**A Form that Accommodates the Mess**

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**Abstract**: In the main focus of the exploration lies a unique poetic territory fringed by the overlapping fields of intersubjectivity, metalepsis and subject performativity. The paper offers an exploration into theoretical considerations that connect Paul Auster’s narrative poetics of chance and absence to Maurice Blanchot’s *L'espace littéraire*, also to Foucauldian enquiries into the concepts of discontinuity, chance (aléa) and materiality in *L’ordre du discourse*. The paper aims at shedding light on the poetic workings embedded in Michel Foucault’s theory of discontinuous systematization, while also examining the way in which the intertextuality of characters leads the reader to a frontier between the inexhaustible state of destruction in endings and the infinite potentiality of all beginnings.

**Keywords**: intersubjectivity, metalepsis, discontinuity, *mise-en-abyme*

**Introduction**

The critical reception of Paul Auster's *Invisible* (2009) is contradictory enough to be described as a black and white portrait of the book. On the one hand, there are the overwhelmed fans, who insist that it is Auster at his best, while on the other end of the scale there seem to be critics who simply refuse to acknowledge it as a well-written, well-formed piece of literature. “The problem is that not enough of this contortive plot is realized as vivid or vital writing on the page; the novel feels gestural, assembled, a simulacra” (Docx 22). Yet, the two opposing sides have one thing in common: both lay heavy emphasis on the questions of structure and form (or the lack of it) in the novel. The critical understanding or misunderstanding of the Austerean text has long been a territory of incessant debate (see Nealon, 95), and these recently published reviews seem but a return to a problem already present at the reception of Auster’s first novel, the *New York Trilogy.* At the core of these differences one finds a persistent question: what is the shape of the Austerean story? If there is one at all, some critics may add.

1. **YOUTH**

The story of *Invisible* starts out in the spring of 1967 and finishes in April, 2001. The timeline zig-zags back and forth from the 50’s to as late as 2007, but in the dead center there is only one date, a year only indirectly referred to: 1968. A year when “for the first time politics was no longer just politics, it was personal business” (*Invisible* 272). The book is built around the juvenile jubilance of that year without ever so much as touching the subject, which this way can offer itself in its absence as a mirroring surface for the naivety and zest of youth, the chaos of war, the invisibility of love and, in the final analysis, the invisibility of art.

**Discontinuity: decapitation, disorder and aléa**

What Auster seems to offer us in his latest novel is a practice of these discontinuous systematicities (see Foucault 69)

On the first pages of the book Adam Walker (yet another paper Auster, the like of M.S. Fogg), meets Rudolf Born for the first time. Born (supposedly a double agent working for the CIA) is teaching “disaster” (that is, French colonialism) at the Columbia University, and he comments on war as “the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul” (*Invisible* 7). Rudolf Born’s chaotic text is metonymically connected to the embedded poem by Bertrand de Born, a 12th century Provençal poet, who is deemed to roam Dante’s *Inferno* carrying his own severed head by the hair.

The chaotic nature of Born’s personality results in an implosion in the plot. When a domineering Born (now stepping up as the would-be literary mentor of the “starving” but promising poet) walks the desolate alleys of New York with Walker, they are held up at gun point by pure chance. This unforeseeable event makes the story take a right angled turn. Born stabs the teenage attacker (named Cedric Williams), and allegedly kills him later on. Walker, who is threatened by Born, hesitates to call the police, which buys Born just enough time to flee the country. Walker’s integrity is shattered into pieces. He is at war now, but in order to take his revenge, he has to travel to Paris.

**Triads of Selves**

Convoluted as the summary above may seem, the plot of the novel could not be farther from the plot of an Elizabethan revenge drama. It is rather the plotting of the narrative movements that creates the shape of the story.

