

# The Trauma of Existence in *The New York Trilogy*

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## Abstract

*All along the New York Trilogy, Auster's detectives bear unspoken wounds of their past. Their epistemological quest for the truth is further hampered by their uncertainty to find answers about who they truly are. Chasing a perpetrator turns into chasing a shadow, an inner self, and a sense of belonging. Drawing on Trauma theory, this essay attempts to examine how The New York Trilogy is an artistic materialization of an underlying trauma leading to a confused definition of identity. This article shall primarily focus on the reading of the novel as a traumatic event. It will examine how textual indeterminacies are implemented to convey a problematized self-definition. Ultimately, it shall study how the detectives' quest for the truth is a query for personal, social and artistic belonging. This belonging is lost in the tides of a traumatic past that impedes the articulation of a clear subjectivity.*

**Key Words:** *trauma theory, identity formation, detective, quest, belonging*

## Methodology

This paper is an application of trauma theory and its relationship with the theme of identity. The latter becomes infused with doubt, dislocation and confusion. Naturally, identity dislocation is a central focus of postmodernism, where genre parody highlights this artistic dilemma of self-definition. This article attempts to analyse the determiners of trauma in these novels in terms of problematic representation, omission and impersonation conveying a heightened state of loss. Precisely, these insights will be examined from an intergenerational and cultural Trauma angle following the frameworks of Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey Alexander and Dominick Lacapra. Simultaneously, postmodern insights of parody and

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intertextuality shall be referred to in order to link the gravity of the traumatic event to the problematized literary self-definition and by extension artistic self-localization.

## Introduction

Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* has seen the light in 1986 in the form of three instalments that at a first glance may seem completely unrelated, but through a deepened analysis each is a version of another. These three instalments bear different names that magnify the state of vacuum lived by its protagonists. The First is a *City of Glass*, in which identities are easily interchangeable. Each character is a reflection of another in another dimension where the worlds of the book and reality do intertwine. In *Ghosts*, as its name may suggest, characters become meaningless copies of each other in a world where routine prevails. Reality becomes a vicious cycle of repetitiveness and confusion leading to a vain question of self-localization. The instalments end with the thrilling version of *The Locked Room*, where an obsession results in impersonating another man's life and mistaking his identity as his own. Both end up facing a door parallel inside and outside a locked room. One must die, a shot is fired and the identity of who has actually died remains a mystery. One reports being outside, walking down the street while the rest remains unknown. Three instalments that toy with the mind of the reader while problematizing the concept of identity. An identity that is presented in reflections and mosaics that shape the same piece except that at the end of the process of assemblage everything crumbles to ashes and what is left are pieces of papers. In *Trauma*, the confrontation with its initial trigger leads to an extreme state of shock ending in diversion or in violent reactions. The aftermath of the traumatic experience results in the inability to define the incident, narrate it, explain or comment on it. A linguistic block impedes the subject from voicing a latent wound that scars his being. Consequently, the inability to articulate one's trauma is sublimated in the course of writing where the subjects choose a different reality to obliterate every trace of its pre-existence. This applies to the characters of these instalments as well as to the writer himself. To assert the questionability of identity construction, traumatic, generic and artistic readings are in order.

## **Unspoken trauma: linguistic inexpression Introducing intergenerational trauma**

In various situations, human beings may encounter tragic events manifested in the loss of someone dear, torture, kidnapping, fire, drowning, war, and displacement; to name a few. These events trigger mental reactions that will incite a repetitive reliving of the event again and again. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth (1996) contends:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century (24).

After establishing contact with a traumatic experience, reality becomes quite frightening, dimmed with a chronic instability, an anachronism and recurrent nightmares. Traumatic disorders restrain the ability of self-expression rendering its therapeutic sublimation quasi impossible. Language, which serves as a communicatory means for social integration and spiritual release, loses its power in traumatic situations. In their renowned article the “Emotional Processing of Traumatic Events”, Richard B. Slatcher and James W. Pennebaker define the loss of language as denotative of traumatic speech impediment; they explain:

When someone talks to other people about his or her experiences, it alerts them to the person’s psychological state and ultimately allows him to remain socially tied to them. Conversely, people who have traumatic experiences and do not tell their friends are more likely to live in a detached, isolated state. Consistent with this approach, Rimé (1995) argues that disclosure in the first days or weeks after a trauma has the power to change the quality of a person’s social network by bringing people closer together (2005: 6).

