

## "WORDLESS THING AND THINGLESS WORD" : THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION IN PAUL AUSTER'S CITY OF GLASS

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**Abstract** : This article deals with the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*. It is rendered in the text through a shift of perception and a disruption occurring in the mode of representation. By questioning likelihood in the angles of analysis adopted by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, representation cannot be pure imitation, even if it remains mimetic. In the novel, the crisis of representation revolves around gaps and absences. Wordless thing and thingless word help perceive the conflict sustaining the crisis of representation in the author's text. The aim of this paper is thus to understand the origin of the crisis and its implications from an aesthetic perspective.

**Keywords** : Wordless thing, Thingless word, Crisis, Fictionalization, Metafiction.

**Résumé** : Le présent article porte sur la crise de la représentation dans le roman de Paul Auster intitulé *City of Glass*. Elle se manifeste par un changement de perception et une rupture s'opérant dans le mode de représentation. Ce travail est une réflexion sur la notion de la vraisemblance selon les prismes d'analyse adopté par Roland Barthes et Gérard Genette. Bien qu'étant mimétique, la représentation ne saurait être une imitation parfaite. Dans le roman *City of Glass*, la crise est rendue par des formes d'absence. L'indicible marqué par la non-perception du terme désignant ou encore de l'objet désigné permet de cerner l'état de conflit justifiant ladite crise. L'objectif de cet article est ainsi de comprendre l'origine de la crise de la représentation et ses implications sur le plan esthétique.

**Mots-clés** : Indicible par la non-perception du terme désignant, Indicible par la non-perception de l'objet désigné, Crise, Fictionalisation, Métafiction.

### Introduction

**P**aul Auster is an American author, who was awarded the 1993 Prix Medicis Étranger and was nominated for the 1991 PEN/Faulkner Award. He is the author of several works (fiction and non-fiction), some of which have been translated in twenty-nine languages. Taking into account his international and



national fame, Paul Auster is a well-established writer. He is known for his trilogy, which the novel *City of Glass* published in 1987 at Penguin Books is part of.

The spot in Paul Auster's novel entitled *City of Glass* revolves around the intertwining of the identity of the author, the character, and the narrator. These three entities have in common their voice, the way through which they (in)differently express themselves in the text. The Writer writes, the character acts, while the narrator tells the story. In this « triad of selves » (Auster, 1987 : 9) comes an erasure of the author's presence in the text. This symbolic death is orchestrated by the dynamics of fictional writing. As a demonstration in the novel, the fictionalized author finds himself trapped in the city of New York – « an inexhaustible space » (Auster, 1987 : 8). By losing himself in this « labyrinth of endless steps », New York becomes the metaphor of his loss and erasure. It illustrates the crisis of representation in the novel, as to justify the death of the author (Barthes, 1984 : 66).

The crisis of representation – object of our analysis – comes as a narrative disruption, which happens when an author is at work. The crisis appears at the very instance of literary creation. Since fiction is elaborated with various materials, associative or dissociative elements are involved in the process of fictionalization. Some ingredients are transformed; other vanish and are absorbed in the act of invention or imagination, as it is the case of a writer whose presence in the text is denied.

Absence manifested as an erasure of the figure of the author occurs in fictional writing. By defining fiction from what it produces, literary imagination can be understood as a detachment from referentiality (Genette, 1981 : 162). The author does no longer control his writing, which becomes autonomous. Fiction as an act of invention, non-reproductive is definitely not imitative (Genette, 1981 : 185). The mirror effect, self-portrait, or/and the autobiography in fiction lead(s) indeed to an impasse, in so much as the author disappears in the text. Language signifies without imitating, as Genette contends it (Genette, 1981 : 185). Everything becomes fictive around writing. Therefore, the author as a concept is a perfect

illustration of what the novelist Paul Auster calls a « wordless » object. A wordless thing refers as a matter of fact to the indescribable. By lacking words, it designates the unnamed in the text.

