

HOW PAUL AUSTER'S POETRY GOT INTO THE LOCKED ROOM:
INTERDEPENDENCE OF POETRY AND FICTION IN *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

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ABSTRACT: The present article argues that Paul Auster's early poetry, critically ignored when first published, gains renewed relevance when it is set in relation to his fiction, in particular with *The New York Trilogy*. Characters that appear in that work, like Quinn, Stillman Jr., Blue or Fanshawe, act as vessels through which Auster's poetic endeavors resurface, not in the form of direct quotations but as referred to, described and evaluated, setting thus the aesthetic parameters of the work, and creating, in the broader context of Auster's literary career, the effect of a *mise en abyme*. This narrative treatment of Auster's poetic voice makes it appear removed from the influence of Paul Celan, of whom Auster as poet, we argue here, is an epigone. Celan's linguistic negation, fragmented syntax, and symbolic minimalism informs Auster's poetry to the point that the latter becomes a derivative extension of Celan's work, a fact that the critique has not emphasized enough. *The New York Trilogy* becomes for Auster the narrative frame that allows him to explore influence in writing—the three novels in the trilogy deal with writers who investigate the example of another previous writer—, making his poetic work appear—especially in *The Locked Room*— as unshackled from Celan's powerful influence. Edmond Jabès and the *noir* genre inform Auster's framing technique to achieve such distance. *The New York Trilogy* develops into a reversal of influence: starting from the Celan-like writers present in *City of Glass*, continuing with the inversion of influence taking place between Black and Blue in *Ghosts*, and finally re-situating Auster's poetry as influential through its attribution to the absent figure of Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*. *The New York Trilogy* is, thus, both an exploration of poetic influence on Auster's poetry and a vindication of his own poetry.

KEY WORDS: Auster, Celan, influence, Jabés, fiction.

CÓMO LA POESÍA DE PAUL AUSTER ENTRÓ EN LA HABITACIÓN CERRADA:
INTERDEPENDENCIA ENTRE POESÍA Y FICCIÓN EN *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*

RESUMEN: El presente artículo sostiene que la poesía temprana de Paul Auster, críticamente ignorada en el momento de su publicación, adquiere una renovada relevancia cuando se pone en relación con su narrativa, en particular con *The New York Trilogy*. Los personajes que aparecen en dicha obra, como Quinn, Stillman Jr., Blue o Fanshawe, actúan como vehículos a través de los cuales resurgen las obras poéticas de Auster, no en forma de citas directas, sino como referidas, descritas y evaluadas, estableciendo así los parámetros estéticos de la obra y generando, en el marco más amplio de la trayectoria literaria de Auster, el efecto de una *mise en abyme*. Este tratamiento narrativo de la voz poética de Auster la hace aparecer desligada de la influencia de Paul Celan, de quien Auster como poeta, sostenemos aquí, es un epígono. La negación lingüística, la sintaxis fragmentada y el minimalismo simbólico de Celan informan la poesía de Auster hasta el punto de convertirla en una extensión derivativa de la obra de aquél, hecho que la crítica no ha subrayado suficientemente. *The New York Trilogy* se convierte para Auster en el marco narrativo que le permite explorar la cuestión de la influencia en la escritura —las

tres novelas de la trilogía giran en torno a escritores que investigan el ejemplo de otro escritor anterior—, haciendo que su obra poética aparezca —especialmente en *The Locked Room*— como liberada de la poderosa influencia de Celan. Edmond Jabès y el género *noir* informan la técnica de enmarque narrativo que logra tal distanciamiento. *The New York Trilogy* se desarrolla como una inversión de la influencia: comenzando con los escritores de rasgos celanianos presentes en *City of Glass*, continuando con la inversión de la influencia que tiene lugar entre Black y Blue en *Ghosts*, y finalmente recontextualizando la propia poesía de Auster como influencia mediante la adscripción de su autoría al desaparecido personaje Fanshawe en *The Locked Room*. *The New York Trilogy* constituye, así, tanto una exploración de la influencia poética sobre la poesía de Auster como una vindicación de su propia producción poética.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Auster, Celan, influencia, Jabés, ficción.

INTRODUCTION

The idea I want to develop and explore in this article is simply obvious and nevertheless I come to it reluctantly, because paradoxically it appears to diminish Auster's authorship: Auster's poems seem as if they had been written retrospectively by some of his characters. The likeliest candidates for having carried out the task are the characters that appear in *The New York Trilogy* (1987): Daniel Quinn, the mystery novel writer; the poet Peter Stillman Jr.; Peter Stillman Sr, recently released from an asylum; Black, the man who writes reports about Blue in *Ghosts*; Fanshawe, the vanished author in *The Locked Room*; or even the character «Paul Auster», who is both an assumed identity and a (real?) person in *City of Glass*. These characters are noticeably presented as writers and poets, but in Auster's works the list is not exhausted by them; actually, many characters in Auster's fiction may lend themselves in greater or lesser degree to the role of author of poems; this is so because the linguistic, artistic and identity conundrums that are expressed in the poems are the base for plot developments, and shedding and adopting identities in Auster's fictions, as it is exemplified with Marco Stanley Fogg in *Moon Palace* (1989), David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions* (2002), or the alternative lives of one character, Archie Ferguson, in *4321* (2017). The idea that characters in Auster's fiction could have authored his own poetry is explored in this article not as a way of diminishing the value of that poetry but as proof of the coherent and intertwined relation between Auster's poetry and the fictional world he developed.

My claim in this article accepts as seriously and artistically intended the impression of Auster's characters as potential authors of his poetry. I therefore consider this subtle presence of Auster's poetry in his fiction as an actualizing and validating strategy with which Auster's poetry is made relevant in a way it was not when it was first published. That is: the relevance that Auster's poetry was not acknowledged with by the literary critique is nevertheless effectively produced in the fictional world of *The New York Trilogy*, where the fact that some characters —Stillman Jr. and Fanshawe— are poets transforms their unrevealed poetic works into a secret fictional cornerstone, hidden but narratologically necessary for the disclosing movements, turns and reversals along which the plots of the three novels run. In this sense, too, Auster's poetry is the *groundwork* —a term employed as the title of an anthology of his works, including his poetry— for his metaphysical detective fiction: the mysteries that they disclose relentlessly point towards a literary space occupied ultimately by a written work that, even if only described —not actually quoted straightaway in the diegesis— fits the characteristics of Auster's poetic output.