Contrastively, traumatized subjects are unable to relate their experience to others, entrapping them in a perpetual state of shock where language loses

its purpose. The inability to voice the gravity of one's experience will be transmitted through different generations as a form of unresolved psychological indeterminacy. This state will be transferred as a subconscious form of malaise from fathers to sons. Slavery, holocaust, Indian genocides are all transgenerational forms of trauma. Since they were unable to transcend that traumatic experience, it was instilled through different ages as a cultural traumatic syndrome. Jeffery Alexander associates identity to an underlying social reference. For him, trauma is passed through carrier groups which function as the collective agents of trauma process who claim a form of a "Fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative of some horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, and symbolic reparation and restitution"(2012: 17).

The collapse of social systems entails the loss and fragmentation of societies, while culture widens the gap between the traumatic event and its representation. The carriers group's task lies in informing the public about the different determiners of trauma through revealing "the nature of the pain", "the nature of the victim"; explaining "the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience" and finally the "attribution of responsibility" (Alexander 2012: 22). By illuminating the following questions describing the source of the trauma, its main inflictor, its devastating effects and its post-traumatic identity reconstruction, the carrier groups can uproot this state of shock. This will lead to the forging of a new discourse that glorifies survival. Lacapra states that cultural trauma transforms into a structural trauma as a form of loss and absence that may fragment wholeness. This state of absence becomes intertwined with a chronic instilment of a disintegrated identity. To overcome it, a new discourse arises on the commemoration of:

A mythical belief in a past-we-have-lost may be combined with an apocalyptic, often blind utopian quest to regain that lost wholeness or totality in a desired future, at times through violence directed against outsiders who have purportedly destroyed or contaminated that wholeness. Compressed between a past and future, one may also construe lost wholeness nostalgically and link it to a future perfect – what might have been if only those in the past had recognized what we presumably know: how to create a true community that will endure as a radiant polity (2001: 195-196).

Re-establishing a temporal framework to retrieve that lost state of identity is a mechanism that functions through the direct recognition of traumatic inflicted pain and its determiners. That is the acknowledgement of the persistent state of an identity disintegration that results from an acute state of loss. To survive a trauma, a mythical narrative of survival should take place to immortalize the communities that have endured such ordeals. Traumatic absence will be thus overcome through the adoption of a surrogate. A surrogate entails the reliance of an alternative system of belief that may bridge the gap between trauma and representation. Later generations and carrier groups will be able to voice the unvoiced leading to traumatic recovery. Ironically, absence, fragmentation and loss entrapping the lives of the protagonists of *The New York Trilogy* have no resolve but to be haunted by the ghost of a fragmented identity of an undetermined past.

### **Traumatic inexpression: the unescapable state of absence**

Extreme traumatic situations lead to a later response of something that has occurred somewhere in the past. This delayed response may result in a post-traumatic syndrome that is characterized by various responses depending on the nature of the traumatic experience. Some subjects may lead to emotional deregulation, including extreme thoughts of anger, sadness and suicidal tendencies. Others may result in complete memory blackouts, chronic episodes of physical and mental dissociation and repetitive replay of the traumatic event. An abnormal version of the self includes helplessness, shame, guilt, stigma and a perpetual feeling of self-loathing. Another traumatic effect includes an obsession with the perpetrator and seeking vengeance of him (Herman 1997: 25). Herman's definition of the post-traumatic syndrome can be reflected in *The New York Trilogy* as its characters seem to be entrapped in the same state of loss, confusion and self-loathing. Among the determiners of trauma is a crippling state of vacuum resulting from a given absence.

In *The City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn has lost his son and his wife in a tragic accident. His life has become meaningless where he hides behind writing mystery novels under a pen name. Quinn's life has become just as faceless, dimmed by a constant state of wandering where he "drifts" and "all places were equal and it no longer mattered where he was". Exactly then, he realizes that "New York was the nowhere he had built around

himself" (Auster 1990: 4). As a traumatized subject, Quinn has become unaware of his surroundings. He has lost perceptions of time, place and purpose as if he was no one and lived nowhere. He even objectifies himself behind the pen name of Max Work who is able to actually detect the truth; this truth that he wants to forget and deny through denying his own identity as a writer. The detachment he feels is physical as his body "wandered aimlessly" placing "one foot after another". He has lost awareness of his own body and it has become a soulless entity that walks on its own. His detachment is also spiritual as he impersonates Paul Auster: the great detective. His traumatized rejection of himself as being devoid of meaning led him to adopt an alternative that may illuminate his life once more. Denying the loss of his family has paved the way for making the transition to a different realm. He has thus sublimated his spiritual and physical dislocation into a psychological reconstruction of an alternative identity. He has ironically become a detective not to look for clues and murderers but to look for what is left of his disintegrated self.