Apart from the author, another impasse comes in fiction as to explain the crisis of representation. It has different characteristics from a wordless object with the illustration of the author. It is the story, which appears rather as the backbone of the text in the making of fiction. Its centrality for most novelists cannot be questioned, as the whole of fiction is built around it. By participating in the production of literary imagination, the story desintegrates itself. From a critical perspective, it is an ingredient that finally takes a minor role at the appreciation of fiction.

In Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*, the story is the «thingless word» - a notion that is emptied of its essence in the process of fictionalization. In other terms, the dynamics of the text affects its nature, transforms it as to be replaced by the narrative. The story is as a matter of fact reduced to the unspeakable. Its object mainly recognizable through the inscription of the theme in the text - is blurred by fiction. This is the reason why Gérard Genette somehow rejects the story for the narrative in his appreciation of fiction (Genette, 1981 : 71-72). As a «thingless word», the story is deprived of its substance, the text reveals and speaks by itself. Consequently, the crisis of representation appears in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* through both «wordless things» and «thingless words».

*City of Glass* is a text on fictional writing. It allows to understand the stakes of the author and the story in a work of fiction. This article is aimed at revealing the metafictional value of Paul Auster's novel. By questioning what is at the origin of the crisis of representation in the novel, this paper examines as well the aesthetic implications of this crisis.

The analysis in this paper is based on Roland Barthes's concept of the death of the author to grasp the source and nature of the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. It jauges its incidence in the making of fiction. By principle, the death of the author induces a disruption in the art of representation through the negation of the



author and the distance with the story, both generative of literary imagination.

### 1. The Story as a Thingless Word

The crisis of representation is materialized in Paul Auster's writing through the presence of thingless words. Their incidence in the narrative mode marks a breach in the perception that combines sign with reference. A sign from a Saussurian perspective results from associating a signifier with a signified, whereas a reference designs the context or the functionality of a graphic inscription (Hawkes, 1977 : 27).

However, *différance* as a displacement of signifying signifiers to the fringe (Derrida, 1967 : 302-303), comes with the mode of representation that is initiated in Auster's novel. It gives way to thingless words. In fact, a thingless word is characterized by the absence of a third element. The reference contributes as well to the production of meaning, even though the lack of a referential element leaves the sign with a gap. The story in the novel entitled *City of Glass* is indeed an illustration of a thingless word.

The first incidence is an induced shift of perception in the author's writing. Traditionally, the story is defined as a sequence of facts. Or to borrow Gérard Genette's terms, it is «the totality of the narrated events» (Genette, 1988 : 13). Paul Auster's *City of Glass* gives indeed a different definition of the story. This one is characterized by a disruption that comes from a rejection of totality. In a Postmodern era, the criterion of totality does no longer allow to apprehend the story, as it designates the plot or the story line.

The assessment of the term « story » is thus questioned in Paul Auster's writing. Totality seen as a set of events interrogates the reader, more than it supplies him/her with answers. It redefines the story as a question, especially when the narrator says that : «The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell » (Auster, 1987 : 7). In this very case, writing emphasizes the loss of the context and the absence of functionality in the representation of the story.

It establishes a vacuum in what is mostly and firstly referred to grasp the theme in a given text. Mis-representation is also perceived in the reader's disbelief in the story. The story remains an ingredient that fictionalizes in the text. It is presented as a pre-literary material (Todorov, 1981 : 133). For this reason, the reader cannot as a matter of fact rely on it in the novel *City of Glass*. The story is a material that loses part of its essence – its referential value and functionality – in a process of fictionalization. It makes it turn into a thingless word, while nourishing fiction. Incompletion derives from a shift of interest on the narrative, and consequently a rejection of the story. Mis-representation and incompletion are regarded as the signs of a crisis destabilizing the reader, because of a doubt cast on the significance of the story itself.

