathers—his own biological father as well as literary ones—and their spirits are everywhere in his imagination and hence in readers' through the act of writing and reading fiction. This act of summoning the dead is also a concern of an American romancer who, to cite Joel Porte, "is of necessity an evoker of ghosts and a resurrector of dead bodies." (Porte 97) When we tell and hear a narrative or a romance, as one of Auster's philosophical characters says, "there are ghosts all around us." (*The New York Trilogy*, 174)

If we look for another concern which Auster, a postmodern writer, shares with the romancers of American Romanticism, it must be the spirit of "quest." The theme of quest has long been a familiar motif in countless literary or non-literary works from old myths and romances of the Middle Ages to many contemporary entertainment films and novels. Ihab Hassan offers a useful and attractive list of the meanings or images that the word "quest" implies: there is "movement in a word, restlessness, the itch of want. There is a roving curiosity in some fabulous or emblematic space, seeking knowledge—knowledge of being, knowledge as being, some gnosis of a dangerous or ultimate kind." (Hassan 19) This spirit of quest or the itching desire to know the unknown world and its inhabitants by stepping outside the domain of dull ordinariness drives many heroes of American romance

into their dangerous adventures. The typical examples are Ishmael and Ahab of Melville's *Moby-Dick* or Pym of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Many "questures" are present in Hawthorne's tales and romances too if we call those who are in quest for knowledge such as Ethan Brand, Aylmer, Miles Coverdale, or even Wakefield, "questurers" who dare transgress the boundary of everyday life and consequently get forever cast out from it. The literature of Romanticism as well as the romance as a literary genre is surely related to this spirit of quest.

Although it seems to come from the myths of ancient tribes, Greco-Roman epic narratives about great heroes, or medieval romances of noble knights across the sea, the spirit of quest has been deeply rooted in American culture since the very first arrival in the New World by explorers and the succeeding settlement by immigrants. The landing of Columbus, or Apollo landing on the Moon, which Auster often mentions in his fiction, are symbols of their spirit of quest underlying American history and its national identity, for they are always conscious that their nation was built by explorers and adventurers, or "questurers," who continuously long for movement and novelty. Hassan introduces Gert Raeithel's concept of "philobats" (walkers on their toes) to explain this strong or secret desire of wandering and movement in American writers, stating that "voluntary American immigrants" as philobats "formed weak attachments to objects, persons, places; they relished stress, movement, exposure, transgressive fantasies." (Hassan 6)

If we look at Auster's fiction from the viewpoint of "quest" which is characteristic of not only the romance narrative but also the whole history of American reality and fiction, we will find his works full of the people who carry out "a willed alienation aggravated by frontier conditions," for the places where Auster's characters are placed and made to wander are not the center of the society but always its fringes, which is symbolized by their circumstances as orphans. Therefore, as Pascal Bruckner suggests, the theme of quest is surely underlying most of his fiction. Since quest is the central movement in the genre of conventional detective novels, the protagonists in *The New York Trilogy* follows at least this golden rule by seeking for missing people. The narrator in *The Invention of Solitude* is in quest of his father, Anna Blume in *In the Country of the Last Things* of her missing brother, Marco Fogg in *Moon Palace* again of his father, Sacks in *Leviathan* of the lost American ideal, to cite a few. The quest is the main motive of wandering and telling their stories for

most of Auster's characters, who are often put in the situation of self-alienation partly because of their being orphans or severed from the tie to their families, which also represents a symbol of the historical situation of America herself as a self-made nation, as Takafumi Akimoto persuasively argues. For those characters, it is also a quest for their own identities or the places where they can establish themselves in this unstable universe. Ihab Hassan, who thinks this mode of quest is an important symbolic choice in the postmodern world, contemplates the timelessness of the spirit of quest in literature:

We can suppose, then, that quest, adventure, travel, and autobiography coalesce in a contemporary, hybrid mode that conveys both the perplexities of the postmodern condition and the ancient, visionary powers of myth. This mode, defying any comfortable distinction between fiction and fact, employs the sophisticated resources of narrative to raise fundamental problems of human existence, problems personal, social, and metaphysical.

But is the mode only contemporary, really new? Literary historians can trace it to old epics and romances, or at least to Cervantes, at the dawn of the novel. They are not wrong to trace it so. For contemporary quest assumes the imaginative freedom of romance, its liberation of desire. . . ." (Hassan 31)

Following Hassan's intriguing assertion, we can at length conclude that Paul Auster, who refers to Cervantes of *Don Quixote*, an archetype of the questurers inflamed by the quest-spirit of both romanticism and postmodernism, as one of his model writers, is also such a writer who narrates postmodern quest-romances. He states in an interview with Mark Irwin that what excites his spirit is not the travel to a predetermined destination but an exploration into the unknown world like the one undertaken by Cavaza de Vaca, who made the first step on the American continent. Writing fiction is to Auster a voyage to the unknown, bizarre territory between fiction and reality. But his readers will also notice that Auster's quest as a story teller is self-consciously related to his attempt not so much to sever himself from the past as to evoke its ghosts or spirits just as the quests of Auster's characters are by chance or on purpose connected with their lost things and people. It seems that this sense of attachment to the past makes Paul Auster a fiction writer of moral responsibility. According to Dennis Barone, "[r]esponsibility, old fashioned as this may sound, is a virtue in Auster's works. (Barone, 15). We can perhaps call this questur of fiction a postmodern romancer who can perchance find his name in the genealogy of the American romance tradition.

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