The necessary first step to take, therefore, is to analyze Auster's poetry in order to specify its qualities and characteristics that allow it to be identified with the texts that, in *The New York Trilogy*, are constantly referred to: always on the brim of being disclosed and presented to the reader. In that silenced fashion, those texts become spells that haunt Auster's detective stories. This fits perfectly Auster's poems, which hover about silence as the evidence of the constant gap between the adscription of language to reality. This poetic focus of interest and its connected consequence, the exploration of attribution of personal responsibility to linguistic, social and legal acts, links Auster's poetic work to post-Auschwitz avant-garde poetry. Auster employs a minimalist, symbolic language that displays the influence of Jewish religious texts, and which had been endorsed before by other Jewish poets, such as Paul Celan. Paul Celan's poetry proves crucial in the formation of Auster's poetry, whose characteristics are, in many ways, a fervent response to Celan's and to his cultural representativity as a poet. The fundamental gesture, in Auster's career, of making reference to a poetic body of work –not to actual poems– within a narrative frame, a fact buried as an actant element within the plot, is traced here back to the construction of the poetic works by Edmond Jabès, themselves analyzed and greatly admired by Auster in his critical writings from his formative years (1970s). Jabès's creative method, developed by quotations and citations which detach and frame the expressions in them into a different interpretation, is connected in the present essay to the choice of the *noir* novel and its style to supply a frame within which the poems –the characters', yes, but ultimately Auster's poems– are referred to as part of a transcendental investigation, replacing the drudgery of academic research with the gripping twists and the sustained reflective voice characteristic of the American private-detective genre. It is necessary now, for clarification's sake, to show the main characteristics of Auster's poems.

THE POETRY OF OBLITERATION

The determination that runs through Paul Auster's poetry is that of not arriving at an achievement. That constitutes its main accomplishment, necessarily paradoxical. As François Hugonnier points out, Auster's poems made profuse use of negative prefixes, suffixes and negations –among them, «un-», «-less» and combinations such as «no one», «no more», «nowhere»–: «The word “nothing” occurs no less than thirty-five times» (Hugonnier, 2014: 150). The poems themselves, from their first phrases and their appearance on the page, seem to maneuver to obstruct or undo possible hints at agency in their own progress. Their advance is composed by denials. This can be illustrated with one poem from Auster's second poetic effort, a series of twenty-five poems titled *Unearth*, published in 1972; this is poem number 20:

Evening, at half-mast
through mulberry-glow and lichen:
the banner of the unpronounceable
future. The skull's
rabble
crept out from you –doubling
across the threshold– and became
your knell
among the many: you
never heard it
again. Anti-stars
above the city you expel

from language, turning, at odds,
even with you, repeal the arson-
eye's quiet
testimony.
(Auster, 2007: 51)

A haiku-like description opens the poem to a linguistic resistance that verges on a sort of impersonal curse («unpronounceable / future»). Instead of placing, enlarging or rooting the opening scene, the poem laboriously dissolves it. The place of dissolution is the mind («skull») of the poet. This «skull» is a space inhabited, a room not unlike the ones so often referred to in *The New York Trilogy*. The speaker comes across as a sort of non-person or nobody precisely by being inhabited by a crowd of people. His language is also marked by negativity: the stars are «anti-stars» and, by virtue of being expelled from language – what are «anti-stars» if not a way of linguistically negating the stars that betrays itself, a paralipsis?–, they are able to revoke the eyewitness testimony (a form of demanded, regulated language). The context of the last lines of the poem assumes legal overtones, as the words such as «repeal», «arson» and «testimony» denote. Wishing and its negative reversal –cursing– require the recognition of a sort of extra-legal authority for its pragmatic felicity conditions to be met, and it amounts to a regulation of a particular person or people's future. Such authority is obliquely expressed here by the relation that the poem establishes between language and stars: although it does so in the negative way –expelling anti-stars from language– the poem draws upon the etymology of 'desire', which connects human fate to what comes from the stars –from Latin *desiderare*, from *de-* + *sider-*, *sidus* heavenly body (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)–. The curse in the poem becomes the impersonality, intimated in the crowd («rabble») inhabiting his mind. That speaker addresses a «you» that is also the experiencer of the process detailed by the poem's development. The poem uses its language to expel itself from language: this is manifested, in «anti-stars», in the dismantlement of the haiku-like beginning, and in the lack of control of the addressed «you» over language at large, and it has cast over his intended limitation the previously hinted curse of «the unpronounceable future». What that «you» would think to have left out of the poem, is regulating the poem itself in the form of a curse, which here, rather than a negative desire, amounts to the negative of desire: wishing absolutely nothing came from the stars. Whatever may come from «anti-stars», it cannot be exempt from negativity itself. This «unpronounceable» negativity, meant to be canceled out as a symbol –«banner»– in the development of the poem, disrupts and appropriates the whole linguistic existence of the poem. The intended obliteration, transformed into writing, creates the whole poem.

The process studied here, that of creating an empty linguistic space in the poem *for the poem to happen*, is not an unusual compulsion in lyrical poetry. Giorgio Agamben situates that poetic process within the artistic aspirations of the medieval Provençal poets, or troubadours. Agamben considers that those poets pushed the limits of classical rhetoric when they stopped considering the poem as created from *inventio* and from dexterous treatment of previous topics:

The troubadours do not wish to recall arguments already in use by a *topos*, but rather they wish to experience the *topos* of all *topoi*, that is, the very taking place of language as originary *argument*, from which only arguments in the sense of classical rhetoric may derive. Thus, the *topos* can no longer be a place of memory in the mnemonic sense. Now it is presented in the traces of the Augustinian *appetitus* as a place of love. *Amors* is the name the troubadours gave to the experience of the advent of the poetic word and thus, for them, love is the *razo de trobar* par excellence. (Agamben, 1991: 68)

The reason (*razo*) for poetic writing in Auster's poetry coincides with that wish to experience the process of a topic creating its place in language; this explains why the previous poem from *Unearth* soon swerves away from its initial visual description, and why negativity overtakes the subsequent language of the poem. Agamben explains the experience of a topic taking place in language «in terms of nothingness» (69), illustrated by the famous poem by William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, «A song of nothing I will write» («Farai un vers de dreyt nien») (Smythe, 2000: 19). Agamben argues that «in the *vers* of William IX, the *razo* is no longer simply a *razo d' amor*, an experience of love and its dictation as the original place of the word» (1991: 72); actually, that poetic reason becomes a lyric debate in the poem (debate called *tenson*, *tençon*, or *tenzone* in medieval Occitan literature) with nothingness:

The *tenson* invites a reader to experience the place of language as nothing as *it* speaks from this nothing, so it is *atenzo de non-re*, a *tenson* of no-thing. The poets who compete in this *tenson* experience the event of language as if they were called to speak from nothing and to respond to nothing (*del dreg nien / mi voletz far responder*). (Agamben, 1991: 72)

This tensed debate that makes of the poem a channel from poetic voice's negativity to the poem's negativity does not arrive at Auster's poetry via Occitan poets but through his interest in and admiration for Paul Celan, their far from obvious heir, who became the most relevant lyricist of negativity in the twentieth century. For Auster, actually, Celan is even more than that; in an interview with Joseph Mallia, included in the miscellaneous book *The Art of Hunger*, Auster states that, among modern poets, when he was a young writer he was interested above all in «the German poet Paul Celan, who in my opinion is the finest post-War poet in any language» (Auster, 1993: 265). Auster addresses Celanian negativity in his article «The Poetry of Exile», in which he elucidates the main characteristics of Celan's poetry; that negativity is the reason behind the resistance in Celan's poems to «straightforward exegesis» (97); when reading those poems, «[o]ne is guided more by a sense of tone and intention than by textual scrutiny» (97). In Celan, Auster encounters the negating strategy –making the poem the site of its own disintegration– that is in action in Auster's own poetry: «Celan's poetry is continually collapsing into itself, negating its very premises, again and again arriving at zero. We are in the world of the absurd, but we have been led there by a mind that refuses to acquiesce to it» (97).

