

The Postmodern Detective: Incommensurability in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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*One popular argument about detective fiction is that its appeal lies in its reassurance: questions are answered, puzzles are solved, mysteries are made knowable, order and meaning are restored. Though even the novels of Agatha Christie prove not quite so reassuring on closer inspection, detective fiction does always raise the expectation that its disparate elements will prove to be part of a coherent whole—that what at first seems inexplicable will resolve into complete intelligibility, thanks to the efforts of the detective who confronts and controls this disorder on our behalf. Paul Auster's *City of Glass* turns these expectations on their heads. Its detective, Daniel Quinn, follows clues but they only lead him, and us, deeper into unintelligibility. This essay connects Auster's genre-bending novel to Lyotard's essay on "The Postmodern Condition," arguing that it both embodies Lyotard's definition of postmodernity and resists the generic demands of detective fiction, particularly its commitment to a coherent meta-narrative. The result is anything but reassuring.*

- Dr. Rohan Maitzen

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. Much later, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. Whether it might have turned out differently is not the question. The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell. (Auster 7)

Thus begins Paul Auster's 1985 novel *City of Glass* which is the story of Daniel Quinn – a writer of mystery fiction who shifts into the role of detective as the result of a strange phone call. As the opening paragraph demonstrates, the novel is also the meta-narrative of Daniel Quinn. In his introduction, the narrator makes two arguments about the ulterior conditions or "rules" of the narrative itself: first, that reality is merely a construction; second, that the narrative is not responsible for legitimating itself.

Jean Francois Lyotard, in his 1979 text "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," examines the cultural transformations that have "altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (xxiii). Lyotard's study on the condition of knowledge examines these transformations in the context of what he refers to as "the crisis of narratives" (xxiii). Lyotard refers to the resultant society as "postmodern." He defines the condition of postmodernity as "an incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Lyotard uses the word meta-narrative to refer to the master narrative systems that once made sense of things for us, such as the meta-narratives of Christianity and Communism. In this sense, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* is a postmodern detective story. As the narrator's two introductory arguments foreshadow, the novel not only demonstrates an incredulity towards the meta-narrative but also abandons it as an obligation that the novel must fulfill. This essay will examine Auster's novel as an embodiment of the conditions of postmodernity, as defined by Lyotard, and as a reaction to the genre of detective fiction and its demands.

It is useful to first examine some of the norms that detective fiction embodies. In “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Tsvetan Todorov argues that we read detective stories because they are a constant, reassuring manifestation of the norms of their genre. Daniel Quinn is a writer of detective fiction. He is compelled to write detective fiction for the same reason that we are compelled to read it – for its order and coherence, its reassuring consistency. The role of the detective himself particularly attracts Quinn to the genre. The detective must wade through what Quinn refers to as the “morass of objects and events” (Auster 15) in search of the idea that will pull the disparate elements of the case together. It is as if, because of the attentiveness that the detective brings to the things around him, the disparate elements of reality will “begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence” (15).

For Quinn, the “eye” in “private eye” has a double meaning: the “I” of the “investigator” and the physical eye of the writer. Quinn describes the physical eye as “the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him” (16). Thus, the writer and detective are interchangeable insofar as they share the same responsibility and method. Just as the detective is seeking the underlying cause of his case, the writer is also searching for the underlying cause or essence of reality itself. In this sense, the detective’s desire for truth is a literary desire for meta-narrative: the single idea that will manifest the essence of reality and give meaning and order to its morass of objects and events.

Quinn’s desire for the ordered construction of reality through narrative contrasts with the narrator’s argument in the introduction. As the narrator states, if reality is merely chance, then the disparate elements of a case are just that: disparate elements; the detective’s observation of them will not manifest a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence. This contrast demonstrates that there will be a paradigmatic shift in Quinn’s thinking, from a desire for the construction of truth through meta-narrative, to an incredulity towards meta-narrative as a method of legitimation. This shift results in the abandonment of meta-narrative as an obligation that must or can be fulfilled. Quinn’s thinking embodies the shift in society from modernity to postmodernity. Lyotard writes that in modernity truth and reality were legitimated or constructed through the authority of narrative. The collapse of narrative authority marks the end of modernity and initiates the postmodern crisis of narratives, in which “the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements” (Lyotard xxiv).

