

**‘A LABYRINTH OF ENDLESS STEPS’: FICTION MAKING,  
INTERACTIVE NARRATIVITY, AND THE POETICS OF SPACE  
IN PAUL AUSTER’S *CITY OF GLASS***

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The title of Paul Auster’s first novel in *The New York Trilogy* suggests a glass city in which light refracts from all surfaces and intersects at all angles. In this essay I will explore how *City of Glass* engages, structurally and allegorically, with the prismatic process of creating fictions.<sup>1</sup> In *City of Glass* the creation of fictions is addressed at the level of writing a novel, but it also points more generally to matters of creative thinking, and more specifically to the possibilities and limits of narrative. At the same time, the process of creative writing is intertwined with the construction of psychoanalytic, national and geographical narratives in ways which foreground their mutual imbrication and fictionality.

Throughout *City of Glass*, the process of creating fictions is paradoxical and consists of alternatives, contradictions and disjunctures. *City of Glass* both courts and rebuffs realism, and is structured round doubles, superimpositions and coincidences. I will therefore begin by discussing the way *City of Glass* embodies its own processes; and the relevance to this of the concept of interactive narrativity. I will then analyse the way acts of detection, psychoanalytic dramas, and narratives of nation and place are allegorically intertwined in the novel, so they both reinforce and call each other into question.

**Structures and Processes**

*City of Glass* is, of course, a postmodern text, and exemplifies many of the literary and cultural characteristics we associate with the postmodernist fiction of DeLillo, Doctorow, Pynchon and others, particularly in its rebuttal of any central resolution or abiding truth. Invoking the idea that the creative process involves a combinatorial logic, Joseph Gemin suggests that postmodernism, with its ‘ironic self-reflection, double meanings and contradictory frames of reference’ may well offer the ‘cultural preconditions’ for creativity.<sup>2</sup> Gemin draws on Albert Rothenberg’s theory of the creative process, as ‘janusian’: Rothenberg claims that:

In the janusian process, multiple opposites or antitheses are conceived simultaneously, either as existing side by side or as equally operative, valid or true. In an apparent defiance of logic or physical possibility, the creative person consciously formulates the simultaneous operation of antithetical elements or factors, and develops those formulations into integrated entities and creations.<sup>3</sup>

Rothenberg also draws attention to the homospatial process, which may occur at a subsequent stage of a work and involves: 'conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities'. He claims that these processes 'seldom appear(s) in the final product', but obviously in the case of postmodern works such as those by Auster this is not true: the work both reflects and embodies its own processes.<sup>4</sup>

Neither Rothenberg nor Gemin account for the differences between creative processes in different cultures. In fact, lacking from Gemin's account is a discussion of the way such processes enable an engagement with cultural difference and political relativism: the embrace of histories, sexualities and subjectivities rather than their singular alternatives. However the janusian theory is pertinent to the structural aspect of *City of Glass*. The novel is comprised of a network of narratives which interweave and work allegorically in several directions at once. Any attempt to hold *City of Glass* in a particular interpretative position will automatically result in converse possibilities suggesting themselves. As in a complex system, a pressure at one point in the system affects unpredictable changes at others. In this way the process of conceiving the novel could be said to be foregrounded in the novel itself, and incorporated into the novel's structure.

For this reason it is useful to think of *City of Glass* as a form of interactive narrative in which the reader continually rewrites the text. Interactive narrativity is a term used in digital writing for the process whereby readers make choices between different narrative possibilities, or even redirect the narrative through informational input. It is more than a formal device, however, it is a way of exploring, even influencing, cultural and political directions in the text. I use the term interactive narrativity here, mainly as a theoretical construct, because it has more specificity for a narrative such as *City of Glass* than Roland Barthes' idea of the writerly text. It accounts not only for the reader's interpretative role, and the similarity between writing and reading, but also for the way that *City of Glass* continually suggests all the alternative narrative paths it could have taken, which are suppressed in a more conventional narrative.

The story, at least initially, has considerable narrative propulsion, due to its affiliation with the detective story genre, though interrupted by pseudo-theological and historical tracts. Quinn is a one-time poet who now writes murder mysteries. Quinn takes on a new identity, and pretends to be a private detective, Paul Auster. This is in response to a phone call to his apartment from Virginia Stillman, and her physically and linguistically impaired husband, Peter Stillman, who wish to hire Auster as a detective.