Another interest stands when the story in its form involves a question. It helps understand its literary implication. Serving as a canal, its function goes beyond the absence of answer to trigger off the participatory role of the reader, even though its superficiality makes it insufficient to reach narrative information. The story is not from Gérard Genette's point of view a space of fictionalization.

However, in the crisis of representation this stance is discussed, as the story turns into a question, and vice versa. A double suspense is registered, making the story an essential element of fiction. In this duality – on the one hand, when the story becomes a question, the external reader is invited to answer. On the other hand, when the question becomes the story itself, the reader is deeply involved in the making of the narrative. S/he is definitely part of fiction.

With the reader's involvement, the story as a component of the novel informs the dynamics of the text. It participates in its fictionality through what can be considered at a second degree as a process of fictionalization. Based on totality, it associates both text and reader in the fabrication of fiction, expanding then its borders. A reader-response approach goes beyond literary criticism and theories to directly address creative writing or the writing of fictional texts with an implied reader (Iser, 1976 : 75).



It is essentially a textual representation of the reader, *sine qua non* to the creation of fiction, on the pretext that every single text is destined to be read. From this point of view, the complex codification of literary texts also results from a double layer of representation. By fabricating its own reader as generative of narrative information, writing confronts an implied with a real reader. The latter has less incidence on the technicity of the text than the story, that which accounts for the crisis of representation.

As a thingless word, the story has no substance, even though it conducts to fiction. The story is not fundamentally an emanation of creativity. On this basis, it can deny authorship to the writer, since the story gives more factual references with regard to its definition as a set of events. It refers to a sort of historicity with a parallel drawn with myths, legends, and folktales. Its position as the first instance in the writing of fiction modifies its function to metaphorically turn into a question.

The story is fictionalized into the narrative (the second instance in Genette's triad). The space of fiction is found out of the story in the narrative. The answer is in other terms in this «elsewhere». Though the story is discredited, it further implicates the reader. The dynamics of Paul Auster's writing reinitiates the story in the field of fiction. For, the question is the instance of creation starting literary imagination. All in all, the crisis of representation is the expression of the profusion of literary imagination. It makes impossible the relationship established between the signifier and the signified. However evocative are different themes, the story plays no major role. In other words, the story is not the element through which the reader or critic should rely on to grasp the author's writing. The essence of the text lies rather in its literariness and its ability to fictionalize. In asserting that: « The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell » (Auster, 1987 : 1), the emphasis is put on the pre-eminence of the dynamics of the text. Its architecture or economy defines the narrative mode through which information are delivered.

Gerald Genette's triad which distinguishes the story from the narrative and narration, helps understand the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's novel. The story as corroborated in the passage above, as being literarily nowhere is not the space of production of literary imagination. Its unproductivity is perceived in the expression « never really going anywhere » (Auster, 1987 : 8), to rejoin G erald Genette's relagating point of view on it. The crisis of representation is also reinforced in the deconstruction of the figure of the author as a wordless thing.

## **2. The Author as a Wordless Thing**

The crisis of representation is also perceived in the treatment of the figure of the author in the text. There is in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* a dynamics that leads to the deconstruction of the author as a concept and the observation of a wordless thing. In parallel with the comparison made on the story, the author is considered as a wordless object from his dis-embodiment. It reads in the text that: « [Quinn] did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote... » (*our emphasis* - Auster, 1987 : 9). Either the character's refusal to be assimilated with the writer, or the writer's objection to be accountable for his own writing justifies dis-embodiment due to the change of function and de-familiarization undergoing in the text.

As an attempt, Paul Auster's writing in *City of Glass* definitely shows a failure at signifying the author's self. Strangeness comes in the act of representation, in so much as Quinn is not the author of what he writes. This distance reveals dematerialisation occurring in the shift of perception. It is in fact operated in the representation of the author as a character of the text. By writing, in other terms the author represents himself as a character in his own work of fiction. It explains Quinn's denial to be the writer of his text. Displacement in the representation of the author's subjectivity allows to understand imitation as an abstraction (Booth, 1983 : 137). Representation especially in writing is synonymous with an act of subtraction that turns the author into a character.