Celianian negativity has been explained from a biographical perspective as a dialogue with the dead carried out in the language of the killers, that is, the inherent tension in being a post-Auschwitz Jewish poet in German:

It is hardly possible to read a Celanian poem without taking into account the singular experience of the concentration camps, the inherent tension in being a Jewish poet writing in German, and above all, the recognition that the enormity of the task of remembering those who are dead means confronting the mass death that accumulates both in language and in reality. (Jorge Benito de Freitas, 2020: 276, my translation)

But this biographical perspective requires a more basic literary negativity which relates Celanian poetry to an «apophatic» definition (or «via negativa») of tackling the poetic experience. This literary negativity is brilliantly clarified by professors Cuesta Abad and Fernández-Jáuregui Rojas:

Let us dwell upon these apophatic statements: a poem means nothing, wants to say nothing; it is a *desideral* signifier whose sense is nothing other than the indeterminate set of its possible effects –all of which, in turn, are (in-)significant. However, for the poem «to mean nothing» implies meaning *in excess*, producing a remnant of literalness that, as a hard, unparaphrasable core, is never fully absorbed into any sense or interpretation. (Cuesta Abad and Fernández-Jáuregui Rojas, 2022: 35, my translation)

As we have seen above, this is exactly the position that Auster assumes, both as a critic and as a poet, and in this latter case even resorting to desideral references. Such perception of poetry amounts to a re-actualization of *trobare*: not dealing with received topics but «to find» and «to make tropes» –from the Latin *tropare*– (Cuddon, 1999: 947). Penetratingly, Auster argues that «Celan’s poems seem to explode on the page» (1993: 90), as a form of dissolution of any possible topic interpreted as confirmation or final statement. The poem takes its apparition in language as its topic, thus *closing upon itself* as to become a *trobar clus*, in which «technical virtuosity» is more relevant than «having anything to say» (Cuddon, 1999: 947). The «technical virtuosity» of the poem from *Unearth*, previously analyzed, becomes evident in the surplus of meaning that the treatment of negativity confers to it.

THE EPIGONAL CONDITION

Unearth appeared in 1974 as the issue number 3 of *Living Hand*, both a literary magazine and an independent publishing house based in Paris (From a Secret Location, n.d.). Previously Auster had published in it translations of poems by Jacques Dupin (issue 2) and had participated as author in the first issue. In issue number 1 of *Living Hand* Auster’s work appears next to texts by Edmond Jabès, Georges Bataille and Paul Celan translated into English (From a Secret Location, n.d.). Jacques Dupin and Paul Celan had previously collaborated in the journal *L’Éphémère* (Lo Feudo, 2013), which indicates that not even as a young translator of French poetry was Auster’s interest far from Celan’s poetry and influence. As we have pointed out, Auster’s own poems are brilliant examples of technical virtuosity in apophatic poetry. To create those poems, Auster dexterously applies the techniques that he had analyzed in his masters, especially in Celan. The problem in Auster’s poetry, however, is that such virtuosity betrays its epigonal condition with respect to Celan. There is a subtle but latent dependency of Auster’s poetry on Celanian vocabulary and techniques. In Auster’s poetry, in terms of Bloomian anxiety of influence, his poetry has only covered the phase of initial identification with the poet-hero, without arriving at the distinctive accomplishment of the *apophrades* phase, in which «the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work» (Bloom, 1997: 16). It is therefore all too easy to detect certain Celanian stylemes in Auster’s poetry, such as the fragmentation of grammar, which in Auster is not taken to the extremes of Celan: Auster’s grammar remains normative, but its contrast with short-line versification helps emphasize obliqueness and resistance to straightforward grammar. Another styleme taken from Celan is the use of neologisms, in Auster’s case to obtain mainly negative constructions, as we have seen in «anti-stars». To these stylemes, we must add the minimalist selection of vocabulary, which promotes a terse, compressive effect, and intertextual echoes among the different

poems, along with intertextual resonances (many of which are also refracted through Celan's influence¹).

The vocabulary Auster employs conspicuously reveals his epigonal condition, since the terms that keep reappearing in his poetry, and hence acquiring a surplus of meaning, have been previously used, in a higher or lesser degree, by Celan. The most relevant and recursive of those words are «stone», «wall», «roots», «ashes», «stars», «eye», «breath», «voice». These terms recur at various points across Auster's poems, where they function as symbols without fixed interpretation. As an instance of these terms' precedence in Celan, we may turn to the short poem «Flower»:

The stone.
The stone in the air, which I followed.
Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were
hands,
we baled the darkness empty, we found
the word that ascended summer:
flower.

Flower –a blind man's word.
Your eye and mine:
they see
to water.

Growth.
Heart wall upon heart wall
adds petals to it.

One more word like this word, and the hammers
will swing over open ground.
(Celan, 1972: 49)

The repetition of words comes across as a babble, as a nascent expression in the language. The precise reference and meanings of the words –«stone», «flower», «wall»– are not established, and the poem becomes an exploration of those referential possibilities. In its rejection of conventional logic, and of the role that words play in it, this poem produces not illogicity but an alternative logic that we find reproduced in Auster's poetry. So much does Auster's poetry treat such minimalist vocabulary the way Celan had previously done it that the implications of the term «stone» in Auster overlap with those devised by Celan. In Cuesta Abad and Fernandez-Jáuregui Rojas' account of the role of the term «stone» in Celan's poetry

Stein is one of the lexemes most frequently repeated in Celan's poetry. It means anything and, for that very reason, properly means nothing –or only its terse sound, which

¹ Michael Hamburger, the first translator of Paul Celan into English, comments on his influences in the following way: «What remains difficult is the degree to which Celan's art is anachronistic, as well as extreme, because he acknowledges no break in the development of modern poetry, no consolidation or revision of modernism. Celan's genitive metaphors, for instance, link his work to the later poetry of Rilke and to French Surrealism; and a clue to his artistic extremism, an extremism of dictation and syntax, occurs in his address *Der Meridiam*, where he suggested the possibility of "thinking Mallarmé to his logical conclusion"» (Hamburger, 1982: 294).

reverberates in other words like *Stern* ('star'), *Stunde* ('hour'), *Stelle* ('place'), *Stille* ('silence'), *Stimme* ('voice'), and above all, *stehen* ('to be' or 'to stand'). Stone, we know, may be that extrahuman and inorganic presence that still grants space and orientation to the speech-act of the poem; it may be that same word in the compact darkness of its meaning, a small offering placed upon a nameless grave, or the silence whistled through the brief click of its initial consonants. The image of the stone is atavistic: already in Pindar, death petrifies (*lithinos thanatos*), and thus all that is mortal carries within itself a return to stone. (Cuesta Abad and Fernández-Jáuregui Rojas, 2022: 120, my translation)

