

Literary Ghosts and Psychology of Spirit in “City of Glass”

Takeshi OMIYA

In 1990 with Penguin Paul Auster, an American writer living in New York, published *The New York Trilogy* consisting of three novels “City of Glass”¹ (1985), “Ghosts” (1986), and “The Locked Room” (1986). The present study will take up “City of Glass,” and examine the structure and theme, the roles of characters of the tale in relation to both English and American tradition of literature.

All the critics agree that “City of Glass” is a deviation from the traditional genre of detective fiction that Edgar Allan Poe invented in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Lavender 220; Lewis 58; Rowen 224; Russell 71; Sorapure 72). I think that it can be read as a metaphor of internal drama of spirit. Auster’s sense of place is closely connected with that of body, especially of brain. He represents New York, the setting of the novel, as “the nowhere he had built around himself,...” (4). The dictionary says the word nowhere literally means “no place,” which “Utopia” (ou not + tópos place), the word Thomas More created, also means. It is interesting that “neverland,” another word meaning Utopia for an imaginary ideal world in *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, is used to indicate brain especially the world of unconsciousness which is displayed in dream. “He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words” (87). In *Peter Pan*, “neverland” is a cozy little island appearing in children’s dream as they will forget when they grow up. Thus, Peter of “City of Glass” may be a literarily deformed descendant of Peter Pan. The use of the word “neverland” and the reference to Humpty Dumpty of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* are suggestive of fantastic characteristics of the tale. And the word of “glass” of the title of the tale “City of the Glass,” which reminds the reader of the glass shoes of Cinderella and fictitious glass in *Peter Pan* for bringing unconscious Wendy around, appealingly implies the rupture of reality or everyday life, fictitiousness, and temporality. As a part of the Neverland is a house for Wendy when Peter Pan says, “Let us build a little house round her,” and boys build it, so New York is the nowhere, an adult’s neverland constructed in the mind of the first-person narrator who emerges at the end of the story (Barrie 89). The setting of *Peter Pan*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and the “City of Glass” is the world of dream or that analogous to it. Auster himself admits in an interview

that “[T]he greatest influence on my work has been fairy tales, the oral tradition of story telling” (Auster, “Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory” 296).

As we have seen, it is suggested that through a series of synonyms such as “nowhere,” “no place,” “Utopia,” and “neverland,” New York, the locale of the story, is a metaphor of brain. Incidents of the tale, therefore, show no reality or actuality. The story seems, on the face of it, to deal with events of the real world as it progresses according to time, but there are inexplicable or almost impossible aspects in it. For example, persistent misdialing to Quinn at midnight, his undertaking Peter’s case as Auster, two Stillmans of the same face, Quinn’s efforts to protect Peter so that he may become a vagabond, and Peter’s and Virginia’s vanishing upon Stillman’s disappearance.

There are a number of oblique references to and parodies of literary or historic figures and writings in the tale. It may be appropriate to say that this is not so much a story of real world as that of dream world in a man’s mind which consists of the above materials. The story begins with a wrong number to Quinn reading Marco Polo’s *Travels* at night who feels fatigued after finishing his detective novel. Taking into consideration the inscrutability of the wrong number, Quinn falls asleep from the scene of ringing him up by mistake. At this point he is a little tired from work. In regard to the narrative’s structure, it may be possible to see the whole tale as a dream of the anonymous first-person narrator who appears at the ending.