The concept of the death of the author developed by the French critic Roland Barthes reinforces the idea of the invisibility of the author who is no longer presented as an authoritative figure. By decentering the interest on him with a disguised enactment, description in the novel praises individuality, by establishing an horizontal axis with no distinction among characters. In the novel *City of Glass*, the reference to the author's name only serves fictional purposes. In the dynamics of the fiction, Paul Auster is not the writer, but a character in the role of an investigator.

Paul Auster appears as a character with regard to his status and implication. He is fully part of the economy of the text. A duality is expressed in the significance of the real author and the represented writer who acts as a character. It has an incidence on the perception of the author. Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* sheds light on the author and the character's interrelation and involvement in the making of fiction. The author uses an experimental writing. The metafictional stakes of his novel come through a fictionalized writer who is not Paul Auster from a Barthesian perspective.

The representation of the writer in the text rather appears as a narrative strategy, because as a character the fictionalized writer is overtly inscribed in the narrative scheme. The description of this character does not represent the real author, but a process of writing. It is not used for a mirror effect. In *City of Glass*, writing does not systematically give any portrait of Paul Auster the real author, as it is the case of Quinn the fictionalized writer. It reads in the text that : « Quinn treated William Wilson with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man » (Auster, 1987 : 9-10). The autobiography is less expressed than is the literary and aesthetic relevance of the author's implication as an ingredient in the making of fiction. Paul Auster's writing is essentially fictional.

In Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*, the character of Quinn is the writer of mystery novels. At times, Quinn's identity is also associated with Max Work « his private-eye narrator ». The very nature of the texts that he is the author reveals the intimacy between the writer and



his narrator. It comes to the expression of sameness, as to remind that the character and the narrator are the fruits of the author's imagination. There is undeniably a little of the author in each actant. Quinn investigates to solve problems, as does Paul Auster the detective that Quinn definitely embodies in the narrative.

By creating no distance between the writer and his character, Paul Auster's writing destabilizes categorization in the novel *City of Glass*. The author's text questions the assessment of the character firstly as a personae. In characterization, human attributes are too limiting in the sense that they prevent language from exploring the field of imagination (Jouve, 2001 : 9). The apprehension of characters from this criterion has the consequence not to fertilize the text. It hinders the production of literary imagination. It makes the text unproductive, as far as its aesthetics is concerned.

Also, by considering the criteria of flatness and roundness, literary interpretation is made partial, since they reduce the possibilities of language. One of the functions of fiction is to liberate imagination. But flatness and roundness are too selective and undemocratic, as being based on a form of discrimination. It does not make them relevant analytic tools of characterization. Exclusion derives from the opposition established between the main/round characters and the minor/flat characters. The study of characters from this perspective does not integrate at all the whole dynamics of fiction.

The crisis of representation leads to an awareness of these limitations in the assessment of a character. It permits to redefine a character from its other criteria of quality or mark. By defining as a matter of fact a character as a verbal construct, writing explores multiplicity that rejects from a character the status of a personae. It appears then more convenient to hold that a character is an argument or a set of arguments, to perceive the fictional dimension of representations in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*. For instance, Quinn the main protagonist holds several personalities. His complexity blurs his identity. As an illustration, by assuming different roles the



main character is at times William Wilson – Quinn’s pen name, and Paul Auster.

Disguise in the narrative is perceived in the mystery books that Quinn writes, as the author does not expose his true identity. The crisis of representation derives therefore from a distortion, as a way to justify the narrative strategy at work in the text. The representation of the character of Quinn is all the more interesting that it emphasizes the death of the author in a perspective that is not Barthesian. Fictional writing leads to an erasure of the author’s presence (Barthes, 2000 : 101). Or the writer undoes himself while he fictionalizes his story in *City of Glass*. A narrative intention is expressed through absorption or disappearance in the fictionality of the text, as it is testified by Quinn’s loss of identity. An act of censorship is here observed.