The English word «stone» cannot reproduce the homophonic echoes that Cuesta Abad and Fernández-Jáuregui associate with «stein» in German, but for both Celan and Auster *stone* is a paradoxically silent word: the site of meaninglessness and the silence of death. Even when there is no denying the influence of Samuel Beckett's plays and novels over Auster, particularly evident in the short play *Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven* (1976-77), a profound Celanian influence is revealed by the fact that the wall that the two characters of the play build between them and the audience is actually made not of bricks but of stones. The identification between words and stones in Auster is implicit in the following exchange:

LAUREL: (*Turning to Hardy.*) There's one more stone to go.
 HARDY: Shall we do it together?
 LAUREL: You took the words right out of my mouth.
 (Auster, 1997: 165)

Walls limit communication and alienate, but they also can make rooms and a possible space for the written word, as in the impending «writing of the wall» of *The Book of Daniel* (Chapter 5), echoed by Auster in the title of the book of poems *Wall Writing* (1975). Like Celan, Auster offers us stones in the poems, and as poems: tactile, fractured and inexhaustible texts of uncertain meaning. But we must underline this fact: Auster does it *after Celan*, employing even the same word –«stone»–, as if Auster's real poetic ambition were to incorporate seamlessly his own poems into Celan's work.

Such an endeavor –to contribute extra poems to Celan's work– stands in contradiction to the aporetic complexity of Celan's poetry, insofar as it denies the unsurpassable aporia of the witness role in Celan's poetry: the poem itself as witness. In the last lines of «Ashglory» Celan states «No one / bears witness for the / witness» (Celan, 2014). This is not an implied request for supplementary assistance, for a later witness to ascertain and support the former one. The idea of a later witness is impossible in Celan because the poem remains a witness as far as it is resistant to readability. Derrida, addressing this puzzle in his article on Celan's poem «Shibboleth», considers that the poem's resistance functions as a mode of rejecting established knowledge, the form of comprehension that a later witness might partake in and reinforce

In what I have elsewhere called its simple *remaining* [restance], the poem speaks beyond knowledge. It writes, and what it writes is, above all, precisely this: that it is addressed and destined beyond knowledge, inscribing dates and signatures that one may encounter, in order to bless them, without knowing everything of what they date or sign. Blessing beyond knowledge, commemorating through forgetting or the unimparted secret, partaking, still, in the unpartakeable. (Derrida, 2005: 34)

Auster's poems are attempts at conjuring up the Celanian process of «commemorating through forgetting»; but Celan's work resists repetition, as it would only amount to the reenactment of forgetting, and, consequently, its erasure. The poems

by Auster, unlike Celan's, point towards an absence not related to a commemoration. Auster's poetry emerges as a shadow of Celan's, fashioning negating and forgetting into an aesthetical activity. Auster is aware of this belatedness in his poetry and acknowledges it in various poems of *Wall Writing*; for the titles of some of them he uses words and phrases taken from Celan's work: thus, «Matrix and Dream» evokes Celan's «Radix, Matrix»; «The Meridian» brings to mind Celan's prose text «The Meridian», and so do other poems bearing titles related to astrological and geographical phenomena, such as «Provence: Equinox» or «Ecliptic. Les Halles». There are, moreover, two poems addressed to Celan in the collection; one is «White», which deals with Celan's suicide in the river Seine, using the image of water as a reference to the Flood in the Book of Genesis, and Celan's definition of poems as messages in bottles, articulated in «The Meridian», a definition to which Auster calls out attention in his article on Celan (Auster, 1993: 95). In the end, the message to Celan that this poem becomes tells him that his poetic stance is still necessary: «[...] that forty days / and forty nights / have brought no dove / back to us» (Auster, 2007: 84). In this way, the poem itself is granting Auster permission to keep at his poetic project as a sought-after continuation of Celan's work. The other poem devoted to Celan, «Fore-Shadows», is however less obviously addressed to him; Norman Finkelstein considers that this «Celan-like» poem is «addressed to victims of the Holocaust generally, but perhaps to lost Jewish writers in particular» (Finkelstein, 1995: 49). Consequently, it is arguably possible to consider this poem as addressed to Celan, himself a *lost* Jewish poet in many diverse senses. Given Celan's gravitational presence throughout the *Wall Writing* collection, lines such as the following address not only the Romanian-born poet himself but also the process of his physical incorporation into new poems, a goal toward which the younger poet aspires:

I breathe you.
I becalm you out of me.
I numb you in the reach
of brethren light.
I suckle you
to the dregs of disaster.
(Auster, 2007: 74)

The reference to numbness and to brethren brings Biblical Jacob and Esau to mind, and the former's trickery to make Esau give up his birthright. Such inversion of inheritance is hinted at in the very title of the poem, «Fore-Shadows», whose hyphenated «Fore-» amounts to the verbalization of a wishful *apophrades*: the reversal of the direction of the influence between the earlier poet and the latecomer, on this occasion, receives conceptual support in a passage from «The Meridian», in which Celan expresses his idea that the poet follows the poem and comes temporally *after* himself in the course of the poem: «these are encounters, a voice's paths to a perceiving thou, creaturely paths, sketches of existence perhaps, a sending oneself ahead to oneself, in the process of searching for oneself... A kind of homecoming» (Celan, 2005: 184). In «Fore-Shadows», the Jacob-Esau inverted birthright stands parallels to the Auster-Celan inverted influence. But what represents an advantage for Jacob –the possibility of exploiting Esau's hunger and vulnerability– impedes the achievement of poetic dominance and independence by the younger poet, who gets his poetic nourishment from the fractured poetic need expressed in the forerunner's work. «Fore-Shadows» discloses Auster's ambitious aspiration to Celan's inheritance, particularly in its final lines:

I haunt you
to the brink of sorrow.
I milk you of strength.
I defy you,
I deify you
to nothing and
to no one,

I become
your necessary and most violent
heir.
(Auster, 2007: 74)

Even in this brazen poetical effort –his attempt at Jacob’s swap for poetic birthright–, Auster ends up recognizing its derivative condition as a poet: the former poet is the nutritious negativity whose preponderant place Auster, despite his technical craftiness – manifested in its terse expression layered with muted reference–, cannot arrogate. As Derrida puts it, offering thus a defining distinction of Celan’s poetry, «One awaits less the return of the flowers, their blossoming to come, than the re-flowering of returns» (Derrida, 2005: 37). Auster’s poetry, as heir to Celan’s, offers only the first type of returns.

