Among ghosts and multiple identities: Names, literary echoes and metaliterature in "The New York Trilogy" by Paul Auster

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Abstract

The naming process in the three spy stories published in the volume *The New York Trilogy* actually shows Paul Auster's metaliterary and metafictional way of writing and can be considered as a mirror of his original approach to literature. This paper proposes an analytic approach to Auster's onomastic choices in order to find in the anthroponyms his deep reflections about the role of the writer and to demonstrate that every name represents a frail fragment of a general loss of sense and referentiality of the written (and oral) sign. Hence it is possible to find in the short novels three categories of names: mirror-names, mask-names, and ghost-names, which show how difficult it is for every character (but also for the author himself) to recognize themselves and find their real identity in a labyrinth of doubles and multiple roles. So Auster is able to create suggestive and complex role-plays in which he also hides biographical trails and literary echoes. In the first story, for example, in order to mix up fiction and reality, he wants to create an evident confusion between two characters, both called Paul Auster as himself, while in the third one he chooses Fanshawe as the surname of his main character, just like the title of a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the authors Auster most appreciates. Other names and surnames, however, such as Stillman, or Blue, Brown, and Black suggest interesting reflections about Auster's work and thought.

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As soon as linguistic signs cease to follow their main purpose, losing *de facto* their referentiality, they actually stop referring to a univocal meaning. It is because of this loss that, as Roland Barthes says in his consideration about the sense of the written sign (the quoted text is translated from French), "letters which create a word, although each one has no rational meaning, are always looking for their liberty to mean something else" (Barthes, 1982). What, however, is this something else? How could we theorize and accept that, still quoting Barthes, the sign "is able to get continuously free?" (1982). This total and absolute freedom of the sign, first of all, implies necessarily the crisis of the natural correspondence between words (written or oral) and things. This is just what Peter Stillman Senior explains to Daniel Quinn during their meeting in the first short story of Auster's *New York Trilogy*. The following reflection, partially quoted from the text, represents also the starting point of this study:

> Words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They have not adapted themselves to the new reality. Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely. Consider a word that refers to a thing − 'umbrella,' for example. When I say the word 'umbrella,' you see the object in your mind. You see a kind of stick, with collapsible metal spokes on top that form an armature for a waterproof material which, when opened, will protect you from the rain. Not only is an umbrella a thing, it is a thing that performs a function − in other words, expresses the will of man. Now, my question is this: When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is the umbrella still an umbrella? (Auster, 1990)

So *words no longer correspond to the world*, says the man, because significance and sign are both overcome by the apocalypse and collapse of the linguistic sense and they "devolve into a collection of arbitrary signs" (Auster, 1990). The same happens to names, which lose

their role of guarantors of a unique and unequivocal identity and start to represent changeable and multiple interpretations, being capable − as Stillman says − of flinging "off in so many little directions at once" (Auster, 1990). Considering what Franco Ferrucci explains about the naming process of a literary character, the so-called *hero's baptism* (Ferrucci, 1986), we observe how this author also states that − translating the quotation from Italian − "language and its mutation − and so also the names we choose − are the result of human decay from the original condition". So it is very interesting to note that Ferrucci shares with the character Peter Stillman Senior the idea that human language and human names are deeply imperfect, just because they were born after Adam's fall.