I

As to the framework of the tale, Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, the first time travel novel of SF genre, which was published earlier than H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, is very suggestive. In Twain’s novel, at the outset “Mark Twain,” who is reading Malory’s book about Launcelot at midnight, is visited by Hank Morgan, chief character. That is the beginning of the story of his adventures in King Arthur’s kingdom, as it were, a fairy tale of the neverland, most of which can, as Ketterer and Bedford note, be read as Hank’s or Twain’s dream (Ketterer 1113; Bedford 192).² Launcelot’s story provides “Mark Twain” with the material for his dream. “City of Glass” has some parallels with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* in that the author himself shows up and that reading at midnight is the opening of the story. Besides, the situation that Peter and Virginia disappear from their apartment, and Quinn, protagonist, also fades, leaving his

notebook recording events concerning them, reminds the reader of the ending of Twain's work with Hank's vanishment or death. Quinn records every detail of the affair including his first meeting with Peter and Virginia, his pursuit of Stillman in a notebook from the first to the last. The notebook, upon which this novel is grounded, is described as "a jumble, illegible, palimpsest" (76). In Twain's work, Hank's journal kept during his stay in King Arthur's country, most of which the novel is based on, is also mentioned as "a palimpsest" (Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* 10). Hank's death and Quinn's fading-out mean Mark Twain's and the anonymous first-person narrator's awaking from sleep, and therefore each narrator emerges before the reader at the denouement of both novels.

In "City of Glass," that first-person figure articulates the relationship between him and Quinn as follows: "As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always" (158). As is evident from the above excerpt, the person and Quinn are inseparable friends. He is another self of Quinn, and his story can be construed as a story of dream world or the neverland of the first-person character's mind.

II

On the thematic level, there is remarkable resemblance between "The City of Glass" and Twain's "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger." The setting and period of Twain's work are Austria and the Middle Ages. August Fedler, an apprentice to a printer and narrator of the tale, relates a turmoil in the printing-shop since the boy with the strange name of Number 44, New Series 864,062 has appeared at the shop. The master's generous dealing with the boy causes an opposition of some workers to the master, and then all of a sudden, instead of them who are on strike, their "Duplicates" emerge and work for him. More mysteriously, the boy transmutes a lady-maid into a cat. August's Duplicate or his Dream-Self named Schwarz (its meaning is black in German) also appears and talks with August. Number 44 is burned to death, but revives by his magic. In a fanciful mood, he says to August, "*Nothing* exists; all is a dream. God-man-the world, *Nothing exists save empty space - and you!* you are but a *thought*. I myself have no existence, I am but a dream - your dream, creature of your imagination.... Dream other dreams, and better! ..." (Twain, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* 404-5).

The motif of double, which is apparent in Poe's *William Wilson*, *The Man of the Crowd*, and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is also harbored in Twain's

“No.44, The Mysterious Stranger.” Reading Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Twain thinks that his explanation of one’s duality is “nearer, yes, but not near enough” (Kaplan 341). He finds unsatisfactory as its defect his way of handling the theme of “the thorough and primitive duality of man” (Stevenson 76). “Jekyll... projected and shared in the pleasures of Hyde; but Hyde was indifferent to Jekyll, or but remembered him as the mountain bandit remembers the cavern in which he conceals himself from pursuit” (Stevenson 86). Thus Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, an allegory of good and evil, know and are conscious of each other much or less. Twain views this point as false, for he thinks that “the two persons in a man are wholly unknown to each other” (Kaplan 341). The psychological schema of consciousness and unconsciousness is already established in his time, and he wants to write a better story upon the basis of the schema than Stevenson’s one. That is “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger.” In the story, Twain explains “Workaday-Self” and “Dream-Self” as unknown to each other. “You know, of course, that you are not one person, but two. One is your Workaday-Self, and ’tends to business, the other is your Dream-Self, and has no responsibilities, and cares only for romance and excursions and adventure. It sleeps when your other self is awake; when your other self sleeps, your Dream-Self has full control, and does as it pleases” (Twain, *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* 315). In the quotation above, the expression of “Dream-Self” indicates, in Twain’s terms, unconsciousness, and Workaday-Self, consciousness. Auster’s trilogy, that is, “City of Glass,” “Ghosts,” and “The Locked Room” corresponds in number with Twain’s trilogy, that is, “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” “Schoolhouse Hill,” and “No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger,” in all of which a stranger displays his supernatural power. In an interview of the magazine *Cat* for August 1990, Auster states that he reads such nineteenth-century writers as Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and Thoreau over and over again, and in fact refers to them in his writings several times (Auster, *Cat* 8). And it is assumed from his use of the name of Huck Finn in his work that Twain is in his reading list, too.³