FICTION AS MEDIATING FRAMEWORK

In 1979 Auster published the prose text «White Spaces», which is his last poem. This prose poem is an attempt at reaching Barthesian «degree zero» of writing: it is an exercise in ascetic renunciation, a divestment of any external topic that is not the writing act itself. The opening of the poem leads us back to the terrain of the song about nothing composed by William IX, Duke of Aquitaine: «Something happens, and from the moment it begins to happen, nothing can ever be the same again» (Auster, 2007: 153). Auster wants to find –i.e. *trobare*– and turn into writing –*tropare*– the dialectics between the ‘nothing’ of the topic and the ‘something’ that is the text, and how such dialectics makes possible the topic not as a vacuum now but as silence and suspension:

It comes from my voice. But that does not mean these words will ever be what happens. It comes and goes. If I happen to be speaking at this moment, it is only because I hope to find a way of going along, of running parallel to everything else that is going along, and so begin to find a way of filling the silence without breaking it. (Auster, 2007: 153)

The text becomes the speaking voice that courts silence. By the mere occurrence of its continuing, however, the prose poem makes it impossible to embody or restore silence; the poem’s advance persistently points to the missing silence: «On the surface, this motion seems to be random. But such randomness does not, in itself, preclude a meaning. Or if meaning is not quite the word for it, then say the drift, or a consistent sense of what is happening, even as it changes, moment by moment» (Auster, 2007: 154). Such motion is describing a space, a landscape that Auster denominates in the poem «the realm of the naked eye» (2007: 155). In this terrain Auster realizes that, for his intended ascetism to be accomplished, «It is sometimes necessary not to name the thing we are talking about» (155). What makes this prose poem significant in Auster’s literary career is that, in it, an alternative way of creating silence comes about, a way that depends on the discursive interplay of fiction. That is, certain restrictions on fictional information can contribute to the representation of silence. That realization arises when, as an example of how the prose poem itself is annulling its purpose by its mere continuation, Auster

narrates the anecdote of the explorer Peter Freuchen in the Arctic: the explorer's own breath was becoming ice inside his igloo «until eventually there was almost no room left for his body» (2007: 159). We must not forget that 'breath' is one of the recursive terms that enter Auster's poetic vocabulary through Celan's work, so Auster continues in this prose poem under the shadow that Celan casts.² Through that anecdote, Auster introduces a narrative strategy that integrates anecdotes to illustrate the abstract concepts and paradoxes structuring his plots. What is most significant in the igloo anecdote is that readers are denied full disclosure, the reason being that the poetic voice has forgotten its conclusion: «Curiously, I do not remember how Freuchen managed to escape his predicament. But needless to say, he did escape» (159-160). What we find here is a Cervantesque gesture, a fictional erasure of the text like the one that evades telling us the outcome of the fight between Don Quixote and the Gallant Basque.³ Here, such forgetfulness has facilitated the artistic generation of silence in the poem; the poet has turned his own previous aesthetic requirement –namely, that it is «necessary not to name»– into the narration-mediated «needless to say».

«White Spaces» is not Auster's farewell to poetry but an anticipatory sample of the position that poetry is going to occupy in his subsequent work: it will materialize as a constructed silence in his narrative. The Freuchen anecdote works as a frame around a void –the explanation not provided– which arouses the reader's curiosity. It is in that generated emptiness where negativity is made textually productive, avoiding exchanging its silence for an explanation. It is therefore crucial, for an understanding of this shift – where poetry is transposed from apophatic statements on absence and silence into a constructed narrative void in Auster's prose– to examine the models of such framing available to Auster in his formative years. Two likely sources for it are Edmond Jabès's poetry –so much admired by Auster– and *noir* fiction. Auster used both in combination in *The New York Trilogy*, exploiting the stylistic conventions of the detective novel – information-gathering, fragmented data, and opaque motivations within the plot– to articulate a version of Jabès's conception of *The Book*.

JABÈS'S SWAY OVER AUSTER'S EARLY FICTION

The title «White Space», the same one as Auster's poem but in the singular, features in one section of *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès, which indicates the relevance of this French writer –born in Cairo, Egypt– had acquired for Paul Auster by the time of the composition of his prose poem. In *Ground Work* Auster includes an article on Jabès, originally published in 1977 in *The New York Review of Books*, and a long interview with Jabès, which means that this poet occupies more pages than any other author in Auster's selection of essays. Auster subscribes to the view that Jabès's principal work –*The Book of Questions*– constitutes «a new and mysterious kind of literary work», which is «[n]either novel nor poem, neither essay nor play» (Auster, 1990: 183). What Auster places particular emphasis on in his article is the use of meta-textual frames that structure the book's multiple voices, narrative fragments, and dialogues, all of them embedded in texts that refer to other texts. The texts appear framed by quotations from

² Analyzing in depth this Celanian shadow over the Freuchen anecdote, it is possible to detect a connection with the poem «Etched Away From», in which Celan tackles a similar impossibility: to inhabit his language and live. The exteriority to language in the poem consists of «the hospitable / glacier rooms and tables» (Celan, 1972: 84).

³ «At this critical point our delightful story stopped short and remained mutilated, our author failing to inform us where to find the missing part» (Cervantes, 1950: 75).

rabbis who quote books that do not exist: «One of Jabès's most original strokes is the invention of the imaginary rabbis who engage in those conversations and interpret the text with their sayings and poems» (186). Paul Auster translated the essay in which Maurice Blanchot evaluates the results of such technique, namely «the powers of interruption at work» (Blanchot, 1972: 34), which is obtained by such mutual embedding:

This is perhaps the book's most important characteristic: this holding back, even when it must reply to the most painful blows. It is a book of discretion, not because he refrains from saying all that must be said, but because he holds himself back in the space or the time of pause, where the Law, the pure arrest of the forbidden, comes to ease its severity, and where the cry becomes '*patience*', '*the innocence of the cry*'. The tender endurance of the song. (36)

The Book of Questions refers to a story, the one of the young lovers Sarah and Yukel, but it does not intend to furnish the reader with its full details. Richard Stamelman considers that «[t]his may explain perhaps why Jabès's works are 'books' and not 'novels'» (Stamelman, 1991: xviii). The discretion that Blanchot points out in Jabès's work actually establishes that the reader is given scope for reflection and speculation. Jabès literally promotes that attitude in his work:

A good reader is, first of all, a sensitive, curious, demanding reader. In reading, he follows his intuition.

Intuition –or what could pass as such– lies, for example, in the unconscious refusal to enter any house directly through the main door, the one that by its dimensions, characteristics and location, offers itself proudly as the main entrance, the one designated and recognized both outside and inside as the sole threshold.