The Stillmans want Quinn to follow Peter's father, a writer also called Peter Stillman, who locked up Peter Jnr. as a child, and who, they say, may try to murder Peter now he has been released from prison. Subsequently Quinn reads a scholarly work by Stillman Snr., which enshrines Stillman's obsessive desire to return America, language and the world to a prelapsarian state, through, amongst other things, the construction of a contemporary Tower of Babel in contemporary America. He then tracks down Stillman Snr. at the railway station, though he has to make a choice between two identical versions of Stillman who appear: one poor, one affluent. Choosing the poor version, Quinn charts Stillman's daily walks in New York, watches as he collects junk, and visually maps out Stillman's steps as the words Tower of Babel. After talking to Stillman, Quinn eventually loses him, is unable to contact Virginia and Peter anymore, and is reduced to destitution. Nevertheless, he fanatically keeps up his vigil for Stillman. Eventually he is told by the character Paul Auster, whom he contacts, that Stillman has committed suicide. Quinn returns to Peter and Virginia Stillman's deserted flat, loses interest in the case, and focuses on his own writing. At the very end of the story the narrator claims not to know anything about Quinn's whereabouts, and Quinn could be alive or dead. In fact *City of Glass* is a detective story with a difference, since there is no single neat solution. Stillman Snr. may have killed Virginia and Peter Stillman, or they may have killed him. Or the whole scenario might have been the Stillmans' fabrication. The plot teases narrative desire, but fails to satisfy it, just as Quinn's erotic fantasies about Virginia Stillman are never fulfilled.

*City of Glass* is, therefore, in some senses, as much a poem as a narrative, in that there is no resolution to the storyline, and its metaphorical and allegorical possibilities become more important than the sequence of events which comprise the story. In fact, *City of Glass* explores the aporia of narrative, the point at which narrative complexity deconstructs into poetic allegory and metaphor.<sup>5</sup> For Quinn, creative fulfilment goes hand in hand with realising that narrative resolution and closure are not important.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the narratives of which *City of Glass* is comprised, from the detective story, to the city as text, to Stillman Snr.'s fictionalised account of the history and future fate of America, continuously modify each other, in a dynamic, multi-faceted way. The detective story is the main allegory in which the others are embedded (there are several stories within stories, what Brian McHale calls 'chinese-box worlds'),<sup>7</sup> but there is no one scheme into which every idea fits, nor is there an allegorical hierarchy. Rather there is much doubling and superimposition. For example, the detective story, and walking in the city, function as allegories of both reading and writing, but reading and writing also function as allegories for the construction of myths about national identity. The literal and metaphorical are not in a stable

binary opposition, for example some of the time Quinn metaphorically writes, sometimes he literally writes. Nor is there the conventional one to one relation between sign and concept we find in traditional allegory, though, as de Man and others have suggested, such multiplicity is always potential in traditional allegory because of the rhetorical nature of language.<sup>8</sup> The effect is to create multi-layered, constantly shifting relations between different levels of the text, so that, for example, the detective story can be viewed as a metaphor for writing fiction, for psychological development, and for the discovery and development of America, with different possibilities predominating at different times.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the allegorical structure of the novel constantly resonates with intertextual references, particularly the short stories of Poe, breaking down any sense of a circumscribed and internalised text world.

Throughout *City of Glass* realism and non-realism are intertwined. The description of Quinn amongst the crowd at the railway station, for example, is highly suggestive of the bustle of everyday cosmopolitan New York, but the ghostly corpse-like figure of Peter Stillman, dressed entirely in white and partly talking linguistic babble, belongs to a different order of reality. Throughout the novel certain elements of narrative veracity are courted, but are also stretched and subverted. This sometimes occurs though the manipulation of time, for example, where ‘text time’ is very different from ‘story time’.<sup>10</sup> When Quinn first meets Peter Stillman Jnr., for instance, Stillman’s monologue only takes a few minutes to read but, according to the narrator, lasts for a huge amount of time:

*The speech was over. How long it had lasted Quinn could not say. For it was only now, after the words had stopped, that he realized they were sitting in the dark. Apparently, a whole day had gone by. At some point during Stillman’s monologue the sun had set in the room, but Quinn had not been aware of it. Now he could feel the darkness and the silence, and his head was humming with them. (City of Glass, p.23)*

When, towards the end of *City of Glass*, Quinn takes up residence in the Stillmans’ old flat, the physical laws of time seem to change (the periods of light become shorter and shorter), and food appears, provided by an unexplained agent. Coincidences also sometimes occur in ways which stretch credibility. Ostensibly the appearance of the two identical Stillmans is open to a rational explanation, for example that they might be twins, or that Quinn might be hallucinating. However, such a coincidence at a pivotal point in the story tends to suggest that physical norms are being subverted to explore psychological and political realities in non-realistic ways. This use of ‘unreality’ allows the novel to function more effectively as a multi-

layered allegory, but also points to the way that fictions in general are both socially founded and mythical.