So the anthroponym (name or surname) feels the rhythm of the loss of sense, which is followed up by the crashing of the whole being and becomes itself the trigger of a complex role-play, where it is possible to hide or to recognize ourselves in a name, and where a name is also able to evoke memories or literary echoes. This process, typical of Auster's fiction in general, actually dominates the three short novels of *The New York Trilogy*. The episodes, three peculiar spy-stories in a classical Austerian style, present an intricate metafictional labyrinth of lives and characters, in which the individual personalities entwine and merge together, and where the identity principle becomes ephemeral. In such a situation, through the naming process every character is able to confirm or refuse his *status*. Nevertheless, among the onomastic choices of this book, it is also possible to discover deep autobiographical trails which, together with many metaliterary fragments, become shades or memories. Here I wish to remark that interesting and thorough studies have already analyzed the onomastic process in Auster's works, and so I would like to recall the Italian essays by Pasquale Marzano (*Otto nomi italiani nelle opere di Paul Auster*, *L'onomastica nella Trilogia di New York* and *Dalla Polonia al Paese di Poe*), [*Eight Italian names in Paul Auster's works*, *Onomastics in The New York Trilogy* and *From Poland to Poe's Land*] in which the author studies and analyzes the innermost meanings of Austerian naming mechanisms, discovering lots of diverse and important suggestions, such as the presence of Italian names in Auster's works, for example, or the significant role of Walter Benjamin in his narrative, and asserting that the writer always applies a − translating from Italian − "semantic and allusive use of the names" (Marzano, 2003) and frequently uses *calembours* to demonstrate how every single anthroponym or toponym always hides a second and deeper meaning.

I also want to recall Annamaria Carrega's *Nomi di vetro: note sulla narrative di Paul Auster* [*Glass-names: comments on Paul Auster's narrative*], another Italian paper which focuses on the idea that *The Trilogy* is a complex work of destructuring of narrative forms and that the Austerian choice of names reflects − translating from Italian − "the obsession of an unknown double" (Carrega, 2006).

So, these studies are very exhaustive in explaining how the writer, in naming his characters, uses many different suggestions, such as literary reminiscences (and we can find names from Poe, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Cervantes), or biographical facts (his wife's and his children's names for example, or his literary pseudonyms). They also show how Auster really needs to include all the characters' names in that process of negation or agnition of themselves and of their own literary doubles. For these reasons, my essay will deal with other particular aspects to prove how the naming processes in the *New York Trilogy* are deeply related to the already-mentioned crisis of referentiality and have the purpose of demonstrating how, from time to time, a name can play the role of a mask, a mirror, or a ghost. So let's start from the so-called "Humpty Dumpty's semantics" (Manganelli, 1990). This expression, which I translated from Italian, was used by Giorgio Manganelli to explain the linguistic structure of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking–Glass, and What Alice Found There* and, even though coming from a different context, seems very appropriate for

the names of the *Trilogy*, especially if we consider that in *City of Glass*, the first of the three stories, Peter Stillman Senior, who theorizes the death of language, considers the little talking egg as a perfect metaphor for the human condition and also as a prophet, able to re-establish the old equilibrium among words, names and lost sense. So, let's read from the text:

> Humpty Dumpty: the purest embodiment of the human condition. Listen carefully, sir. What is an egg? It is that which has not yet been born. A paradox. For how can Humpty Dumpty be alive if he has not been born? Because he can speak. More than that, he is a philosopher of language. "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." (Auster, 1990)

It is from this character, a symbol of fragility and wisdom, that we can start analyzing our first name: *Henry Dark*, which is Peter Stillman's heteronym. First of all we observe that Stillman Senior explains that he chose this literary pseudonym because it had the same initials – 'H. D.' – as the egg. So we can recognize our first mask-name. It is a mask-name because the man hides his identity behind a fantasy character who, as the man himself explains, "sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation" (Auster, 1990). And we cannot forget that he locked his son in the dark for nine years to follow his insane project: to find the so-called God's language, that "will at last say what we have to say" (Auster, 1990). Therefore, by assuming the false identity of Henry Dark, private secretary to John Milton who wrote an essay titled "The New Babel", Peter Stillman illustrates to the world his own theory about language's downfall and shows to men the only way they have to "speak the original language of innocence and to recover, whole and unbroken, the truth within himself". However, the surname Dark also reveals something else. It is a quite explicit reference to the dark side of the character, to the madness which floods his soul, and also to his turbid past. To prove this consideration, it is useful to consider another Austerian main character: Henry Dunkel in *Brooklyn Follies*. Dunkel and Dark share the same name, the same acronym and so the same wish to hide themselves. Above all in their names there is the same allusion to obscurity. In fact Dunkel means *dark* in German, and this man, as his daughter explains, is a dark man who lives in a dark forest. Everybody in the book, however, knows him as Henry Brightman, with a surname that reminds us of light, because he wants to fight the darkness of his dishonest past with the pure brightness of a new identity. Lastly, Henry Dark is also one of several mirror-names, or better, to again quote Lewis Carroll, looking-glass names. So, referring to New York, where the novel is set, we can actually talk about a 'looking-glass city', and not only a city of glass, as the title suggests, where continuous identifications and alienated negations are generated by stolen, borrowed, or hidden names. During their second meeting, for example, Quinn introduces himself to Stillman as Henry Dark. Let's read their conversation:

> "I'm sorry," he went on, "but I don't remember your name".
> "Henry Dark," said Quinn.
> "Unfortunately, that's not possible, sir."
> "Why not?"
> "Because there is no Henry Dark."
> "Well, perhaps I'm another Henry Dark. As opposed to the one who doesn't exist."
> "Hmmm. Yes, I see your point. It is true that two people sometimes have the same name. It's quite possible that your name is Henry Dark. But you're not the Henry Dark."
> (Auster, 1990)

Then Stillman explains why he needed to be Henry Dark: "I had certain ideas at the time that were too dangerous and controversial. So I pretended they had come from someone else.

Els noms en la vida quotidiana. Actes del XXIV Congrés Internacional d'ICOS sobre Ciències Onomàstiques. Annex. Secció 9

2272

It was a way of protecting myself" (Auster, 1990). So a name is just like a mask to protect ourselves from who we really are. As we have just read, however, the man also states that *two people sometimes have the same name*. In fact his son has his same name: Peter Stillman. The identity-play becomes more and more involved as Stillman Junior, who has serious psychiatric problems, introduces himself to Quinn saying: "I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name. But Peter Stillman is not my real name. So perhaps I am not Peter Stillman, after all" (Auster, 1990).

Concerning this character and his distorted perception of reality, Aliki Varvogli observes: "In Peter's damaged world, there is no distinction between name and identity: because he does not know his real name, he is unsure of his own identity" (Varvogli, 2001). So the problem of identity, which is necessarily related to the loss of sense, is a focal point of the whole Trilogy and the basic theme of *City of Glass* as well. Auster himself, during an interview with Joseph Mallia, observes that:

> The question [is] of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. The whole process that Quinn undergoes in that book − and the characters in the other two, as well − is one of stripping away to some barer condition in which we have to face up to who we are. Or who we aren't. (Auster, 1998)

Hence, Young Stillman cannot recognize himself in his name because he is actually not able to recognize himself at all. But his family name Stillman, if we observe it with attention, says a lot: *still man*, because, despite all his father's efforts to elevate him over the limits of human language and make him a new Adam speaking God's language, he is still a man, he is so much a man, totally bridled in his guilty humanity.

Also the main character, Daniel Quinn, constantly gets lost in the chaos of his multiple identities and his literary duplicates, where agnition is impossible. Now let's read the incipit of the novel: "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" (Auster, 1990).

This is just like a perfect spy-story; but who is he? Who is Daniel Quinn? And who is he not? According to the plot he was a poet, but he stopped composing when his wife died and now he writes spy stories and, by a twist of fate, he is mistaken for the private investigator Paul Auster. So the man decides to pretend to be Auster and, as Virginia Stillman asked him, begins to follow Peter Stillman Senior, who could undermine his own son's safety. According to another observation by Aliki Varvogli, Quinn, therefore, is "the writer-turned-detective [who] seeks to erase his identity, not only to annihilate his former self but actually to divest himself of his very selfhood" (Varvogli, 2001). He is the poet fled from poetry who finds his refuge in novels, and he is the man who plays detective and wears several mask-names suitable to his multiple roles. He is, but also he is not, Daniel Quinn, and in the meanwhile he also is William Wilson, his literary pseudonym, and Max Work, main characters of his novels. As we can read from the text:

> 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. (Auster, 1990)