To take the wrong door means indeed to go against the order that presided over the plan of the house, over the layout of the rooms, over the beauty and rationality of the whole. But what discoveries are made possible for the visitor! The new path permits him to see what no other than himself could have perceived from that angle. All the more so because I am not sure that one can enter a written work without having forced one's own way in first. (Jabès, 1991: 5)

Good readers are already placed at the very threshold in *The Book of Questions*, in the initial dialogue between unnamed voices. The voice that answers questions –with cryptical, enquiring answers– says that the rabbis present in the book are «privileged readers»: «They foresaw the book. They are prepared to encounter it» (Jabès, 1991: 31). These rabbis are inside and outside, commenting the book that they both create and dismantle in their comments. In his article on Jabès, Auster states that «the commentaries are in some sense an investigation of a text that has not been written» (Auster, 1990: 187). It is implied, then, that the comments of the rabbis, who stand for privileged readers, are investigators of the book in which they enter. Such construction of quotations allows for narrative detachment. The frame of citations creates a literary space of suspension that renders interpretation an unceasingly unstable process, resistant to closure or finality. Such is the distance that Auster incorporates to his narrative in *The New York Trilogy* with the employment of different narrators and with the iterative narration of cases of literary influence in each novel of the trilogy. Auster's fundamental gesture as a novelist is, then, to appropriate the investigative genre of detective fiction as a framing device, within which texts authored by different characters remain latent, only referred to, hovering at the threshold of the diegesis yet never fully disclosed. Such metatextual construction is inspired by Jabès's work, and the suspended space created for the literary work implied in the novels becomes a lodge for Auster's poetry, silenced but reachable for the «good

reader» who «take[s] the wrong door» (Jabès, 1991: 5) and, like those readers, both outside and inside the narrative. Auster's poetry then would attain renewed literary value, one constructed by the fictional worlds of *The New York Trilogy*, in which Celan's influence over his poetry could be held in abeyance.

THE DETECTIVE NOVEL AS A SITE OF INFLUENCE REVERSALS: *CITY OF GLASS*

Auster began his career as a novelist in the late 1970s as a simple and direct way to make some money by writing (Auster, 1997: 121). His first effort was *Squeeze Play* (1978), a detective novel, written under the pseudonym of «Paul Benjamin», which, since Auster's full name is Paul Benjamin Auster, is only a partial pseudonym. Likewise, the novel does not represent merely a work of sustenance; Auster invests it with his thematic preoccupations and his ambition to experiment with the genre, although keeping the narration strictly within its cliché-ridden limits:

One of the conventional plot gimmicks of these stories was that the apparent suicide that turns out to have been a murder. Again and again, a character would ostensibly die by his or her hand, and by the end of the story, after all the tangled strands of the intrigue had finally been unraveled, it would be discovered that the villain was in fact responsible for the character's death. I thought: why not reverse the trick and stand on its head? Why not have a story in which an apparent murder turns out to be a suicide? As far as I could tell, no one had ever done it. (Auster, 1997: 120)

It is clear that the detective novel affords Auster a site for reversals, both at a minor scale, as the in the case described above, but also at a more ambitious one, as in *City of Glass*, where a writer of detective novels becomes a detective, and whose investigation leads him to writing again, now not as a novelist but as a writer conscious of the writing experience: of the phenomenology of his own writing process. Ben Libman considers this kind of inversions that Auster develops within the diegesis of his metaphysical detective fiction as Auster's greatest contribution to literature; according to Libman, the early detective stories emphasized reading: «Consider the ability of Sherlock Holmes to “read” a case from a bulge in a hat, for example. At stake in each story is whether the clues are being correctly read» (Libman, 2024). Conversely, Libman underlies, «the writing of the crime –by Watson– is by comparison effortless» (Libman, 2024). We may add to Libman's appreciation the fact that characters who are writers, like Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass* or the unnamed narrator in *The Locked Room*, are influenced in their decisions and in their writing by other characters who also write. The same applies to Blue in *Ghosts*, where the demands of surveilling another writer, Black, force Blue's writing beyond the conventional boundaries of the detective report. In the trilogy, writing reacts to another writing, underlying the process of influence among writers.

Literary references are woven in the three novels of *The New York Trilogy*, starting from the choice of character's names, evoking characters from canonical American authors (Hawthorne, Poe and Melville) and spreading to allegorical resonances reminiscent of Kafka and Beckett. Aliko Varvogli argues that Auster does not follow Emerson's demand for originality and authenticity in writers, and that such dissent is exemplified in Auster's choice to make of the character Peter Stillman Sr., an Emerson-like figure:

Auster's disagreement with this doctrine [Emerson's belief in the Romantic genius] is clearly registered in *The New York Trilogy*, where Emerson metamorphoses into an inspired madman who inhabits a text which owes its particular nature as much to cultural

events and literary texts, ranging from the writings of Kafka and Beckett to film noir and baseball, as to Auster's 'original' authorship. (Varvogli, 2001: 23)

Varvogli presents Emerson as a refused influence that, precisely through such refusal, becomes inscribed in the plot mechanism of *City of Glass*. So, for Varvogli, the centrality of influence, travestied as its denial, affects crucial narratorial decisions in that novel. Varvogli identifies Emerson as a counter-reference for Peter Stillman Sr., contrasting him with the explicit allusions to American authors; yet *City of Glass* may be more coherently read as conditioned by the literary work in which the role of influence had let itself felt more definingly, molding Auster's «'original' authorship»: his own poetry.

As Stephen Fredman argues, the most characteristic features of Auster's novels can be ascribed to «the intrusion of poetry into narrative prose» which «have remained remarkably open to poetry and to what are thought of as poetic concerns», which, in Auster, Fredman does not associate with lyricism but with «portraying dilemmas of understanding» and «characters whose driving concerns are epistemological» (Fredman, 2004: 11). The epistemology of literary creation is indeed explored in *City of Glass*: the novel presents characters whose actions are motivated by the dynamics of the poetic influence which conditioned the genesis of Auster's own poetry. Auster configures Daniel Quinn's endeavors as an allegory, as if enacting the different phases of a detective investigation gone awry. We find in the novel a model of poetic writing embodied in Peter Stillman Jr., whose display of disconnected, identity-fracturing speech (or *writing*, as the reader encounters it in the novel) turns Daniel Quinn into an apprentice who applies to himself the (poetic) lesson he has witnessed. Thus, when Quinn meets Peter Stillman Jr. the latter is only able to speak in a sort of babble in which he questions his own identity: «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, 2006: 19). In his speech he repeats as a sort of refrain: «I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name» (26). Daniel Quinn shows the signs of Stillman's influence in the entries he writes in his red notebook, where his sentences established the similar analytical treatment about his impersonation of the detective named «Paul Auster»:

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. On the other hand, nothing is clear. For example: who are you? And if you think you know, why do you keep lying about it? I have no answer. All I can say is this: listen to me. My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name. (48)

This instance of influence can be used to support the argument that the relation of Auster's poetry with Celan is fictionalized in *City of Glass*:⁴ the most relevant feature of Peter Stillman Jr. is that he is a poet; he speaks in fragmented, poetic bursts related to childish babble, something also present in «Radix, Matrix», a poem by Celan in which the mother tongue is emphasized through childish language: in it «anaphora and other forms of repetition generate an impression of babbling or, at times, obsessive chanting»

⁴ It may be possible to argue that Peter Stillman Jr. really represents Louis Wolfson, whose book *Le Schizo et les Langues* is analyzed by Auster in the essays included in *Ground Work*. But it is also possible to maintain that, to Auster, Louis Wolfson actually stands for Celan: both are traumatized by the experience of being expelled from their mother tongues, by the loss of the *motherhood* of the language. This is what Auster says about Wolfson's relationship with her mother and her language: «The mother is the dominant, suffocating presence of the book, and when Wolfson speaks of his "langue maternelle", it is clear that his abhorrence of English is in direct function to his abhorrence of his mother» (1990: 123).