### **Acts of Detection**

Throughout *City of Glass* the detective story, and its lack of resolution, can be interpreted as an allegory for the process of creative writing. The act of detection figures as the fictional impulse: it enables all the characters to either play out other people's fictions, or persuade others to respond to their own fictional demands. This not only suggests that fiction-making is a kind of performance, it is also interactive narrativity run riot. The motivation for Quinn, for example, initially seems to be a desire to refuel his creative energies by participating in a fiction, and this outweighs certain ethical and rational constraints. When Quinn takes on a prosthetic identity as Auster,<sup>11</sup> the wish of authors to vicariously inhabit the lives of their characters reaches its extreme. At the same time Quinn is himself manipulated as part of the fictional demands of Peter and Virginia Stillman, and the metafictional character Paul Auster.

That the detective story is a narrative archetype has often been noted, and *City of Glass* states that 'the writer and detective are interchangeable' (*City of Glass*, p.8). Narratives consist of a sequence of events which are rearranged in the discourse of the narrative, (again the notions of 'story' and 'text' are relevant), similarly the detective has to put together non-linear clues and find a solution to the crime. However, the detective story genre is also a good example of how narratives can be extremely constraining because they demand narrative closure and exclude anything which does not fit into them, either formally or ideologically. What is important about the act of detection in *City of Glass* is the way it ceases to have any importance and dissolves, so that Quinn was not only 'sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine.' (*City of Glass*, p. 104) However it is when the narrative breaks down that Quinn starts to write purposefully:

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

We are told at the end that Quinn's way of writing changes and possibly becomes more poetic, and that he, 'felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower.' (*City of Glass*, p.130). The creative

process therefore involves a 'lytic' stage of breaking unities apart, and then forming new totalities through reassemblage.

Within the detective story framework, there is a slippage between authors, readers and characters, which suggests that creativity lies as much with the reader as the writer: again the concept of the interactive reader is relevant. Quinn adopts the name of Paul Auster, but previously had worked under the pseudonym William Wilson, also the name of the character in Poe's famous doppelgänger short story.<sup>12</sup> When faced with a situation Quinn sometimes wonders what his character Max Work would do. Peter Stillman Snr. mistakes Quinn for his own son, while Stillman Snr. also emerges as Quinn's alter ego when Quinn loses him, 'it felt as though he had lost half of himself.' (*City of Glass*, p. 92) Both Stillmans are called Peter, the name also of Quinn's dead son. Paul Auster's son is called Daniel like Quinn, and Quinn's initials are the same as Don Quixote, about whom Paul Auster, the character, is currently writing. When Quinn reads Peter Stillman's walks round New York, it is not simply a data-gathering exercise, but a creative superimposition of a visual and linguistic imagining: it is a form of writing. More generally Quinn as the detective both 'reads' and 'writes' the situation he is in: the two activities are interdependent.

In fact, Quinn's approach to his detective work revolves around what I call 'the paradox of process'. In this process the fictional writer courts and balances opposite modes of working so that they exist in a dynamic tension. For example, sometimes Quinn lets events dictate to his direction: 'I seem to be going out', he says, as he goes to his first appointment with the Stillmans (*City of Glass*, p. 12). At other times, however, he superimposes his own imaginative formations on events as they arise. Similarly, he uses an incremental, inductive process to generate his fictions, but also engages with discontinuous, non-logical thinking. As a result, through Quinn, the process of creative writing emerges as culturally constructed and subjectively cast, intellectual and affective, analytical but irrational, self-generating and yet produced through particular frames of reference. The process also merges popular culture and high art: starting with the detective story genre and then moving outwards. Most significantly Quinn uses the detective story to trigger his creative thinking and act as a restraint, but eventually breaks out of it to shift what Margaret Boden would call his 'conceptual space'.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, lack of resolution in the detective story demonstrates how the creative process never disappears from the final text, but is always present in the choices which have been made to pursue certain possibilities and suppress others. The traces of these choices are more present in *City of Glass* than in most novels, constantly reminding us of the arbitrariness of

the concept of 'final text'. The most graphic choice that Quinn has to make is between the two Stillmans. Here Quinn's position is analogous to the reader of a hypertext who must choose between two equally weighted alternatives. His choice seems to be political (he chooses the poor Stillman rather than the rich one):

*Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's. For a second Quinn thought that it was an illusion, a kind of aura thrown off by the electromagnetic currents in Stillman's body. But no, this other Stillman moved, breathed, blinked his eyes; his actions were clearly independent of the first Stillman. The second Stillman had a prosperous air about him. He was dressed in an expensive blue suit; his shoes were shined; his white hair was combed; and in his eyes there was the shrewd look of a man of the world. He, too, was carrying a single bag: an elegant black suitcase, about the same size as the other Stillman's.*