Take the beginning of the story, for example. First, we see the young poet, a strong subjectperformer (associated with a hunger artist) in distancing isolation. Then the reader is being informed step by step that it is Born’s companion and lover, the film noire goddess look-alike Margot, who sees the beauty in Adam’s starving existence; it is she who asks Born to put him under his wings. Later Born tells Adam that it was his idea all along. Walker, who finally gets seduced by Margot, now faces two conflicting versions of the same story. Using Born as presence to get to Walker would make Margot a sex-ghost, an apparition, who, without her black make-up, would not be visible. But if the plan was carried out on Born’s initiative, the man’s voyeurism would mean attaching his own presence to the object of his gaze, that is, Walker. Hence, the movements in the story are shaped by possible routes among possible triads of Selves. That side of the triad which is represented by a ghost, double, twin or doppelgänger serves as a gateway towards other triads, other possible stories.

This interaction can lead outward, but it also can stay within the boundaries of the triads. In the aforementioned example Walker is contaminated by both Margot’s automaton-sexuality and Born’s equally abusing sense of power, which, in effect, leads to an implosion of Selves. Here the casus belli is self-mirroring hatred. Humiliated by his own lack of courage to confront Born in time, Walker writes the following in retrospect: “[F]or the first time in my life I understood what it meant to hate someone. *I could never forgive him*—*and I could never forgive myself*” (emphasis added) (*Invisible* 71). Through the mirroring surface of their selves Walker implodes into Born.

The shape of the story is created by the movements among the selves. Everybody wants to get to somebody, which may happen within the triads but also among them. And, as it will be argued later on, the desire to get connected is also present in the metaleptical starvation of the narrative body to its bare bones up to a point, when this unity (the body of the text) disappears in its plurality (bones) altogether.

While the Walker-Margot-Born triad resulted in implosion, Adam Walker’s revenge could not be carried out without the explosion of the Walker-Cécile-Hélène triangle. When Born and Walker meets by chance in Paris, Born offers Walker to introduce him to Cécile Juin as a token of their burying the hatchet. Since Born wants to marry Cécile’s mother, Hélène Juin, he walks out on Margot, so now, lacking a ghost as interface, Born and Walker are not part of the same triad of Selves any more. Cécile as the daughter to Hélène is first mentioned by Born, but now it is Walker who gets it in his head that Cécile could mean the perfect gateway to get to Hélène, whom he wants to persuade not to get married to a murderer (thus ruining Born’s chance for unity). Born and Walker meets again in Cécile as a ghost.

Walker is now waging guerilla warfare against power, violence and chaos. He is building the Walker-Cécile-Hélène triangle in order to complete the Walker-Hélène-Born triad and break the connection between Hélène and Born. But first he has to make Cécile trust her. Being aware of his own deceit, he feels as if he was “chopping off her head” (*Invisible* 237). These instances are marked for discontinuity as punishment. In both cases the indirect encounters with Born culminate in an explosion (in furious parting of the ways). Finally, Born pulls the strings of power, and manages to have Walker exiled from France.

There are two instances when direct contact with the chaos represented by Born is described. The descriptions of the indescribable are made possible by highly stylized narration. The first encounter occurs when Walker has to face Born after the murder for the first time: “As Walker leaves, the sun shoots across the sky and explodes into a hundred thousand splinters of molten light. The Eiffel Tower falls down. Every building in Paris bursts into flame. End of Act I. Curtain” (*Invisible* 187). The second time it is Cécile, who glances into the abyss listening to the now elderly Born’s words: “The polar ice caps are melting, he said. ... Drowned cities, obliterated continents, the end of everything. You’ll still be alive, Cécile. You’ll get to see it happen, and then you’ll drown. You’ll drown with all the others, all the billions of others, and that will be the end. How I envy you, Cécile. You’ll be there to see the end of everything” (*Invisible* 300).

These explosions propel the two characters out of the orbit of their systematic beliefs. Walker leaves France, leaves the university along with his pursuit of a career as a poet to become a lawyer to help the downtrodden, to get to others, finally. Thirty-six years later Cécile leaves all her books behind in Born’s house and on her way down from the top of the mountain, she loses herself in the sight of the most peculiar final scene Paul Auster has ever come up with.