As soon as he pretends to be a real detective in real life, that animated voice gains a face and a body, and, with a *calembour*, we could affirm that Max Work actually becomes 'Max *at* work'. But it is very important to note that, first of, Quinn decides to be Paul Auster, stealing identity and name even from his own author. As in a paradox (we can imagine something like "Being Paul Auster", paraphrasing the famous movie *Being John Malkovich*

by Spike Jones), the writer is even able to reduplicate himself: he is at the same time the narrator, the mysterious New York detective, Quinn's new fictional identity and an actual novelist who lives in Brooklyn. Here it is important to remark what Enzo Caffarelli explains about the literary author's real name, which is considered, because of its *in limine* position on the cover, one of the so-called *lieux privileges*. In fact, he says − translating from Italian − "the author's own name, just like the title, incipit and ending sentences of a text, represent […] the main place of the writing process" (Caffarelli, 1997). But in the novel we are analyzing, the writer wants to overdraw and multiply his presence and so he moves from the 'threshold' to the pages, entering the story by giving his name to other characters. But what happens if the writer himself becomes a character, made up of paper and ink? He loses his human substance and, above all, he loses his name. This fictional paradox is evident in another, more recent book of Auster's, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007), in which the nightmare of non-agnition, that obsesses everyone in the *Trilogy*, spreads until it transforms itself into an actual amnesia. In this novel, all the roles are definitively overturned, and the author, who is now the main character, trapped in his own story, does not know who he is and, above all, does not remember his name. This anonymous man meets all the characters of his previous books and also Peter Stillman, who has finally conquered a simpler identity. So, while in *Travels* no one but the real writer, the one who signs the cover, is Paul Auster, and nobody has the same name, the *Trilogy* is the place of the confusion of names.

In fact, when Daniel Quinn goes to Auster's home, the identity-game becomes more and more complex, because the writer's house is like a mirror-house, when everybody is reflected in someone else's face and name. Here, the false Paul Auster meets the real one and, above all, Daniel meets Daniel. The detective, in fact, has the same name as the novelist's little son and when they meet − as we can read from text − every role is definitively confused:

> Auster saw the yoyo in his hand and said, "I see you've already met. Daniel," he said to the boy, "this is Daniel." And then to Quinn, with that same ironic smile, "Daniel, this is Daniel."
> The boy burst out laughing and said, "Everybody's Daniel!" "That's right," said Quinn. "I'm you, and you're me."(Auster, 1990)

In this obsessive delirium of twin names, every possibility of agnition is totally denied. In fact Quinn himself, just like Peter Stillman, writes in his notebook: "And then, most important of all: to remember who I am. To remember who I am supposed to be. I do not think this is a game. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name" (Auster, 1990).

Once again, the only certainty is the lability of being and its alienating reflection in a mirror-name. Such a crashing of identity, even the legal one, brings to mind the incipit and the explicit of the Italian novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* by Luigi Pirandello. At the beginning of the story the main character, in fact, introduces himself saying − translating from Italian − something like: "perhaps all I knew was that my name was Mattia Pascal" (Pirandello, 1955), and at the end, when he at least accepts the impossibility of escaping from his own identity and social role and begins to live a sort of *post-mortem* life, he affirms: "I am the late Mattia Pascal" (1955). But while Mattia only confides in his name, Daniel and Peter know theirs are fictional just like their identity.

As for Daniel's surname, there is still another reflection. When Stillman and the writer/detective first meet, the old man soon observes that Quinn rhymes with several words such as "grin, kin, bin" (Auster, 1990). In particular it is remarkable when he says: "A most resonant word. Rhymes with twin, does it not? And if you say it right, with been" (Auster, 1990). The rhyme Quinn/twin once again deals with the theme of the literary duplicate and *alter-ego* and could be a reference to the multiple identities of the main character. I think that

Els noms en la vida quotidiana. Actes del XXIV Congrés Internacional d'ICOS sobre Ciències Onomàstiques. Annex. Secció 9