*Quinn froze. There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end. At that moment, the two Stillmans started on their way again. The first turned right, the second turned left. Quinn craved an amoeba's body, wanting to cut himself in half and run off in two directions at once. 'Do something,' he said to himself, 'do something now, you idiot.'*

*For no reason, he went to his left, in pursuit of the second Stillman. After nine or ten paces, he stopped. Something told him he would live to regret what he was doing. He was acting out of spite, spurred on to punish the second Stillman for confusing him. He turned around and saw the first Stillman shuffling off in the other direction. Surely this was his man. This shabby creature, so broken down and disconnected from his surroundings—surely this was the mad Stillman. Quinn breathed deeply, exhaled with a trembling chest, and breathed in again. There was no way to know: not this, not anything. He went after the first Stillman, slowing his pace to match the old man's, and followed him into the subway. (City of Glass, pp. 55-56)*

The creative process, then, is one in which many different possibilities present themselves. Formal and ideological choices have to be made, but this does not mean that there are nevertheless right or wrong choices: other outcomes would always have been possible. These other possibilities hover round the text, posing the texts which might have been, as well as the text that is. At the end, like the reader of *City of Glass*, Quinn reviews all the choices he could have made, and wonders how things would have turned out if he had taken other paths, explored other creative possibilities:

*Quinn wondered, for example, why he had not bothered to look up the newspaper reports of Stillman's arrest in 1969. He examined the problem of whether the moon landing of that same year had been connected in any way with what had happened. He asked himself why he had taken Auster's word for it that Stillman was dead. He tried to think about eggs and wrote out such phrases as 'a good egg', 'egg on his face', 'to lay an egg', 'to be as like as two eggs'. He wondered what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman instead of the first. He asked himself why Christopher, the patron saint of travel, had been decanonized by the Pope in 1969, just at the time of the trip to the moon. 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. He wondered why he had the same initials as Don Quixote. He considered whether the girl who had moved into his apartment was the same girl he had seen in Grand Central Station reading his book. He wondered if Virginia Stillman had hired another detective after he failed to get in touch with her. He asked himself why he had taken Auster's word for it that the cheque had bounced. He thought about Peter Stillman and wondered if he had slept in the room he was in now. He wondered if the case was really over or if he was not somehow still working on it. He wondered what the map would look like of all the steps he had taken in his life and what word it would spell. (City of Glass, p.129)*

It is important to notice here that Quinn's thoughts not only span the situation in hand, but point outwards to historical events: both their relationship with the situation he is in and their relationship to each other. In this way Quinn's creative choices are linked, as they might be in a hypertext, to fictions created by politicians, the media and other national mythmakers.

### Psychoanalysis and Language

In order to theorise the multi-dimensional nature of the creative process further, we need to examine the psychoanalytic underpinning of the story. Particularly relevant here is Lacan's concept of the real, imaginary and symbolic. For Lacan the real is the pre-oedipal, pre-mirror stage: a prelinguistic realm. The imaginary is the stage of doublings, opposites and reflections which follows the mirror stage before the child enters the symbolic order, the realm of language.<sup>14</sup> The creative act, I suggest, always tries to recapture the inarticulate realm of the real, but needs to inhabit the imaginary, the actual creative process in which possibilities manifest themselves without exclusion. The symbolic order is the medium in which the artist works, and the site at which the creative object actually appears.

The narrative of psychoanalysis is a linear one, in which the child passes from identification with the mother and then self-identification in the mirror stage, through the imaginary and the castration complex, into the symbolic order. But for the creative writer, it could be argued, the real, imaginary and symbolic are synchronic, and writing involves negotiation with these different spheres not only during the production of any piece of writing, but throughout the writer's working life. The creative writer gestures towards the real, works within the imaginary, and negotiates the symbolic, deftly moving between those three spheres. The real, however, is unattainable, and the writer also fears becoming trapped in the symbolic, which encourages stultifying conformity and death.

On one level *City of Glass* is an Oedipal drama, and Peter's fear of being murdered by his father can be seen as a dread of castration. There is even a hint that Peter did indeed have an incestuous relationship with his mother, since in his long initial monologue to Quinn, he says, 'Big father said: it makes no difference' (*City of Glass*, p.16). This Oedipal drama could be seen to symbolise the dilemma of the writer who wishes to find again the unified relationship with the mother where there is no division. The oedipal drama, however, itself consists of multiple superimpositions and inversions. For arguably castration has already taken place, because Peter was hidden away by his father and severed from language. This had a continuing impact on him: he seems to be trapped somewhere between the real and the imaginary. Likewise fathers and sons do not retain stable positions in the text. Quinn is, for example, identified by Peter Stillman Snr. as his own son. And the theme of the murderous father is counterpointed by the redemption of the lost son (since both Quinn and Stillman have in different ways lost their sons, Quinn through death and Stillman through alienation). Again there is no one cohesive psychoanalytic scheme that can be applied.