In Poe’s *William Wilson*, there are two men of the same name and age. The first-person narrator, William Wilson, is inclined to passion, has no virtue, indulges in intemperance, debauch, and gambling, and is morally ruined. In marked contrast with the narrator, another William Wilson, associated with God, is very wise, almighty, and noble-minded. He interferes with all of the narrator’s affairs, and checks his will. It goes without saying that these two men stand for good and evil. These qualities are expressed

as two contrary persons in an allegorical fashion of the Middle Ages. On the other hand, Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* differs from *William Wilson* with the allegorical tone in that evil in a man, which is usually suppressed as an existence of shadow, is figured as the pure form manifested by means of medicine. As discussed earlier, considering the demerits of Stevenson's novel, Twain accepts the discovery of unconsciousness, the latest outcome of psychology of his time, and introduces it into his literary work. Surveying the works of three nineteenth-century writers with the motif of double, the progress of the story can be recognized from the allegory to the fairy tale grounded on the new scientific notion.

Then what originality is shown in Auster's "City of Glass"? He seems to go further from Twain's description of the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness. In Freudian theory, there is the distinction in one's consciousness between "self," "ego," and "super-ego," which are clarified in Auster's novel. It seems evident from his quoting Freud as an explanation of the protagonist's experiences and epigraphs in *The Invention of Solitude* that Auster himself adopts the theory (148-9, 164). It is suggested that though the character has been viewed as sharp, clear, stable, and consistent, it is not so sure as has been generally imagined. This kind of idea is demonstrated in the proper use of the protagonist's names. William Wilson is his pen name when he writes mystery novels. He regards the character of William Wilson as different from that of Quinn (5). Moreover, in Stillman's case he acts according to the action code of Max Work, chief character of his work. That is, he behaves himself on the basis of his consideration of what he would do if he were Max Work. And he is mistaken for "Paul Auster" by Virginia and Peter, and he attempts to play the role as they expect. Auster tries to create his own literary world, presenting adaptations from other writers' texts, whose affluent, literary imagery flows into "City of Glass."

III

New York is a metaphor of internal world of mind. Then what does each character in "City of Glass" stand for? It seems that Quinn embodies the super-ego (conscience). He pursues and looks after Stillman in order to protect Peter, Stillman's son whose character was damaged by him. Quinn recognizes his role as good, as is evident from the following saying: "For imagining himself as Auster had become synonymous in his mind with doing

good in the world” (62). Conscience plays the part of censorship on the ego and the id, unconsciousness. Quinn chases Stillman, monitors those who have the possibility of doing harm to Peter, and records his every action in his notebook. However, Peter’s fear is ill grounded that his father may damage his spirit, and may be a delusion. Peter goes on speaking without regard for Quinn’s saying that he is not Auster. In this case the view that disregard is the essential of the illusion is applicable to his attitude. Since Peter’s speech is filled with meaningless absurdities at Quinn’s first contact with him, the upshot of it is that it will be turned off as a madman’s complete nonsense. But when Quinn begins to play the part of “Paul Auster” by a persistent wrong number, saying “This is Auster speaking,” he is involved in Peter’s and Virginia’s delusion (12). This is his first step toward transforming into a representative of conscience.