(Cuesta Abad and Fernández-Jáuregui Rojas, 2022: 16, my translation). Stillman Jr.'s fractured voice is the consequence of his father's traumatizing linguistic experiments, designed to «purify» language and restore it to a pre-Babel state. Peter Stillman Sr., in this sense, embodies a project of purification that resonates with the Nazi regime's attempt to regulate not only language but also religion and ethnicity. Celan himself lived the paradox of being a German-speaking Jewish poet after the Holocaust, a contradiction inscribed in his work. Within this constellation, Daniel Quinn –himself a writer– occupies a secondary, derivative role: he assumes the task of protecting the poet Stillman Jr., and he does so under the borrowed identity of «Paul Auster», a metalepsis that is further amplified by the fact that, in a Cervantesque gesture, the literary author «Paul Auster» is visited by Daniel Quinn. This articulation of metalepses, presented both as fictional and real and grounded in the author's name, projects the fictional world into extradiegetic reality, thereby challenging the ascription of literary works to stable authority. The novel refers to an entry in the red notebook that could function as a commentary to Quinn's vivid reaction to Stillman Jr.'s influence: «He thought through the question of why Don Quixote had not simply wanted to write books like the ones he loved –instead of living out their adventures» (Auster, 2006: 154-155). In his investigation Quinn combines both options.

In Auster's metaphysical detective fiction living equals writing. In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn, conditioned by the influence of Stillman Jr. and his own assumed detective role, suffers a social and personal dissolution which is actually depicted in the novel, and therefore appears in the diegesis as more radical than that of Peter Stillman Jr. (Celan's counterpart); such an impression arises because Quinn's collapse is framed as the outcome of a moral commitment –his illusory guardianship of the poet– whereas Stillman Jr.'s fragmented identity results from his father's linguistic experiments, which, apart from a brief reference, remain outside the diegetic unfolding of the narrative.

GHOSTS AND THE LOCKED ROOM: DIEGETIC AND EXTRA-DIEGETIC APOPHRADES

Ghosts is based on Poe's short story «William Wilson», as scholarship on Auster has shown (Arce Álvarez, 2014; Varvogli, 2001), and in his novel Auster creates «a new version of [Poe's] idea of the double making of it a metaphor of the creative act of writing» (Arce Álvarez, 2014: 27). The characters, allegorically named as colors –Blue, Black–, had appeared previously in a play that Auster composed in the 1970s; its plot contains the outline for *Ghosts*, which would develop that outline with excursions, physical, in the form of walks and errands performed by the characters, and literary, in interjected digressions in which the narrating voice wanders away from the main plot, as, for example, when it provides the reader with a detailed summary of the film *Out of the Past* (1947). The interdependence portrayed in the novel between the characters Blue and Black can be further complicated if we include in it the concept of apophrades. For apophrades to happen there must be a subordinate relationship, in artistic terms, between a master and an apprentice, a subordination that the works of the apprentice have to be able to invert retrospectively, in such a way that the former master's works would appear as derivative from the apprentice's most authoritative *oeuvre*. In the novel, Blue, earnestly trying to fulfil his role as a detective, writes professional reports that, however, fail to meet the expectations of White, the person who has commissioned him to observe Black. And ultimately, Blue himself does not deem them appropriate:

As he reads over the results, he is forced to admit that everything seems accurate. But then why does he feel so dissatisfied, so troubled by what he has written? He says to

himself: what happened is not really what happened. For the first time in his experience of writing reports, he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say. (Auster, 2006: 176)

Black spends his time primarily reading and writing, thus setting a model for Blue. Blue undergoes a process of apprenticeship during his commission and, in executing it, unwittingly supplies Black with a profusion of reading material: the reports he composes accumulate in Black's room, where Blue finds them once he breaks into Black's apartment; Blue at first thinks those texts were Black's original creations:

He picks up the papers he has stolen, hoping to distract himself from these thoughts. But this only compounds the problem, for once he begins to read them, he sees they are nothing more than his own reports. There they are, one after the other, the weekly accounts, all spelled out in black and white, meaning nothing, saying nothing, as far from the truth of the case as silence would have been. Blue groans when he sees them, sinking down deep within himself, and then, in the face of what he finds there, begins to laugh, at first faintly, but with growing force, louder and louder, until he is gasping for breath, almost choking on it, as though trying to obliterate himself once and for all. (Auster, 2006: 224)

What Blue experiences here is the sudden, unexpected conscience of apophrades, which appears to be for him an unacceptable irony. This apophrades comes about within the fictional realm of this very allegorical novel: it is a diegetic result of an unfolding narrative that enables the inversion of influence, problematizing, as a consequence, the concept of authorship, something that Auster himself effectively accomplishes here with an appeal to intertextuality that relates both Poe's narrative and his own one-act play *Blackouts*.

The novel *The Locked Room* offers a different treatment of influence and of apophrades. In this novel the writings of Fanshawe are given to a friend of his with whom Fanshawe had shared his childhood and adolescence. This unnamed detective-investigator edits for publication his oeuvre, which coincides with what Auster had published –as literary author– by then: two novels (one is titled *Blackouts*, like Auster's play), three plays and poetry. When the narrator is commenting on Fanshawe's notebooks we come to the following metatextual moment: «“In a book I once read by Peter Freuchen”, Fanshawe writes, “the famous Arctic explorer describes being trapped by a blizzard in northern Greenland. Alone, his supplies dwindling, he decided to build an igloo and wait out the storm”. [...]» (Auster, 2006: 300). The anecdote is the same one as in «White Spaces» and the sentences from the prose poem appear *verbatim* in the novel. We come into a biographical and fictional *mise en abyme*, further stressed by the commentary that precedes it:

In his work, Fanshawe shows a particular fondness for stories of this kind. Especially in the notebooks, there is a constant retelling of little anecdotes, and because they are so frequent –and more and more so toward the end– one begins to suspect that Fanshawe felt they could somehow help him to understand himself. (Auster, 2006: 300)

The unnamed narrator offers a commentary on Fanshawe's writings here that appears to be modeled on the rabbinic glosses found in Jabès, but which also applies to Auster's writing in the two novels that precede *The Locked Room*. The continuous metalepsis that this implies allows hence that the characteristics of the poetry that is attributed to Fanshawe in the novel should also describe Auster's own poetic writing. We can detect this in Ellen, Fanshawe's psychologically troubled sister, who is introduced in the novel

to show the disestablishing effect that his poems were able to attain; Fanshawe's mother describes those poems and their effects to the unnamed narrator:

Ellen's the reason why he never published any of his work, you know. She's why he quit Harvard after his second year. He was writing poetry back then, and every few weeks he would send her a batch of manuscripts. You know what those poems are like. They're almost impossible to understand. Very passionate, of course, filled with all that ranting and exhortation, but so obscure you'd think they were written in code. Ellen would spend hours puzzling over them, acting as if her life depended on it, treating the poems as secret messages, oracles written directly to her. (Auster, 2006: 310).