In *City of Glass* the desire to attain the real can be seen in Peter Stillmans Snr.'s absurd but telling search for the perfect language, one which, according to Stillman, would not be subject to the arbitrary link between signifier and signified. In an activity which seems to parody the structuralist idea that language makes the world, Stillman collages rubbish from the city and renames it in the hope of constructing the perfect language. In his own words this is:

*A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our 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, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent. It's made a mess of everything. (City of Glass, p.77)*

Stillman's perfect language, then, is one in which there is an absolute fit between signifier and signified, but the search for such a language raises dilemmas about creative writing in the postmodern era. In his book *The Garden and The Tower: Early Visions of the New World*, Stillman discusses the use of the word 'cleave' in Milton and the 'two equal and opposite significations' it suggests, which Stillman has found to be 'present in all Milton's work' (*City of Glass*, p.43). He contrasts a prelapsarian language with a postlapsarian language:

*To illustrate his point, Stillman isolated several of these words—sinister, serpentine, delicious—and showed how their prelapsarian use was free of moral connotations, whereas their use after the fall was shaded, ambiguous, informed by a knowledge of evil. Adam's one task in the Garden had been to invent language, to give each creature and thing its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable. After the fall, this was no longer true. Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language. (City of Glass, p.43)*

This desire to heal the rift between signifier and signified is part of Stillman's larger quest to restore unity to American society, and to find again a prelapsarian truth and innocence. Speaking to Quinn, Stillman says, 'the world is in fragments, sir. And it's my job to put it back together again.' (*City of Glass*, p.76)

Through Stillman's quest for a perfect language, the novel adumbrates a central question: whether a language where signifier, signified and referent could be as one would be desirable even if achieved. For it is the divisions between signifier and signified, the slippages and ambiguities of language, that give it life, and result in creative texts. The perfect language would exist in the Lacanian real where there is nothing to say. Stillman's quest for such a language is quite contradictory, even within his own intellectual terms, because in his book he admits that life could only start to flourish after the fall, that good could only exist in the face of evil, and that the new world, even in its early beginnings, was never a harmonious place (*City of Glass*, p. 43). He also enjoys the wordplay central to postmodern poetry, which the perfect language would erase. For example when he first meets Quinn he speculates on the fact that Quinn's name rhymes with twin. And he celebrates the antics of Humpty Dumpty, who in *Alice and Wonderland* thought he could make a word mean anything he liked. Stillman says:

*Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs, Humpty Dumpty was a prophet, a man who spoke truths the world was not ready for. (City of Glass, p.81)*

One of Peter Stillman Snr.'s problems is that he is bound up with the idea of a natural language, but in fact language is not natural and is always conventional, arbitrary and culturally entrained. His attempt to shut his son Peter up, and isolate him, seems to be an attempt to find such a natural language, but the results make Peter socially and conversationally retarded, his conversation a parody of a pre-linguistic realm. Although Peter's language has an ambivalent status (perhaps it does engage with realities which the conventional structures of language suppress) Peter seem to be a casualty of his father's experiment. Like the wild children of history, such as Peter Hanover and Kasper Hauser (referred to in one of the factual/historical passages of *City of Glass*, pp. 33-35), he finds it difficult to become articulate and adjust to social norms.

### **Narratives of Nationhood**

Peter Stillman's desire to repress difference in language is paralleled by his wish to homogenise history, and reduce the complexities of nationhood as a

discursive formation. Homi Bhabha has talked about the way that homogeneous and linear narratives suppress differences within nations, and exclude or subordinate some histories at the expense of others. For Bhabha, such narratives convey the impression that history has evolved fairly and teleologically, rather than by exclusion.<sup>15</sup>

Stillman's history and future vision of America, itself a form of fiction making, does exactly that. His book presents a largely westernised, colonialist, masculinist view of the development of America, in which America is globally central and Christianity is the supreme religion. The whole history of slavery is excluded in this account, while the history of indigenous Americans is figured in two mutually opposed and yet equally racist ways: as 'prelapsarian innocence' or as 'devils in the form of men.' (*City of Glass*, p. 42) Here history becomes a fiction of exclusion and privilege, in which alternative histories are either suppressed or stereotyped.