1. **LOVE**

To return to the starting point, Auster’s movie, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* is above all a romance. The story is full of missed encounters, and the only encounter not missed happens to be with a ghost. Love is invisible, and as the final scene demonstrates, the closest thing to invisibility, that is, the closest one can get to visibility is looking (for the other and for oneself) in a rearview mirror.

The ghost here is also a doppelgänger, a double or a twin. In the movie the lovers are first separated by the door of a locked room, then, they are able to meet only in dreams. Finally, their encounters become dependent on blindness and invisibility. They become Narcissus and Echo dis/united in the mirroring surface of water and air, they turn into Orpheus and Eurydice dis/united in their shared gaze.

Adam Walker in *Invisible* looks in the mirror three times. First, he sees the make-up of a film noire diva (Margot Jouffroy), then his own sister (Gwyn -Eve-Twin), and finally, his wife, Sandra Williams (a reference to Cedric Williams), who happens to be of Afro-American descent. Between the blackness of distance and the matrimonial happiness marked by his wife’s blackness there is the shape of blankness, in this case, love as incest, the love of the double.

Incestuous love here serves as a *mise-en-abyme* for seeing the Other. The siblings’ act of love is thus paralleled with the gaze between Orpheus and Eurydice. The moment of closeness is the tragic moment of loss. The white space of (poetic) absence. Absence as something impenetrable (in Auster's poetry the symbol is a wall of stones), also absence as a possibility for presence. Maurice Blanchot writes the following when explicating his philosophical concept of “the other night” in *The Space of Literature*: “It is only in the day that the other night is revealed as love that breaks all ties, that wants the end and union with the abyss. (…) But the echo sends this step back to him as the whispering immensity, and the void is now a presence coming toward him” (168-169).

The reader is left in the dark whether the incestuous love affair took place at all. The two opposing rendition of the same time period that are offered in the text cancel each other out. The story of the incestuous love between author (Orpheus) and work of art (Eurydice) is never to be told and in the novel the text is erased by (request in the last will of) the dead writer (*Invisible* 161). And yet, this void does become a presence as a possibility to tell the story of the impossibility in total unity. Gwyn and Adam are “male and female versions of the same person” (*Invisible* 112). Such a monadic unity is undermined by its own impossibility and absence, and becomes the very territory where this story of Lacan's missed encounter can be told.

**The Narrative**

The three parts of the embedded novel are entitled *Spring, Summer, Fall* respectively*,* which suggests that the linearity of a grand narrative is bound to be decapitated, but the absence of the fourth season—the season of death—in itself suggests a structure built around absence and empty space. In a sense the story can be read as a deconstructed coming-of-age novel. A “chronicle of early failure,” *Invisible* renders futility a gateway towards the invisible aspects of human condition, where the Self ensures presence by disappearing into a state of exile from its own Self. The writer makes the narration possible by multiplying himself in the personae of the narrators, characters, yet, as a consequence of this, he is also being usurped by his own writing. He is digging his own grave in order to prolong his life by the only possible way, by extending his agony, that is, the very effort of digging, the attempt at making himself disappear. Just as in the case of Auster’s *The* *Locked Room*, the unnamed narrator disappears, but by the time he does, the narrator has already transformed into the (implied) writer, Fanshawe as a character in the narrated story, who has exhausted and taken over the role of the unnamed narrator. This, in effect, proves nothing else but that the original locus of the story has always already been nothing but an empty space.