Here, it is necessary to examine the story of Quinn and the events that lead to the shift in his thinking. Quinn was once a poet and literary critic; however, after the death of his wife and son he began to retreat from society and found that he could no longer write, at least not as himself. Quinn describes his life as “posthumous” (Auster 8), a numbed existence barely held together by the fragments of a bygone reality. Quinn’s isolation from society results in a turn inward, though not in the sense that he inhabits the world of his “self,” for there is no longer a self to inhabit. Rather, as Quinn says, he has been reduced to a mere “seeing eye” (8), existing in a state of radical objectivism by virtue of the fact that there is no longer a subject to “cloud” his judgement. It is in this state that

Quinn begins to write detective fiction through the use of a pseudonym, an act which, according to Quinn, absolves him of responsibility for what he writes (9).

When Quinn receives the phone call that results in his involvement as a detective in a (purportedly) real case, he is reading Marco Polo's account of his travels. Polo's objectivism appeals to Quinn for the same reason that detective stories do: Polo provides crisp assurances and is unflinchingly confident in his ability to discern truth. Polo writes "we will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record free from any sort of fabrication. And all who read this book or hear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth" (12). According to Polo, to interpret reality is to obscure its truth, to succumb to the "perils of invention." Polo's philosophy acts as a meta-narrative in that it asserts a method through which we understand the world. Quinn initially adopts this meta-narrative in his own role as a detective. He believes that "through the close observation of details human behaviour could be understood; beneath the infinite facade of gestures, tics, and silences, there would be a coherence, an order, a source of motivation" (105).

The phone call that Quinn receives is from Peter Stillman, who is trying to reach detective Paul Auster, who shares his name with the author of the novel. At first, Quinn tells the caller that he has the wrong number, but after several calls from Peter, Quinn decides to play along, to say that he *is* Paul Auster. It is useful here to briefly summarize what Quinn learns about Peter following their first meeting. From the age of three, Peter's father locked him in a dark room isolated from all human contact. At the age of twelve, he was discovered by the authorities who subsequently arrested his father. Before his imprisonment, Peter's father, Stillman, was a writer and religious scholar. He hypothesized that if his son could be kept in total isolation and innocence, he would revert to the prelapsarian state of language – when words were not merely a collection of arbitrary signs, but rather perfectly unified, interchangeable with their essences. Now, years later, Stillman is about to be released from prison and Peter hires a detective because he feels threatened by his father. This information is told to Quinn, in part, by Peter himself; however, because his language skills were suppressed during childhood, the narrative that Peter constructs about himself does not follow the patterns of conventional speech. For example, Peter introduces himself to Quinn in the following manner: "No questions, please...yes. No. Thank you...I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name. No" (26). Peter's manner of speaking challenges Quinn's belief in the power of observation to reveal coherence and order, for it is through language that meta-narratives are constructed and it is through meta-narratives that reality itself is constructed. Lyotard argues that the consensus and summation of meta-narrative does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. Peter's speech exemplifies this heterogeneity and foreshadows Quinn's inability to impose a meta-narrative on the case.

Quinn learns from Peter's wife, Virginia, that, on the day of his release, Stillman will arrive at Grand Central Station at six p.m. When Quinn arrives at the station to begin his "tail job," his task proves to be difficult, for two men appear to be Stillman: his choice to follow one man or the other will be arbitrary, a submission to chance. This uncertainty

haunts Quinn, who concludes that “there was no way to know: not this, not anything” (89-91). Quinn trails the aimless wanderings of the man he decides is Stillman but despite his close observation, the coherence, order, and motivation of the case do not materialize. Quinn struggles with the illogical nature of the case, commenting, “how much better it was to believe that all his steps were actually to some purpose” (97). Quinn fails to occupy the heroic detective role that he so admires. Obsessively following the arbitrary movements of a deranged, shuffling man in what he refers to as a “neverland of fragments” causes Quinn to lose his already fragile sense of self (113).