Censorship in the novel comes as a denial of authorship. Fictional writing absorbs (auto)biographical items. It actually uses and transforms them as Quinn’s name does not appear on the cover page of all of his novels. As a writer, he is given no existence as such. Or rather, as an author he is deprived of any authority due to his status, as it reads in the following passage : « A part of [Quinn] had died [...] and he did not want it coming back to haunt him. It was then that he had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself » (Auster, 1987 : 9). This representation in the novel *City of Glass* is a disruption that feeds the reflection on the death of the author as a Postmodern condition. It reads in the text that : « he wrote books [...] under the name of William Wilson » (Auster, 1987 : 1). The novels discredit the author, unprivileged his position. The status of a writer is questioned, since writing *per se* becomes autonomous. Autobiographical details are taken as ingredients in the process of fictionalization.

Moreover, the discrepancy between an author and a writer also has an incidence on how each participates in the economy of a text of fiction. The author is considered as a more authoritative figure whose

influence corrupts the nature of narrative information delivered. It explains on the plan of analytical objectivity, or for the sake of neutrality the reason why he is put aside, silenced, or metaphorically killed. This approach to the text is adopted by Paul Auster in his novel. In *City of Glass*, the responsibility of the writer is not engaged at all. The writer writes, he does not systematically assume the role of the author, as it is the case in autobiographical works.

The distance between these two entities (a writer and an author) influences the mode of representation. It impacts a writing that becomes experimental, by leaving some gaps and holes. These spaces made of fragments and incompleteness yield an imagination that involves the reader. In other terms, writing achieves itself through the reader, the reception that he or she has (Barthes, 1984 : 69). Such a modality establishes uncertainty.

Additionally, the crisis of representation also stems from an anxiety generated by the absence of a figure of authority in the narrative. The author like God, is indeed reassuring. His implication affects the reception of the text. Reliable, the author's presence favors readability. The author gives credibility to the nature of narrative information delivered. His absence rendered manifest through his non-implication however destabilizes the reader, who questions the validity of narrative information. From the poetics of the text to its reception, the crisis of representation is maintained as it gives way to an aesthetics of deconstruction in the novel.

Moreover, the crisis of representation derives from the production of descriptions that are turned into objects of criticism. The mistrust in the author, the writer, and the story modifies the mode of perception. If a representation is a construct with an apparent God-like figure (the author or the narrator) who gives credibility on the reception of the text, descriptions are to be questioned and reexamined. The disbelief of the reader defines a new mode of reception - a state of crisis. This mode is built on a phenomenology of perception which is centered only on the mechanism of writing.



It praises the autonomy of the text. For, writing results from a completely autonomous mechanism, which may also be due to the repressed unconscious of the author. It finds its way-out in writing. It contributes to the aesthetics of the text. The unconscious is not only an outlet, but also an inscription that stands beyond the control of the author. Its manifestation ascertains the existence of the crisis of representation, which is seen as a discrepancy between the represented object, namely writing and the object of writing to be apprehended in the authorial intention. The unconscious of the author comes as an essential element to definitely illustrate the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has permitted to examine the theoretical, literary, and aesthetic implications of the treatment of the concepts of the story and the author in *City of Glass*. It holds that the theorization of the author from Roland Barthes's precept of the death of the author accounts for the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's novel. It is justified by a wordless representation.

It holds that the theorization of the story from Gérard Genette's triad has also an incidence on the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass*. By throwing a discredit on a traditionally constructive material at the disposal of the writer, it makes the author lose his own representation. It destabilizes him. For his words become unfaithful with his original intention.

This article definitely establishes that the crisis of representation in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* originates from the presence of a wordless thing (the author) and a thingless word (the story). It shows that these two elements - the author and the story - disregarded in literary theory and criticism as elaborated by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette because of their corruptive nature, find in Paul Auster's text a fictinal and aesthetic articulation. This is simply due to the metafictional value of his writing.

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