In *Invisible,* this effect is achieved bya gradual starvation of the narrators through serial metalepses. *Spring* sets out by narrating the chance encounter with the chaotic black hole of the text (Rudolf Born) in the first person singular. Progressively and regressively distancing himself from his own identity, the narrator relates *Summer* in the second person singular and *Fall* in the third person singular. In this latter case, it is Freeman who advises the narrator to follow the same path Auster has chosen for himself to build in *The Invention of Solitude.* This process is pushed to the limit by stripping the narration down to its bare bones when addressing the narrator and the characters by their initials. However, after making the already starving narrators/characters diet on what I coined the “third person’s *initials* singular”, there is still one step beyond. The empty undecidable borderline experience of utter unison and displacement—is a must to be told, a matter of life and death, indeed. Because it is also a story made possible by the absence of a dead sibling (Andy): a story of love (and paradise) lost. Not with Cécile Juin. Cassandra’s word is a “word beyond grasping, (…) a word from which no lesson is to be drawn, a word, each time, and every time, spoken to say nothing” (*The Invention of Solitude*128). Love between Adam and Cécile is also invisible. If Adam and *Gwyn* are doubles and *twin*s, “male and female versions of the same person,” (*Invisible* 112) the encounter between Adam and Cécile create a *mise-en-abyme* for an emblem representing the state of being young (Juin meaning June) and being at war, which is at the center of the novel. Attached as an appendix at the end of the three-part story narrated by Adam Walker, published and edited (translated?) by James Freeman, *Cécile Juin’s Diary* is the dead center of the work written by Paul Auster. But the reader cannot be sure of any of it. As James Freeman admits: “Hélène and Cécile Juin are not Hélène and Cécile Juin. Cedric Williams is not Cedric Williams. Sandra Williams is not Sandra Williams, and her daughter, Rebecca, is not Rebecca. Not even Born is Born. ... Last of all, I don’t suppose it is necessary for me to add that my name is not Jim” (*Invisible* 260).

The appendix as a dead center cancels out any possibility for answers thus revealing that Auster’s text is invisible because it is a book of questions. The fourth part is a *mise-en-abyme* displaced and extended both inwards and outwards of the text. At this point the fifty-one year old Cécile Juin is still young compared to Rudolf Born in his seventies, who is actually proposing marriage to her. Cécile’s character/text (metelepses for Auster-Walker/Gwyn-Freeman) has to climb up a mountain on a barren island (once colonized by the French) to reach the tip dominated by Born, to reach the depth of the maelstrom in the abyss of the novel (see “How I envy you, Cécile. You’ll be there to see the end of everything”.) The house called *Moon Hill* may well be a reference to the *Moon Palace* as the *mise-en-abyme* of the oeuvre.Now, outside and at the same within the inmost core of the four-part narration of a three-part autobiography, the usual triad of Selves is reduced to a duet. Imploding and exploding at a time, old and young as well, Born is division as such: “a man composed of two spheres” (*Invisible* 287). Yet, his out-of-proportion presence does not implicate the possibilities of losing oneself in a Leviathan: he is “not whalelike” (*Invisible* 287). He is the Sun on the double, domineering, consuming and being consumed, defying and controlling chance (by killing Cedric Williams), designing and refining the techniques of power, and finally, hailing the end of everything without having faced it once. The implosion results in two simple sentences: “I’m sorry I invited you to my house”. “I’m sorry I came” (*Invisible* 304). No punishment, no decapitation, just stone cold indifference.

Cécile’s narration (mirroring the Walker-Freeman-Auster compound) explodes out of the story. Whereas she was stumbling while climbing up (although all her luggage was carried by Samuel (a descendant of colonized natives), Cécile having gotten rid of all her books now relates that she “didn’t fall this time, not even once” (*Invisible* 306) while approaching the chance event encountered in the final scene.

1. **WAR**

The imaginary island Quillia (quill/pen) is a nowhere-land, the dead center *en abyme*, the innermost, ninth circle of Dante’s hell, where paradise is utterly lost to treachery. This is also the heart of darkness, the center of the world, where gravity turns around, and purgatory comes within reach.

Born (an allusion to de Born, and Joseph Conrad's Kurtz) is teaching disaster, indeed. The disaster of French colonialism passed on to the USA as the second Indochina War, the war in Vietnam. Rudolf Born does not allow for chance events. He represents the destruction of chaos and darkness (“Long live the darkness inside us” (*Invisible* 45)) but also the Sun’s ubiquitous controlling light. In 1967, when sensing the imminent political turmoil, outraged (“How many years have I given them? ... The ship is going down” (*Invisible* 35)), he travels to Paris and pulls the strings. This political, social, historical chaos is built on “[b]ombastic pronouncements, wild generalizations, bitter declarations” (*Invisible* 45) as well as a “most blistering harangue” about “hatred of anyone who was not a European with white skin, of anyone who was not, finally, Rudolf Born himself” (*Invisible* 300). In the end, he predicts that the rays of this Sun will melt the ice caps and will bring the end of everything.