When meaning and purpose fail to materialize from objective observation, Quinn decides to initiate a conversation with Stillman. It is during this discussion that the shift in Quinn’s thinking begins to materialize. The radical objectivism that Quinn admired in Marco Polo gives way to the radical subjectivism of Stillman’s philosophy. After graduating from university, Stillman published a book entitled “The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World,” in which he examines the work of the seventeenth century clergyman Henry Dark. According to Stillman, Dark proposed that “if the fall of man also entailed a fall of language, it was logical to assume that it would be possible to undo the fall ... by striving to recreate the language that was spoken in Eden” (77). In conversation with Quinn, Stillman says that he has decided to reconstruct the world from its fallen state using “the dazzling clarity of his mind” (77). Quinn has read Stillman’s book and decides to introduce himself to Stillman as Henry Dark. Stillman responds, “Unfortunately, that’s not possible, sir ... Because there is no Henry Dark” (125). Quinn suggests that “perhaps I’m another Henry Dark. As opposed to the one who doesn’t exist” (125). Stillman responds “But you’re not *the* Henry Dark” (125). This exchange demonstrates the absurd subjectivity that Stillman’s construction of reality implies – what does not correspond with *his* notion of reality is dismissed as an impossibility. Stillman proceeds to reveal that he created the character Henry Dark to communicate his own controversial ideas.

After this encounter Stillman disappears. As a result, Quinn loses a case which has become his sole connection to reality. Quinn comments, “Everything had been reduced to chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities. There were no clues, no leads, no moves to be made” (141). As a result of his reliance on Stillman’s conflated interpretation of subjectivism, Quinn begins to construct “truth” himself. The case and his own actions are, he decides, governed by the “fates,” the administrators of chance who have plagued him since the beginning of the case:

The busy signal, he saw now, had not been arbitrary. It had been a sign, and it was telling him that he could not yet break his connection with the case ... He had tried to contact Virginia Stillman in order to tell her that he was through, but the fates had not allowed it...Was fate really the word he wanted to use? It seemed like such a ponderous and old-fashioned choice (169)

Quinn's arbitrary construction of truth and reality is alluded to in his preoccupation with observing the clouds and his effort to predict their motions, as he comments, "the spectrum of variables was immense" (179-80). Quinn's attempt to predict these motions is futile. The motion of clouds, like the greater reality to which it belongs, is eternally variable. Order and coherence are not inherent to reality, there to be discovered or derived through the powers of the human intellect. Rather, they are mere constructions which we create and impose on the world in our desire for meta-narrative.

From this point on, the temporal and spatial location become difficult to determine. Quinn retreats into what he refers to as memory: "He remembered the moment of his birth...he remembered infinite kindnesses of the world and all the people he had ever loved. Nothing mattered now but the beauty of all this" (200). Quinn is living his life in reverse, similar to the backward trajectory of Henry Dark's theory that by learning the language of innocence man could recover the whole, unbroken truth within himself. As Stillman comments through the voice of Henry Dark, "history would be written in reverse. What had fallen would be raised up; what had been broken would be made whole" (79). Quinn discovers at the end of this backward, inward trajectory, that truth only exists through man's construction. He states that reality is like the clouds, an immense, infinite spectrum of variables, constantly shifting, perspectival: "if it was in fact night here in New York, then surely the sun was shining somewhere else ... Night and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition. At any given moment, it was always both" (194). Quinn recognizes the disparate elements of the case, and indeed of reality itself, cannot conform to the imposition of a meta-narrative. His initial desire for coherence is not satisfied by the case, nor does the novel reach the clear and concise conclusion expected of a traditional detective story. This ambiguous conclusion refers back to the narrator's claim that "whether it means something or not is not for the story to tell" (7). This lack of order and coherence should not be regarded as a "failure": the postmodern incredulity towards meta-narrative ultimately abandons it as an obligation that must be fulfilled, challenging the demands of the detective fiction genre.

Quinn's discovery exemplifies Lyotard's argument that the consensus and summation of metanarrative does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. Postmodern knowledge, he says, refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable (Lyotard xxv). As the novel states in the opening lines, meta-narrative is not the responsibility of the narrative itself. In presenting this appropriation of narrative's purpose, the novel defies Todorov's statement that we read detective fiction because of the meta-narrative it promises to provide. Reader expectations have changed: "our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies" (Lyotard xxiv). In one scene, Paul Auster discusses *Don Quixote* with Quinn, arguing that the reader's expectation is merely for the novel experience to amuse: "To what extent would people tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement? The answer is obvious, isn't it? To any extent. For the proof is that we still read the book. It remains highly amusing to us. And that's finally all anyone wants out of a book – to be amused" (Auster 155). The novel can be both amusing and incomprehensible. This idea ultimately affirms Lyotard's statement that the conditions of

postmodernity are such that we are sensitive to narrative differences and tolerant of the incommensurable.

Works Cited

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