2274

the second, Quinn/been, however, is very interesting. 'Been', as we know, is the past participle of the verb 'to be,' and so it represents something we collocate in the past. So it seems as if Stillman wanted to underline that this name concerns an obsolete, cancelled identity. But if we analyze the literary pseudonym *William* (without forgetting that it is also the name of an Edgar Allan Poe character who, as Pasquale Marzano observes, constantly fights against a perturbing and obscure *Doppelgänger*) and break it down in this way: WILL I AM, we can see that it is composed of the notion of being in the future in the first segment 'Will I', which is the interrogative form, and by the notion of being in the present in the second one 'I Am'. This nomen omen, probably unintentional, clearly establishes that Daniel Quinn, despite all his roles, is and will be an evanescent *alter-ego* who defends his false identity and not his real one. His destiny is to disappear completely, to dissolve, to shatter like a frail egg, as Humpty Dumpty fallen down from the wall, just like those words which "can erode, can be crushed. [and] you can turn them into shards, or gravel, or dust" (Auster, 1990).

Also, the names chosen for the second story, entitled *Ghosts*, appear as derelict of the death of sense. Let's read the incipit: "First of all there is Blue. Later there is White, and then there is Black, and before the beginning there is Brown" (Auster, 1990).

Blue, *White*, *Black*, *Brown*; in this episode people are nothing more than a visual perception, only connoted by a colour-surname. They are just ghosts, shadows without substance, as are their names. What do we know about them? Auster soon explains this to us: "The case seems simple enough. White wants Blue to follow a man named Black and to keep an eye on him for as long as necessary" (1990). The case is simple, they are simple, as long as the same perturbing role-play does not start; and as long as Blue does not feel himself trapped and suspects Black is spying on him and, above all, as long as he begins to recognize himself in Black. So, like an obsession, the theme of the looking-glass comes back and all the names are again confused. Concerning the mirror, we can read from the text:

> [Blue] finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before. If thinking is perhaps too strong a word, a slightly more modest term − speculation, for example − would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning to spy out, to observe, and linked to the word *speculum*, meaning mirror or looking-glass. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself (Auster, 1990).

So Auster chooses ghost-names, names without identity, because once again he wants to create an ambiguous onomastic and existential chaos in which all his characters are not able to know or to recognize themselves. Also in this story we can find some mask-names, good to hide unstable roles and uncertain acts. Still using a colour, for example, Blue becomes Rose (which is a flower but refers to a colour) and in the beginning of the episode there is a man, named Gray, who changes his surname to Green. Also previously, in the first story, as if the author wanted to anticipate the possibility of denying an identity behind a colour-name, Peter Stillman Jr. says: "in the winter I am Mr. White, in the summer I am Mr. Green. Think what you like of this" (Auster, 1990).

In *Ghosts*, Black and White are actually the same person. So Mr. White is not different from Peter Jr. and Daniel in trying to confuse his real being through a false name. But the surname Black, which also refers to the same theme of darkness already analyzed for Dark, is first of all the negative of White. Therefore, the mirror in which this man is looking at himself suddenly becomes a mask, and Mr. White turns into his opposite.

Finally, as I previously explained, a name can also evoke literary authors or characters. In fact, in the third and last story, entitled *The Locked Room*, the missing protagonist is Fanshawe, a name taken from a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the writers Auster most appreciates. This man, however, who ran away from his family and his previous life,

knows that he can only renounce his name to negate his identity; and so when his friend found him in Boston, he forbids him even to pronounce his name, saying: "Don't use that name, I won't allow you to use that name" (Auster, 1990). This is because he is afraid that in simply pronouncing it, his denied identity could be restored. Also in this spiral of negations and changing roles, once again there is a man called Peter Stillman. So the first mask-name, which is also a mirror and then a ghost-name, is still hiding another identity because, as one of the characters explains, "Names aren't important, after all" (Auster, 1990). Therefore, the name in *The New York Trilogy* is a residue among residues of the sense and, most of all, is the place of non-agnition.

As an appropriate conclusion for this study I chose a profound reflection taken from the last short story:

> We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another − for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself. (Auster, 1990:243)

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