Stillman looks back to the building of the Tower of Babel as a utopian era in which all language was integrated and whole. He speculates, through the colonial 17<sup>th</sup> century figure of Henry Dark (fictionalised as the private secretary of John Milton), that the Tower of Babel will rise again in contemporary America as a unifying linguistic, political and cultural force, a paradise on earth:

*Turning to the Babel story, Dark then elaborated his plan and announced his vision of things to come. Quoting from the second verse of Genesis 11—'And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shi-nar; and they dwelt there'—Dark stated that this passage proved the westward movement of human life and civilisation. For the city of Babel—or Babylon—was situated in Mesopotamia, far east of the land of the Hebrews. If Babel lay to the west of anything, it was Eden, the original site of mankind. Man's duty to scatter himself across the whole earth—in response to God's command 'to' be fertile...and fill the earth'—would inevitably move along a western course. And what more Western land in Christendom, Dark asked, than America? The movement of English settlers to the New World, therefore, could be read as the fulfilment of the ancient commandment. America was the last step in the process. Once the continent had been filled, the moment would be ripe for a change in the fortunes of mankind. The impediment to the building of Babel—that man must fill the earth—would be eliminated. At the moment it would again be possible for the whole earth to be one language and one speech. And if that*

*were to happen, paradise could not be far behind. (City of Glass, p.47-48)*

This is obviously a very Americocentric view of the world. In addition, one language and one space could not embrace the diversity of race, sexualities and culture in America, or the world at large. And the Tower of Babel is a symbol, not only of the unity of language but its subsequent disunity, for God punished the builders by destroying it. The image of the Tower of Babel, which Stillman puts forward as a symbol of freedom and unity, is in fact a powerful image of repression, uniformity and brainwashing. It is more like a prison than a paradise:

*Once completed, the Tower would be large enough to hold every inhabitant of the New World. There would be room for each person, and once he entered that room, he would forget everything he knew. After forty days and forty nights, he would emerge a new man, speaking God's language, prepared to inhabit the second, everlasting paradise. (City of Glass, p.49)*

Narrative, then, can tell powerful stories, but it can also close off, marginalise and exclude. *City of Glass* suggests that new narrative strategies are required to open out history and national identity: interactive, multiplicitous and non-linear narratives which dispel what Mark Currie calls 'the homogenising strategies of historicist narration'.<sup>16</sup> Here again the writer must identify with the real and imaginary of the national consciousness, rather than simply capitulate to constructions of the nation trapped within the symbolic order of national institutions and rituals.

### **Writing the City**

The search for a new language is entwined with walking in New York, most graphically in Stillman's walk, and Quinn's interpretation of it, which again is an allegory to do with creating fictions. Time and again the idea of walking in the city is compared to feeling lost. We are told that for Quinn:

*New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. (City of Glass, p.3-4.)*

For Quinn dissolving a specific sense of place is a positive experience. To be lost in the labyrinth is to find a new identity:

*Motion was of the essence, the act of putting one foot in front of the other and allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (City of Glass, p.4)*

Moreover, the bodily experience of walking the city highlights the physical aspect of writing, the involvement at a bodily level. Walking is both a kind of performance and a form of writing. Walking becomes what I have previously called performative-inscriptive, using Austin's definition of a performative as an illocutionary act which achieves what it says, while it says it.<sup>17</sup>

Quinn also observes that Peter Stillman seems lost as he walks, and yet at the same time keeps within certain geographical boundaries. Steve Pile, emphasising the spatial aspects of Lacanian theory, suggests that the city can be thought of in terms of multiple superimpositions of the real, imaginary and symbolic.<sup>18</sup> This seems to be true of New York in *City of Glass*. The streets are structured like the symbolic order, and are organised in regimented grids, but in *City of Glass* they also function as the Lacanian imaginary, in which Stillman and Quinn lose themselves in a welter of oppositions, reflections and shadows. And throughout, Stillman and Quinn are in pursuit of the real in the hidden and inaccessible aspects of the city. To see walking the city as a creative process is to see it as a negotiation between these different realms.

The city, of course, exists on both a horizontal and a vertical axis, and walking writes New York in subversive ways which disrupt its phallic power structures: another way of putting this is that it feminises the city. Relevant to my argument that walking the city functions as an allegory for creative writing is the work of de Certeau, and his idea that walkers in New York create complex contradictory urban texts which subvert the rational, totalising and economically-driven 'concept-city' viewed from the top of the World Trade Centre. Through pedestrian activities 'the city is left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power.'<sup>19</sup> De Certeau makes analogies between walking, and the linguistic figures of asyndeton and synecdoche, to show how pedestrians fragment the spaces they traverse, or replace totalities by fragments. In synecdoche the part is taken for the whole, while asyndeton involves the suppression of linking words such as conjunction and adverbs, either within sentences or between sentences.<sup>20</sup>

Walkers, therefore, write experimental texts: that is texts which subvert the normal structures of place, power and language, and which foreground discontinuity and multiplicity rather than unity. The city functions as what, in my recent book on Frank O'Hara, I called a hyperscape, a term I constructed from the words hypertext, landscape, and Frederic Jameson's hyperspace. A hyperscape, like the labyrinthian hypertext from which it derives its name, is similar to Rothenberg's janusian process: it is a site characterised by multiple oppositions. The hyperscape occurs:

*through the interface between the embodied subject and the city, in which each continuously remoulds the other, revealing new political and subjective spaces. It is possible because neither embodied subject nor city is static, unified or impermeable. The result of this reconfiguration, in its most radical form, is the hyperscape, a postmodern site which is discontinuous, contradictory, heterogeneous, economically uneven and constantly changing.<sup>21</sup>*

In the hyperscape, therefore, body and city continuously transform each other, because neither body nor city is a unified, autonomous object. The hyperscape is activated by the process of walking, and the dynamic relationship it creates between body and city.

Particularly complex in *City of Glass* is the way that Stillman's footsteps spell for Quinn the words 'Tower of Babel'. Quinn draws diagrams of three of Stillman's walks and then decides that they look like letters. He interprets the first as an O, the second as a W, and the third as an E. However it is obvious from looking at these shapes that it would be possible to see them as different letters, or not as letters at all. Quinn then starts charting Stillman's walks in terms of letters, and adds to the list another O, an F and two Bs. He subsequently goes through the process of ordering the letters:

*Quinn then copied out the letters in order: OWEROFBAB. After fiddling with them for a quarter of an hour, switching them around, pulling them apart, rearranging the sequence, he returned to the original order and wrote them out in the following manner: OWER OF BAB. The solution seemed so grotesque that his nerve almost failed him. Making all due allowances for the fact that he had missed the first four days and that Stillman had not yet finished, the answer seemed inescapable: THE TOWER OF BABEL (*City of Glass*, p.70).*

Clearly Quinn is using his own imagination, by deciding that the visual appearance of the walks is meaningful, and by interpreting the letters and

their order. He also draws on the fact that he has read Stillman's book: he would have been unlikely to arrive at Tower of Babel as the solution if he had not read about this in Stillman's tome. The process Quinn goes through here is similar to Rothenberg's homospatial process of conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, since the link between the diagrams of the steps and the shapes of the letters is extremely arbitrary. However, as we have seen, The Tower of Babel is really an extremely ambivalent symbol, and the contemporary equivalent of the Tower of Babel, the World Trade Centre, symbolises masculine, capitalist values which must be identified with conservative government, and the common language of money. Particularly potent here is an analogy between the Tower of Babel and the World Trade Centre which Auster could not have foreseen, but makes the work seem prophetic, since the Tower of Babel, like its contemporary counterpart, was destroyed by fire and fell down.

The streets of New York in *City of Glass* also spell out the economics of creativity in contemporary America. New York is a rich cultural environment, but also a place of abject poverty and exploitation. Walking and writing the city are associated in literary texts with the European figure of the flâneur.<sup>22</sup> Both Quinn and Stillman invert the idea of the bourgeois flâneur into a down-at heel American guy: they are men of the crowd only in the sense that they become lost in their own isolation, poverty and alienation. At the beginning Quinn seems to be reasonably well off financially, but the more he haunts the streets of the city the more destitute he becomes, until he turns into a streetperson. At no point does Quinn appear to be motivated by money: when he has a choice between the two Stillmans he follows the poor Stillman, perhaps because he suggests more creative possibilities. And his pay cheques are made out to the Paul Auster, who he is impersonating, so he cannot cash them.

It could be argued that Auster, here, is capitulating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of the artists as starving garret genius. But in fact Quinn's gradual impoverishment makes him aware of the marginalised and destitute, and their own hidden creativity, which manifests itself in street performances. In several moving passages he writes about beggars and bag ladies in his red notebook, and arguably this spells the turning point in his own writing:

*But beggars and performers make up only a small part of the vagabond population. They are the aristocracy, the elite of the fallen. Far more numerous are those with nothing to do, with nowhere to go. Many are drunks—but that term does not do justice to the devastation they embody. Hulks of despair, clothed in rags, their faces bruised and bleeding, they shuffle through the streets as though in chains. Asleep in doorways,*

*staggering insanely through traffic, collapsing on sidewalks—they seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them. Some will starve to death, others will die of exposure, still others will be beaten or burned or tortured. (City of Glass, p.109)*

He is now able to move away from the well-heeled fantasies of his murder mysteries, to poetic explorations which are grounded in an urban social and economic reality: one that is both vital and impoverished.