Ironically, in *Ghosts*, the prestigious Mr White gives Blue, a real detective, the task of tailing Mr Black. All Mr Black does is read and write all day in a room while Blue watches, anticipates, hopes and ends up disappointed. The cycle of waiting, reading, observing and writing has become unbreakable. Blue has become aware of his own significance as a copy. Disillusioned by this task, he decides to break the cycle finding that Mr Black was in fact Mr White and that he was made into a third copy. To be devoid of an essence, to be trapped in a cycle of vain repetitive actions indicate that an inherent trauma stifles the blooming of the self. The repetitive act of observing and tailing is in fact a euphemism for the recurrence of the traumatic event. White, who feels the worthlessness and meaninglessness of his life due to an undefined state of lack, hires Blue to watch him and write reports about him. By doing so, he tries to overcome this lack while projecting his own traumatic vacuum on Blue. The latter's projected fragmented identity and lost sense of existence decides to end both lives. He penetrates inside the realm where Black himself is White and where Blue is an intermediate shade of the same self.

Critics and readers of the book may speculate that White has committed suicide ending his derivative versions with him. Thus, due to a certain traumatic experience, probably emotional as it is suggested by the loss of his wife, White conjures up a sadder version of himself. A version

that has no actual awareness of time, place or has no another purpose than to read, sleep and write. Feeling unsatisfied with his bleaker version, he decides to break the cycle by inventing another self. The latter was the verge of his own destructiveness. As such, traumatic self-fragmentation is only healed through death. Trauma is simply a labyrinth, a rotating door that keeps on retracing the same steps to the same centre. This centre is nothing but the psychological entrapment where tragedy has struck.

Fanshawe is neither a detective, nor a copy. He is someone who has abandoned his life and chosen to give it to another. Fanshawe is successful, has written books that he simply has decided not to publish. He was married to a beautiful woman that he has abandoned while about to give birth. He has disappeared like a ghost where no body was found, the circumstances of his disappearance are unknown and the facts of his death or life have remained a mystery. Ever since the death of his father, Fanshawe has drastically changed. His life has become a burden to him where instead of choosing to abide by the predominant system of that time, he has departed on the very denial of his identity. He has simply given his life on a silver platter to his unnamed friend who fell in love with his wife, adopted his son and published his own books. Bestowing his identity on another marks a deepened sense of denial and loss. The trauma of Fanshawe's loss of his father has undergone three different stages. Judith Herman defines them as a difficulty regulating emotions and impulses, emotional numbing, anger and aggression, substance addictions, behavioural addictions (porn, anonymous sex, gambling, etc.), self-harming behaviours (cutting, burning, etc.), dissociation (spacing out, blanking out, losing time, etc.) (1990: 25). Aside from the death of his father, Fanshawe's trauma springs from a dissociative past. He had "an alcoholic mother, an overworked father, innumerable brothers and sisters. I had been to his house two or three times—a great, dark ruin of a place—and I can remember being frightened by his mother, who made me think of a fairy tale witch" (Auster 1990: 207). His anger is of an implosive kind that has only peaked twenty years later. It was followed by self-doubt and personal effacement. Fanshawe has never exteriorized his anger; instead, he has immersed himself in a writing that he has considered as a form of addiction. His wife reported that he has spent hours and hours locked in his room writing. Writing is a sublimation process but for Fanshawe, it feeds his obsession with his own tragedy. Probably, his ultimate

masochistic behaviour is leaving and suffering homesickness, self-banishment and subjugating himself to extreme labour. His traumatic disorder culminates in complete and utter dissociation, where he decides to put an end to his own existence. Death is the only cure for a miserable life he had lived without savouring the joys of love and stability. In his quest for his identity, the writer becomes immortalized as an artistic icon or becomes doomed for losing his own voice.