The futility and absurdity of the guerilla war Adam Walker waged on Born is paralleled with the invisibility of 1968 in the novel. As a character in the book, and a puppet in the revenge drama abused and iterated both by Walker and Born, Cécile is a casualty of war in Walker’s battle. However, being one of the multiple identities narrating the story, she also represents a strategy similar to Walker’s choice to disappear behind the profession of a lawyer (“a vestige of Walker’s early life as a poet” (*Invisible* 163)). Cécile becomes a literary scholar “to make the world as dull as possible” (*Invisible* 263). They are both exiled to invisible strata of society, living in a distance that preserves possibilities for discontinuity and chance. While in his pilgrimage, Walker invisibly helps the oppressed, Cécile’s identity turns into a ghost for the triad of the narrating Selves (Walker-Freeman-Auster), and enters the empty space of the abyss to face chaos.

**Lacuna**

Cécile’s ascension to/descension from the inverted pit of hell called *Moon Hill* is prefigured in the book on a textual level. Right before the end of part III, there is a lacuna in the text, after which the narration is changed from the third person singular to the “third person’s *initials* singular,” a generic, transparent way of addressing the characters (Walker becomes W. and so on…). This effect of stripping down the narration to its bare bones is driven to the point that it disappears into thin air, which is underlined by the double spacing of the last five lines as well. This lacuna can be identified with such literary concepts as the linguistic moment (Hillis Miller), as the punctum (Roland Barthes). But one can also apply a literary term inherent in Auster’s novel itself, stating that this textual locus marks *the decapitation of the text*. This is textual locus is the point of no return for the story, when Walker decides to go through with his revenge, this is where the text turns into a ghost of its own textuality, where Dante’s hell and purgatory collapse into a white space, the point where number 3 becomes 4, where the triad of narrators through metalepsis is being transformed into the narration of a seemingly minor character: Cécile. The last words before the lacuna are the words of Hélène, a worrying mother:

It’s impossible not to worry about that girl. That’s my job, Adam. I worry about Cécile. I’ve been worrying about her all her life.

[white space]

[After the word *life*, there is a break in Walker’s manuscript, and the conversation abruptly comes to an end. ... By the last three pages, the collapse is nearly total. Walker is vanishing from the world, he can feel the life ebbing out of his body, and yet he forges on as best he can, sitting down at his computer one last time to bring the story to an end.]

[white space] (*Invisible* 235-236)

Then the battle ensues. To take his revenge on Born, by using Cécile, Walker had formed the Walker-Cécile-Hélène triad so as to be able to get to Born through Hélène. Now it is Walker who “is chopping off” a head. In the aftermath the battlefield is scattered with ghosts. Walker is exiled (Born pulls the strings again), and at the moment of narrating his own autobiography he is dying as well. “They are all ghosts now, and W. will soon be walking among them”.

**The Word**

The *mise-en-abyme* represented by the island is generating both *progressus* and *regressus ad infinitum*. As an allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*, it is spiraling inwards, while the reference to the *Moon Palace* makes the mirroring effect point outwards. The four parts of Auster’s novel incorporating the three-part story translated/edited by Freeman and the three acts of the revenge drama narrated by Walker are linked to the two-part invention by Bach, which is associated with Carl Dreyer’s *Ordet* (*The Word*), a movie filmed in 1955. The black and white classic relates four views of faith, yet, these views are reduced to one strong act of performativity in the final scene of the movie, which is narrated in the text with the following sentences:

The farm woman who has died in childbirth is stretched out in an open coffin as her weeping husband sits beside her. The mad brother who thinks he is the second coming of Christ walks into the room holding the hand of the couple’s young daughter. (…) Rise up, he commands her, lift yourself out of your coffin and return to the world of the living. Seconds later, the woman’s hands begin to move. (…) The woman opens her eyes, and just seconds after that she sits up, fully restored to life. (*Invisible* 134-135)