For *City of Glass* simultaneously portrays New York as creative and destructive, as both highly conformist and commercialised, and also allowing for radical change. Graham Clarke argues that American authors tend to see New York as either ‘sublime’ or ‘atrocious’, and contrasts Whitman’s ‘Mannahatta’ with Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*. For Clarke, New York is a double city which can be seen as either myth or urban reality. Clarke also points out about New York that:

*As Manhattan it retains its mythic promise and remains an image at once familiar and inviting. As New York City it becomes part of a different urban process: denied its mythic energy, its transcendent base, it moves into an historical reality in which social, political and economic questions are prominent. It becomes, in other words, a city of people rather than images—of social contingencies rather than mythic projections.<sup>23</sup>*

Like de Certeau Clarke proposes vertical and horizontal modes of experiencing the city: the vertical mode tends to be identified with mythical views of the city, while the horizontal mode tend not to be identified with urban realities.

This ambivalent way of experiencing the city is graphic throughout *City of Glass*. Stillman’s ‘vertical’ myth of the Tower of Babel, and the everyday ‘horizontal’ realities of walking New York, exist in a dynamic tension epitomised by Stillman’s humdrum walk which spells out the Tower of Babel. Similarly Stillman’s collection of detritus on the streets of New York, to hopefully build a new language, is another metaphorical paradox. And Quinn, at the beginning of the story, is stuck in a kind of writing which is dictated by a form of mass culture, the mystery novel, but his journey in the book allows him to write less circumscribed by commercial considerations.

In conclusion, I have argued that *City of Glass* enacts allegorically the paradoxes of fiction making, but that these allegories never point in a single direction. Furthermore, the creation of fictions in *City of Glass* is of various types, from writing a novel to making myths about the nation, and these are inextricable interwoven. Such is the complexity of the novel that it both points inwards to itself and outwards to the world: the creativity of *City of Glass* lies in its capacity to be about everything in the world and yet nothing at all. In fact it is about the search for a fruitful balance these two extremes: between linguistic coherence and the power of silence, unknown utopias and lived American experience, structural cohesion and the stimulus of chaos.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987. Hereafter *City of Glass* will be referred to by name in the text, with relevant page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Gemin, 'The Dissolution of the Self in Unsettled Times: Postmodernism and the Creative Process', *First Quarter*, vol.33, no.1, 1999, pp.45-61.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Rothenburg, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1990, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25, 15.

<sup>5</sup> 'In allegory the vision of the reader is larger than the vision of the text; the reader dreams to an excess, to an overabundance. To read an allegorical narration is to see beyond the relations of narration, character, desire. To read allegory is to live in the future, the anticipation of closure beyond the closure of narrative.' Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to remember that Paul Auster has written and translated poetry, and was also closely affiliated with the experimental American 'Language' poets.

<sup>7</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, pp.112-130.

<sup>8</sup> See both Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979 and *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Methuen, London, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly the recurring ideas which permeate the story are highly ambivalent and inconsistent: they function both metaphorically and metonymically, and in a way which explores the interdependence between the two. Their recurrence binds the elements of the story together in a centripetal way, but their refusal to stand only for one idea means that they also centrifugal, that is, they constantly build new lines of association which point the story in different directions. The concept of the egg, for example, recurs through the story in many different guises: as scrambled eggs, as omelette, as Humpty Dumpty, in Stillman's assertion that 'all men are eggs' (*City of Glass*, p. 81). Through it ideas about language, birth and unity are explored, but not in a unidirectional, homogeneous, or consistent way.

<sup>10</sup> I am using here Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's distinction between text and story. For Rimmon-Kenan story 'designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events'. Text is 'the written discourse which undertakes their telling'. In the text 'the events do not necessarily appear in the chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some

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prism or perspective ('focaliser'). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction : Contemporary Poetics*, Methuen, London and New York, 1987, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> My idea of a prosthetic identity here is closely related to Alison Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory. She argues that prosthetic memory is the way we acquire, and treat as our own, memories which do not belong to us. Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner' in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*, M. Featherstone and R. Burrows, (eds.), Sage Publications, London, pp.175-190.

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, D. Galloway (ed.), Penguin, London, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret A. Boden, 'What is Creativity?' *Dimensions of Creativity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp.75-118.

<sup>14</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Norton, New York, 1977 and J. Mellard, *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction*, University of Illinois, Urbana and Chicago, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Macmillan, London, 1998, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2000, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Pile also draws attention to the way in which Henri Lefebvre's notions of natural, absolute and abstract space line up with the Lacanian real imaginary and symbolic. For Lefebvre absolute space involved a unity between people and space, while abstract space involves a 'site of alienation' which places 'images and signs within a particular logic of the visual'. Steve Pile, *The Body and The City*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p.165.

<sup>19</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Hyperscapes*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>22</sup> Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Graham Clarke, 'A "Sublime and Atrocious" Spectacle: New York and the Iconography of Manhattan Island' in *The American City: Literary and Cultural Perspectives*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1988, p. 39.