At least in two respects Quinn can be interpreted as the super-ego (conscience). First it is the scene of his encounter with Stillman at Grand Central. Stillman arrives at the station by train, and Quinn starts to chase him. Then another man with the exact same face as Stillman’s appears before him. Unlike the other Stillman, he has a look of a dashing success. When the first starts his way, the second walks away in the opposite direction. Quinn decides to shadow the second at first, but something (probably his inner voice) tells him that he will regret following the second Stillman. Thus he changes his mind, and tails the first Stillman. This happening can be accounted for by the schema that the super-ego (Quinn) censors the id or unconsciousness which may have a pernicious influence upon the ego. Unconsciousness has everything registered, takes the ego (Peter) in, and may have a bad effect on it. According to Virginia, Stillman had shut Peter, his son into a room out of the outer world for nine years, and influenced him critically. Quinn’s mission of the affair in question is to protect Peter from Stillman’s mischief. The second Stillman depicted as “a man of the world” in an expensive blue suit with “a prosperous air” about him is, as it were, an afterimage of a promising scholar in his youth, and there is no doubt that he will do no harm to Peter (68). Quinn, therefore, need not chase him. In the first dialogue between Quinn and Stillman, Stillman calls him “a man of sense” without certain grounds, which implies the character of his mission, that is, the role of conscience (89).

Second, what is the result of his pursuit and censorship of Stillman? Every day Stillman walks around just within a small region in the neighborhood of his hotel, but has

never even attempted to establish his contact with his son. No mischief on Peter is a matter of course. It is because Quinn (the super-ego) watches and puts censorship on Stillman. On Quinn's calling, Virginia tells him the present condition of Peter as follows: "Peter has been in such good shape these past two weeks, and I know it's because of you" (79). She maintains that since he has overtaken the job, Peter has been in condition, which is ascribed to him and that he is "a hero" to Peter (79). From the perspective of the ego (Peter), Quinn is a hero who censors unconsciousness (the id) which confines the ego and is liable to have a bad influence upon it.

What does Peter represent? As stated above, he represents the ego, that is, the organization of perception and consciousness. He is a completely average child till he is two years old, but later lacks sociality. He receives no education of language partly because of his mother's death, and does not enter into the symbolic relationship of language and society, shut out of the outside by his father for nine years. On his first meeting with Quinn, he neither offers him a seat nor even seems to be aware of him. He is very awkward in his movements like a marionette. All his white clothes and shoes make a transparent impression upon Quinn, who can't sense his existence as follows: "As their eyes met, Quinn suddenly felt that Stillman had become invisible.... it felt as though he was not there" (18). From this quotation, the reader knows that he is far from being a social being with his own identity. That he repeats "I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name," displays his unstable identity or mentality. Saved from a fire, he went to hospital, and underwent Virginia's speech therapy for five years. In spite of this, he can't speak well. He exists only as the system of perception and consciousness without social life. Quinn associates him with the wild boy of Aveyron or Peter of Hanover who doesn't learn to speak in Defoe's pamphlet, *Mere Nature Delineated*. Quinn's late son's name is Peter, too. This is why after all he makes a contract with Virginia to defend Peter from Stillman. The situation that for Quinn, Peter is another self, a substitute of his son makes him carry out his mission.

What does the old man, Stillman, stand for? As we have seen, he is a representative of unconsciousness. Once he became a prosperous professor in his mid-thirties, but when his wife died (there was a mischievous rumor about it), he resigned his promising job, and applied himself to raising his son, Peter, who has been abnormal on account of his imprisonment for nine long years. Furthermore, it was made clear on the occasion of the fire caused by him that Stillman had treated Peter badly. And Stillman was sent to the

hospital as a lunatic. He is out of the hospital now, and has arrived in New York.

Analyzing Stillman's promenade, it seems to Quinn that he has no purpose for it. "Such precision baffled Quinn, for in all other respects Stillman seemed to be aimless" (7). His way of walking is the same as that of the old man in Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*, which Auster has read over and over again and attempts to parody.