Those poems are commented on, but not shown in the diegesis of the novel, except by the Freuchen anecdote, which is not labeled as poem by the unnamed narrator. However, by means of those comments Auster's complete poetic work is evoked metonymically, executing in the novel thus a reversal of metalepsis in which the poetry written by Auster is allocated into the diegetic realm. Through the attribution of Auster's own texts to the ghostly character of Fanshawe in the novel, Paul Auster's poetry is given an alternative, fictional life, which entails crafting a 'ghost' writer of his own work. However, the reversal in *The Locked Room* involves more than the diegetic realm. It places literary works composed by Auster in the fictional space, conferring on them a fictional status which cannot fully adhere to them since they simultaneously are inside and outside the book, latently present in it in such a way that they are not expressed but neither suppressed by the narrative frame.

The Locked Room may be considered *just a frame*: it refers to a *hors de texte* which is Fanshawe's literary work. Such frame, then, is built around a literary content that is not subject to diegetic restitution; on the contrary, its void is a necessary requirement for the edifice of the narrative construction. However, that literary content is described and commented on, as we have already seen when Fanshawe's mother describes the effect of those texts on her daughter. A crucial comment on Fanshawe's writing occurs at the end of the novel, when the narrator finally starts to read the notebook that Fanshawe has left for him outside the locked room in which the reclusive author lies hidden:

I read steadily for almost an hour, flipping back and forth among the pages, trying to get a sense of what Fanshawe had written. If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I understood very little. All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity. It is as if Fanshawe knew his final work had to subvert every expectation I had for it. These were not the words of a man who regretted anything. He had answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again. I lost my way after the first word, and from then on I could only grope ahead, faltering in the darkness, blinded by the book that had been written for me. (Auster, 2006: 370)

The elements presented in this comment –amounting to the articulation of negativity as constitutive of textual development– coincide with those that Auster, as critic, had already foregrounded in his readings of Celan's poetry:

Celan's poems resist straightforward exegesis. They are not linear progressions, moving from word to word, from point A to point B. Rather, they present themselves to a reader as intricate networks of semantic densities. Interlingual puns, oblique personal references,

intentional misquotations, bizarre neologisms: these are the sinews that bind Celan's poems together. It is not possible to keep up with him, to follow his drift at every step along the way. One is guided more by a sense of tone and intention than by textual scrutiny. Celan does not speak explicitly, but he never fails to make himself clear. There is nothing random in his work, no gratuitous elements to obscure the perception of the poem. One reads with one's skin, as if by osmosis, unconsciously absorbing nuances, overtones, syntactical twists, which in themselves are as much the meaning of poem as its analytic content. [...] Celan's poetry is continually collapsing into itself, negating its very premises, again and again arriving at zero. (Auster, 1993: 97)

In its evaluation of Celan's poetry, this fragment underlies strategies, such as the use of «oblique personal references» and of «intentional misquotations», which later materialize as programmatic tenets for Auster in the composition of *The Locked Room* –the most radical misquotation present in it consisting in his systematic avoidance of quotation itself–. Moreover, both critical commentaries emphasize the paradoxical clarity of Fanshawe's writing and Celan's poetry as a departure from straightforward communication; in both quotations, the constitutive element of the poetic texts is identified as their textual unfolding impelled by the performance of erasure. The specification that the «final purpose» of words in Fanshawe's texts was «to cancel each other out» (Auster, 2006: 370) is consonant with the perception that Celan's poetry «is continually collapsing into itself, negating its very premises, again and again arriving at zero» (Auster, 1993: 97). We apprehend clearly that both comments are interchangeable.

If the comments on Fanshawe's and Celan's texts are interchangeable, the texts themselves may be considered so. The fictional space demarcated in *The Locked Room* permits the interpretation that Fanshawe's literary production stands on equal footing with Celan's. So, the competition over literary influence in the novel is not between Fanshawe and the unnamed narrator, the latter demonstrating the effect of influence at the biographical level, traversing a life that Fanshawe has already appropriated. The novel distinctly exhibits the derivative life of the unnamed narrator so that such a condition seems allotted to him exclusively. No influences over Fanshawe's work are acknowledged, a striking fact within a novel characterized by its profusion of literary references and intertextual resonances. In terms of literary inheritance, Fanshawe stands isolated and severed from continuity.

In *The Locked Room*, a fictional, influence-free void is generated, and the references that point to it configure a *hors de texte* devised for the extra-diegetic poetry authored by Auster. The novel, thus, results in a dynamic site of inversion that renders possible not only that Fanshawe's poetic work should come to be identified with Auster's poetry, but it also induces the erasure of the influence exerted by Celan's works on Auster, by virtue of the auto-legitimation that the novel's diegetic world confers on Fanshawe's poetry. Thus, the novel establishes a correlation between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic through a metaleptic projection of its fictional literary commentary onto Auster's poetry, thereby effecting its critical dissociation from Celan. In *The Locked Room* Auster's fiction achieves the apophrades that Auster, as poet, did not attain in relation to Celan with poems such as «Fore-Shadows». In doing so, the novel also assumes the poetics of negativity that Agamben relates to the instauration of a topic in language «in terms of nothingness» (Agamben, 1991: 69), in this case, the diegetic suppression that Fanshawe's work corresponds to. *The Locked Room* exploits the poetry of Auster as a quarry for negativity, which coherently determines that, with analeptic precision, the novel's narrative development adopts as its template the closing lines of his poem «Quarry»:

I sing, therefore, of nothing,
 as if it were the place
 I do not return to—
 and if I should return, then count out my life
 in these stones: forget
 I was ever here. The world
 that walks inside me

 is a world beyond reach.
 (Auster, 2007: 136)

CONCLUSION

The New York Trilogy can be analyzed as a construction that translates in a narrative form the poetics of negativity which define Auster's poetry. As in his poetry, the novels deploy apophatic strategies in order to reinforce negation as their constitutive basis. This is the way in which Auster's poetry is projected into and preserved in his narrative, undergoing a critical process that the novels, adapting Jabès's technique of commentaries to this end, exploit as the motivation for the characters' *peripetias*. The process unfolds through successive phases: the destabilization of the identity in *City of Glass* as the result of the effect of poetic influence, whose origin is ascribed to the recognizable figure of Paul Celan; the dislocation of influence in its unintentional reversal, realized by the diegetic apophrades of Blue with respect to Black in *Ghosts*; and the assimilation of the extra-diegetic poetry authored by Auster into the void that critical comments and evaluations open up within the narrative development of *The Locked Room*. The consequence of the fictional process enacted in *The New York Trilogy*, therefore, is that Auster's poetry emerges cleansed of the epigonal condition that thematically and stylistically signals its artistic debt to Celan's work. By assimilating his own poetry to the space of void and silence elaborated by the framing narratives within *The New York Trilogy*, Auster finally fulfils his own original poetic purpose of producing an active negation: a 'nothing' that creates.

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