To interpret the singularity of this speech act, the notion of the strong performative proves to be instructive as explicated in the volume of “*They Aren’t, Until I Call Them*” by Enikő Bollobás:

In all these [biblical] examples one can observe a rupture between radical presence and radical absence, uniqueness and mimicability, the fulfillment of authority and the satisfaction of convention. The originary performative establishes a relation of future anterior temporality with its repetitions: while the radical act of the founding moment invents its own tradition within which it is meaningful, God’s original words are the repetition of an established formula retroactively assigned to the originary moment. …

The performative force of the succeeding utterances, as well as their readability, therefore, depends on repetition and, concomitantly, absence—or, to use Derrida’s familial imagery, an iterative structure 'orphaned and separated at birth from this assistance of its father' (*Signature* 181). And the caveat here: this negative description (of the iterative structure orphaned at birth) applies, indirectly, to one moment, when the Father’s ultimate presence and absolute authority bring about a code, as yet a 'secret cipher' (*Signature* 180), and offer it to his sons for iteration—and, I would add: offers the subsequent repetitions as his sons in iteration—an iteration always evoking (but never attaining) 'the pure singularity of the event' (191). (37)

Thus, according to Bollobás, the singularity of the strong performative is marked for both ultimate presence and ultimate absence. In the story the impossible unity of the Adam/Gwyn persona is made possible when together they try to resurrect the ghost of their deceased brother, Andy by carrying out a ritual that has been reiterated for years. Strong performative acts “create (discursively) the subject” (Bollobás 14) as ruptures between the inexhaustible state of destruction in endings as *regressus,* and the infinite potentiality of all beginnings as *progressus*.

In the description of the final scene in the movie, the reader arrives at the terminal point of a structural regressus from the openness to multiplication inherent in number 4 to the singularity in the act of strong performativity. The four-part novel is reduced to a three-part biography involving a three-act revenge drama in which a two-part invention by Bach is played, a musical piece associated in the text with the singularity of the strong performative. However, as seen above, this singularity always already extends towards its own plurality. Adam’s character is marked for strong performativity by not only his name (the name of naming). Every year he and Gwyn celebrate the birthday of their deceased brother by performing a ritual of remembrance to resurrect Andy from the memories that make him the ghost that both connects and separates them. Their ritual is a *mise-en-abyme* for the structural progression from singularity to plurality that saturates all narrative levels of the novel. The rite consists of three stages (see *Invisible* 138): In Step One words are spoken summoning Andy’s past, in Step Two Andy himself is summoned as present, while in Step Three his future, his would-be persona is put in words. In the story this ritual is performed for the last time. Andy vanishes as a part of the triad of siblings, which occurs as a cause/result of Step Four: Adam and Gwyn implode into each other as lovers. “What cannot happen has happened,” the ultimate unity of the subject has been created discursively in a story that cannot be told, that will be denied, even erased: in a story that is its own ghost. This unity of personae is disrupted and dispersed into plurality by the elaborate, metaleptical layering of authors and narrators, up to a point when all writers, narrators, characters disappear into a different text, into the *pars pro toto* appendix of Cécile Juin's diary.

1. **The Shape of the wHole**

Returning to the question this paper put at its beginning, a spiraling progression/regression can be determined in the ubiquitous *mise-en-abymes* of the novel. The more absent and invisible the narrators, characters, triads of selves, the story itself become, the more presence builds up on the side of the reader: the more there is to see. On the other hand, the discourse is generated by the traces left behind the footsteps of the ever-changing, unreliable narrators, who are but flâneurs taking sharp, right angled turns until the traces behind the last steps taken by the last narrator/character vanish as well. In Paul Auster’s fiction, the shape of the *Invisible* may be represented with a zig-zagging route, where movement is not interpreted in terms of possible starting points or destinations, but with inevitable progression and regression *ad infinitum* all along the line. In the Austerean realm it is the shape of the invisible that represents a “form that accommodates the mess” (Beckett qtd. in Auster, *The Art of Hunger* 19).

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