"[A]s he forced his way to and fro, without aim, among the host of buyers and sellers" (Poe 480). Every day Stillman walks around within the narrow range, and after all he returns to his hotel. This situation is also similar to that of the man in *The Man of the Crowd* who goes back to the street of the hotel at the beginning. Moreover, Stillman concentrates on thought, paying no attention to his surroundings, still less the pursuer. "He had never seen anyone so lost in his own thoughts. Even if he stood directly in front of him, he doubted that Stillman would be able to see him" (69). This passage seems to echo the following parts of *The Man of the Crowd*: "The stranger paused, and, for a moment, seemed in thought;..." (Poe 480). "He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk,..." (Poe 481). And in both works there is the correspondence that the old man's action is inexplicable and unpredictable. "If the object was to understand Stillman, to get to know him well enough to be able to anticipate what he would do next, Quinn had failed" (80). "[I] was at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions" (Poe 480). In short, unlike consciousness, unconsciousness has no purpose, and cannot be explained. There is no point of direct contact between consciousness and unconsciousness. Auster's depiction of mind with the distinction between them seems to take into account of Twain's *No.44, The Mysterious Stranger*, and besides he is the most scientific among Poe, Stevenson, and Twain in delineating in detail the world of the ego and the super-ego. It is evident that the story has made some progress from the nineteenth-century to the twentieth-century according to the theoretical notion.

Unconsciousness contains everything, and stores up insignificant memories at the back of one's mind. All the things Stillman gathers up are of no use. Their insignificance is shown by trash or fragments Stillman picks up when he takes a walk. Even a dog turd is put into his bag. It seems to Quinn that he is just scavenging on the street. Thinking about the track of Stillman's walk, Quinn falls asleep into dream, that is, "a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words" (my emphasis 87). Stillman sees the world as "fragments" (91). At this point the characteristics of Stillman's world parallel

those of dream, in which we can at times catch a glimpse of unconsciousness. The phrase "a neverland of fragments" itself expresses unreal, fantastic dream world. In his dream of the above quotation, Quinn sees him in the town dump, surrounded by rubbish. This is a prophetic dream and comes true later. In front of missing Peter's apartment, Quinn waits him to appear, and stays in a garbage can. His life in the can has changed his look completely, and he cannot understand who he is when he sees himself in the mirror. His long, wearing, watching days deprive him of the strength of his body so that he cannot walk without stopping and taking rest sometimes like Stillman. It is suggested that he is deeply involved in Stillman's world and that his identity is lost. A series of terms of "rubbish," "fragment," and "dream" are associated with him, and thus it seems that the old man certainly epitomizes the unconsciousness.

And as he has vanished from the hotel (according to "Paul Auster," he committed suicide), Peter and Virginia also vacate their apartment, and break contact with Quinn. What does their leaving the scene signify? In the structure of the anonymous first-person narrator's dream, their death or leaving connotes that he is awakening from his dream. In Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the first-person narrator, "Twain," appears on the stage at the ending again, and watches Hank, protagonist, beside his deathbed. The tale ends with his death, which can be explained as Twain's awakening from his dream that constitutes most of the story (Bedford 192). Equally "City of Glass" ends with the disappearance of Quinn, another self of the narrator, which signifies that the scene moves from unconsciousness to consciousness, that is, awakening. Unconsciousness provides consciousness with energy. The Id (unconsciousness) is indispensable to consciousness. Therefore, if Stillman, the incarnation of unconsciousness, vanishes, the world of consciousness which unconsciousness supports also has to disappear. This is why the three leave the stage.

A number of references to writers and their works, which are a postmodern pastiche, mean nothing in themselves, but rather present the material to the narrator's mind which functions automatically. Its underlying tone is that of the fairy tale. The framework of the text is very similar to that of Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and leads the reader to the dream world. "City of Glass" is allied to Poe's *William Wilson*, Twain's *No.44, The Mysterious Stranger*, and so on, dealing with the motif of double. Remarkable progress is made in that the world of unconsciousness and consciousness is

illustrated in impressive detail.

Notes

- 1 Paul Auster, "City of Glass." *The New York Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 1990). All the following quotations from "City of Glass" are from this edition, followed by page number in parentheses.
- 2 Incidentally, from Twain's note as to the structure of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* that follows, it can be read as a story of dream: "Dream of being a knight errant in arm or in the middle ages" (*Mark Twain's Notebooks & Journals Vol.3*, p.78).
- 3 As to the use of the name of Huck Finn, see *Leviathan*, p.42 and *Mr. Vertigo*, p.126.

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