### **Traumatic silence and textual ellipsis**

*The New York Trilogy* revolves around a problematic understanding of language. Most characters struggle to find a suitable language to express their ideas or dilemmas, where the act of naming is correlated with the state of being. A failure of expression results in an existentialist impediment of self-definition. Peter Stillman, the distinguished scholar, sought to invent a language that “signifies” because the older one fails miserably to establish an accurate signification between signifier and signified. It has become useless. For traumatic victims, any normative language is unable to convey the depth of their suffering and the magnitude of their loss. Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman writes:

[...] some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about. Political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness. Survivors of political torture, war and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen (1993: 3).

To invent the perfect language, Stillman imprisons his son for nine years without any physical or linguistic contact. Silence was the only vehicle which Peter Stillman junior was exposed to. As a result, he was unable to master any speech. His conversation with Quinn while he was relating his ordeal is filled with unfamiliar coined gibberish:

No mother, then. Ha ha. Such is my laughter now, my belly burst of mumbo jumbo. Ha ha ha. Big father said: it makes no difference. To me. That is to say, to him. Big father of the big muscles and the boom, boom, boom. No questions now, please. “I say what they say because I know nothing. I am only poor Peter Stillman, the boy who can’t remember. Boo

hoo. Willy nilly. Nincompoop. Excuse me. They say, they say. But what does poor little Peter say? Nothing, nothing. Anymore (Auster 1990: 16).

A traumatized grown man finds it exceedingly difficult to maintain a logical conversation with a complete stranger. Speech impediment is also marked by repetitiveness. Repetitiveness embodies the cyclicity of the traumatic experience where the traumatized subject is entrapped in the circularity of the traumatic event. Repetitiveness is portrayed in the plot of *Ghosts* where Blue's actions are an imitation of Black's actions which are in turn repetitive. In *Ghosts*, Blue tails Black, reads and writes reports endlessly where any notion of time and space become inexistent. A plotless narrative incarnates the difficult state of anguish portrayed by the traumatized victim who finds it extremely painful and hard to express what they have undergone. From incoherent speech, to a repetitive cycle, *The New York Trilogy* becomes a radical traumatic event in *The Locked Room*. The text is laden with indeterminacies. *The Locked Room* is the ultimate silence that cripples the traumatized subject and renders him speechless. Fanshawe and the unnamed narrator are both versions of the same distortion where real becomes imaginary and where imaginary becomes real. A hypothetical realm is born out of the silence. This silence is the gaps that fill the text where nothing is certain. It is the self that swirls in the labyrinth of the unknown. The silence is vocalized by the absence of closure and the absence of Fanshawe as a traumatized figure. Ellipses predominate his past, his current state, his feelings, and the arbitrariness of his decision and the circumstances of his disappearance. The silence conceals the bloodiness of an internal struggle that hampered his quest for self-definition. Subsequently, "his dramas were of a different order—more internal, no doubt more brutal—but with none of the abrupt changes that seemed to punctuate everyone else's life" (Auster 1990: 206).

### **The anti-detective and the politics of self-definition**

Trauma can only heal when the victim confronts the locus of his or trauma and manages to overcome it. Equally, Detective narratives are based on the quest of re-establishing the order or harmony in society by capturing the perpetrator (Todorov 1977: 47). Both quests undertake to restore a given type of harmony. The quest for fixing Identity occurs through regaining the

post-traumatic balance. Detective fiction is centered on reinstating the social order as it has previously existed before the occurrence of the crime as Todorov defines it in his "Typology of Detective Fiction". Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeny prefer the term metaphysical detective to denote any text that subverts or parodies any typical detective fiction (Bennet 2013: 45). Auster frames this existentialist dilemma of a problematized self-definition through the literary genre of metaphysical detective. The metaphysical detective forsakes his quest for the truth substituting "who-dunnit" with his quest for "who-is-it". The metaphysical detective embarks on a quest for self-definition as he locates how reality is chimerical. He contends that clues are false leads that do not "necessarily work, that is possible to obscure the things they are trying to say" (Auster 1990: 148). The opacity of clue-hunting and the uncertainty of whether a crime has really occurred portray on a parallel level the difficulty of the quest and the shady nature of its determiners. The metaphysical detective becomes, accordingly, a metaphor for the real quest for existing as a traumatized subject and as a writer.

In *The City of Glass*, Quinn is lost in the vast space of the city while confiding his reality as a grieving father and a mourning husband with a detective that he has created on print. At a certain point of the quest, he has realised that the crime has never existed in the first place; that Peter Stillman was probably a figment of his imagination and that the whole case has been a sham. He confounds his narrative as a piece of fiction with reality. In *Ghosts*, Black and White are the same. Victim and perpetrator are identical, just like writer and detective are extensions of one another. In *The Locked Room*, Fanshawe and the unnamed narrator are reflections of one another. Trauma is marked with schizophrenia or dissociation of the self. Detection becomes a quest for finding identity. Ironically, in each instalment, the query for the truth ends with failure. The quest culminates with a letter, a book or a report. The self for postmodern writers is clearly correlated with the invention of a new fiction that voices the traumatic self.

### **Trauma and the art of writing**

A writer's identity is constructed through writing. As Steven Alford contends that "if the self is a text, and if a text knowability is endlessly differed referring with within the cognitive process to other texts ( be they

physical texts or other selves) then true knowledge is impossible" (2005: 21). Identity is inscribed through textual references to the self. Accordingly, the struggling of writing a good piece of fiction that is infused with inner references mirrors his inability to express his trauma in a narrative. As a result, he constructs three narratives that are symptomatic of the state of vacuum that he is living in. The spaces in themselves are indicative of his artistic psychological turbulence. *Ghosts*, *City of Glass* and *The Locked Room* are hypothetical dimensions of the self. All spaces denote claustrophobia, confusion and uncertainty. Writing becomes a challenging process where creation undergoes trial, error, failure and limited success. When faced with writer's block, Quinn affirms:

He regretted having wasted so many pages at the beginning of the red notebook and in fact felt sorry for that he had bothered to write about the Stillman case at all. For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. (Auster 1990:130)

Defining himself as a Jewish American writer and devising a new piece of fiction is only conceivable through revolutionizing writing. Auster's quest for his identity as a writer is heavy with the holocaust trauma that he carries in his blood as a descendent of survivors. He is torn between integrating himself as a conventional detective fiction writer aligned with Edgar Allen Poe and Conan Doyle and establishing his own literary self. He has wasted so many pages trying to be someone he is not and has decided to write about his struggle during his self-affirmation as a writer. Perhaps, the train scene where Quinn was waiting for Stillman in the station reflects his literary confusion. If he had chosen the rich Stillman, it would have meant his affiliation with the predominant literary custom. Instead, he has chosen the road "less-travelled by" and he has embarked on his quest of redefining himself through a literary trend that is new and unknown. Trauma is manifested through the underlying inferences of concentration camp numbers that are tattooed on a random stranger's arm (Auster 1990: 40). Tattoos entail the engraving of the traumatic wound deep in the blood, rendering a normal man a complete stranger.

The holocaust trauma runs deep in Auster's veins reminding him of a past that he is unable to overcome. As a result, Auster constructs

anachronistic characters that exist outside of space cohabiting two simultaneous worlds. The World of the book is a mirror to the real world where all the writing happens while striving to create the perfect language. Art happens when a medium of expression is created; only then the artist can construct sentences that voice the long repressed traumatic experience. Being a descendent of a holocaust survivor allocates to carrier groups the task of constructing the myth of survival and the paste of the broken pieces of a traumatic self. This cultural wound transforms miraculously into a narrative of survival where the pains of expressing the unrepresentable and relating the unfathomable become accessible through a language of hope. This quest for the perfect language is itself an attempt to locate one's essence in a space of ambiguity that is dimmed by repetitiveness and inaccessibility. Fanshawe's refusal to publish is nothing but an assertion of the challenging nature of self-definition as a writer of a post-traumatic era.

## Conclusions

*The New York Trilogy* is full of mystery. It may seem as the ultimate detective fiction, but it is a frame for a post-traumatic narrative where the quest of self-definition as a writer is an attempt to sublimate the crippling wounds of an intergenerational trauma. The struggles for identity formation coexist with the process of writing as a voice for traumatic inexpression. The task is not that easy owing to the fact that self-definition as a literary outlaw presupposes the experimentation with the unfamiliar territory with a language that no longer signifies. Subsequently, a new language that conveys the depth of an unfathomable traumatic despair only exists in an ontological realm that is laden with confusion, dissatisfaction and indeterminacy. Auster has conceived a narrative of dissociative identities, inexpressive languages and spatial vacuums that only serve to reflect the traumatic nature of the psychological disorder that inhabits holocaust survivors. A mission to devise a new literary genre that detects the quest for the perfect narrative that voices the most silent wounds of all: The Metaphysical detective was thus born. The doomed detective becomes a member of a carrier group that constructs a myth of traumatic survival attempting to overcome the barriers of oblivion and beguiles upcoming generations.

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