

**BARTLEBY MEETS DANIEL QUINN:
INTERTEXTUALITY IN PAUL AUSTER'S *CITY OF GLASS*
IN THE FRAME OF MAURICE BLANCHOT'S THEORY OF LITERATURE**

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One of the most important aspects of Paul Auster's work is the intertextual influence many of the French symbolists and American writers who belonged to the American Renaissance movement have in his novels. The French Symbolist influence comes from Auster's work as a translator of French poets and writers, whereas the American Renaissance has always been for him one of the most important periods of American literature. This is the reason why authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne or, concretely, Herman Melville appear directly and indirectly in his works, together with French writers such as Maurice Blanchot. In this essay, my intention is to analyse Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* as a work influenced by Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and also theoretically structured by Maurice Blanchot's literary criticism.

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In his first piece of non-fiction, the American writer Paul Auster established what could be considered the theoretical principles of his future novels. This work, *The Invention of the Solitude* (1982), represents a bridge that gathers two of the most important literary movements which, at the same time, seem to join in his work *The New York Trilogy* (1987). The result is a revealing postmodern text which becomes a reformulation and extension of two important literary influences: the American Renaissance and French Symbolism. In terms of the American Renaissance, Auster's work seems to be haunted by the works of relevant authors of that period such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville. Indeed, from the point of view of intertextuality, Auster's *The New York Trilogy* can be defined as a compendium of the different short stories and novels written by these writers; furthermore, the symbolism and content of these stories become relevant to decode Auster's metaphors and plots. In her work devoted to Auster's fiction, Aiki Varvogli states regarding intertextuality that "The intertext' exists independently of the author's will, and it shapes both the production and the reception of any given cultural artefact" (2001: 14). Also, she states that "Bartleby" is an urban tale; in both stories, the central character suffers the dehumanising effects of the city, becoming literally as well as metaphorically lost in the crowd" (2001: 63). Nevertheless, there are other hints of texts by Poe or Hawthorne which are, in my opinion, mentioned deliberately by Auster in order to give his texts a concrete meaning and perspective.

The second major influence, French Symbolism, is the result of Auster's stay in Paris during his junior year abroad. That stay was very enriching since he dedicated most of his time to translating French poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Éluard, André Breton, Phillipe Soupault, Robert Desnos, René Char, André du Bouchet, and

Jacques Dupin, among others. Additionally, he translated and edited the volume *The Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry* (1982), a collection of French poetry that has become one of the most relevant works in Auster's literature. Among all his translations, the fictional and theoretical texts by the French philosopher, critic and writer Maurice Blanchot stand out, some of which have been collected in the volume *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* (1999). It can be argued that, not only the texts that he translated by Blanchot but other pieces of theory written by the French philosopher are present as the main theoretical frame of Auster's fiction. In *The Invention of the Solitude* Paul Auster writes:

For the past two weeks, these lines from Maurice Blanchot echoing in my head: "One thing must be understood: I have said nothing extraordinary or even surprising. What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it".

To begin with death. To work my way back into life, and then, finally, to return to death.

Or else: the vanity of trying to say anything about anyone.

(Auster 1989: 63)

These lines quoted by Auster deal with the central topics presented on "Bartleby": silence, an inability to speak and death. In fact, Blanchot dedicated several articles and texts to the analysis of "Bartleby" and other fiction by Herman Melville. Thus, Auster's *The New York Trilogy* and concretely the first novel of the trilogy *City of Glass*, becomes an encounter with Melville's "Bartleby" through two different means of influence: on the one hand, Auster's reception of the text and its influence on his fiction, and, on the other hand, Maurice Blanchot's theory as a line of thought that joins two fictions that can be interpreted as based on the same philosophical arguments. In this paper, it is my intention to analyse the connections between Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and Auster's *City of Glass* (1985) in relation to Blanchot's theory of Literature and concretely in the representation of the figure of the writer and the idea of writing in both fictions.

Different interpretations of "Bartleby" have given the story multiple readings. It has been considered a story about a writer who "faced by the injunction of capitalist society that he writes on demand, ... refuses to compromise, and rather than write on demand writes not at all, devot[es] his energies to the task of surviving in his own way and on his own intransigent terms" (Inge 1979: 81); also, it has been described as being "about a writer who forsakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions" (Inge: 85), or from a psychoanalytical perspective: "Bartleby is a psychological double for the story's nameless lawyer-narrator, and that the story's criticism of a sterile and impersonal society can best be clarified by investigation of this role" (Inge: 107). What is relevant about these interpretations is that they consider Bartleby as a *writer*. Although he is presented as a copyist, a kind of writing which is absolutely mechanical and does not imply any sort of creativity, in practical terms, Bartleby is essentially a writer. Actually, in the first part of the story, Bartleby becomes the most efficient copyist the narrator had ever employed, since he is able to perform his job compulsively:

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been

cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically. (Melville 1986: 12)

In the same way, Auster creates the character of Quinn as a solitary writer of detective novels who lives immersed in a depression caused by the death of his wife and son. This loss leaves him in the solitude of his room where his only activity is writing. But, for him, this task is only a way to leave his self behind, to forget who he is, or, in other words, an attempt to erase his present identity. In this sense, although Quinn is a writer who creates fiction, writing seems for both of them a mechanical action, that makes them remain in silence and, consequently, isolated. In *City of Glass*, the narrator states:

He had continued to write because it was the only thing he felt he could do. Mystery novels seemed a reasonable solution. He had little trouble inventing the intricate stories they required, and he wrote well, often in spite of himself, as if without having to make an effort. Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart. (Auster 2004:4)

Quinn describes himself as an author not responsible for what he writes and feels detached from the text as Bartleby does in his role of copyist. This emotional and physical condition of the writer can be compared to what Blanchot calls "the essential solitude", an emotional state both Bartleby and Quinn seem to share. In Blanchot words:

He who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed. He who is dismissed, moreover, doesn't know it. This ignorance preserves him. It distracts him by authorizing him to persevere. The writer never knows whether the work is done. What he has finished in one book, he starts over or destroys in another. (Blanchot 1989: 21-22)

With the purpose of theorizing about the process of writing creation and the space where it takes place, Blanchot defines "essential solitude" as an essential condition for the activity of writing to take place. It consists in the complete isolation of the individual in a reduced and limited space where he avoids having any contact with the outside world. It can be argued that in both stories, the protagonists experience what Blanchot defines as "essential solitude" since they inhabit reduced spaces isolated from the outside world and with a minimum contact with others. When *City of Glass* begins, Daniel Quinn lives locked in the solitude of his apartment whereas Bartleby isolated himself in the reduced space that his desk occupies in the office. The former will abandon his apartment in order to get lost in New York City but, in the case of the latter, he will never be able to abandon his spot until he is arrested and forced to leave the building.

The process of writing that takes place in the state of essential solitude is interrupted in both fictions by an unexpected event. While Bartleby decides not to do what his boss orders him to do, constantly repeating "I would prefer not to", this being almost the only sentence he is going to utter all along the story, Quinn sees his life changed by a surprising call that transforms him into the private detective he had created for his novels. While Bartleby diminishes all his actions progressively, refuses to follow orders and remains more and more immersed in silence and apathy, Quinn leaves the solitude of his apartment behind and gets lost in the mazes of New York City in order to try to solve a case without solution. According to Blanchot, the experiences had by both characters can be considered a trip to absence and negation that results in disappearance, or, as the French philosopher concludes, death. In this context,

Bartleby's inaction starts to increase up to a point in which his only activity consists of staring out at the wall that shows behind the window:

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing.

'Why, how now? what next? exclaimed I, 'do no more writing?'

'No more'.

'And what is the reason?'

'Do you not see the reason for yourself?' he indifferently replied.

(Melville 1986: 28)

Blanchot explains in *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) Bartleby's attitude and points at writing as the result of all negation and stillness. Then writing, and consequently language, hides Bartleby's latent disappearance:

The enigma comes from the passivity into which this activity (writing) disappears, and which passes imperceptibly and suddenly from ordinary passivity (reproduction), to the beyond of all passiveness: to a life so passive –for it has the hidden decency of dying– that it does not have death for an ultimate escape, nor does it make death an escape. Bartleby copies; he writes incessantly, and cannot stop long enough to submit to anything resembling control (Blanchot 1995: 145)

Here, Blanchot divides the process of writing in two different phases: a first stage of reproduction that would be the ordinary work of copying and, a second stage in which the automatism of that ordinary writing, together with its consequent apathy, goes beyond passivity itself reaching a state in which it seems to equal death. Yet, Blanchot asserts that "it does not have death for an ultimate escape, nor does it make death an escape" since death is not the aim, it is a consequence of it. In my opinion, this reflection about passivity and death in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is comparable to his theories about language and the space of fiction expressed in his work *The Space of Literature* (1955). In Blanchot's account, what remains after language is absence, the void left by the word once it has transformed into its meaning.

In parallel to Bartleby, Quinn suffers the same kind of transition. Nonetheless, whereas Bartleby voluntarily decides to stop writing, Quinn needs to undergo a process which can be considered a period of creation in order to get to the point of passivity that Blanchot makes reference to. Quinn's transition takes place due to the case he immerses in which starts with the unexpected call previously mentioned. In the solitude of his apartment, Quinn receives a phone call from a woman who is looking for a private detective called Paul Auster. At first, Quinn tells the truth and says that that person does not live there, but, moved by curiosity, decides to impersonate this private detective and take charge of the case as one of the characters of his novels. Once the case is left completely unsolved and Quinn is lost in the immensity of the city, he isolates himself and dedicates his time to finishing the pages of a red notebook which he used to account for the case he was trying to solve. It is at this point when Quinn seems to reflect Bartleby's movements:

This period of growing darkness coincided with the dwindling of pages in the red notebook. Little by little, Quinn was coming to the end. At a certain point, he realized that the more he wrote the sooner the time would come when he could no longer write anything. He began to weigh his words with great care, struggling to express himself as economically and clearly as possible. 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. (Auster 2004: 131)

Still, there is a contrast in the behaviour of the two characters. If there is a feature that defines Bartleby's personality that is refusal. It also becomes the central topic of the plot. The narrative rhythm is conditioned by Bartleby's refusal to follow his boss's orders. On the one hand, this attitude becomes a constant violation of the internal regulations of the office and a provocation for his work mates, who obey their boss's instructions carefully. On the other hand, Bartleby's behaviour lays down a pattern for the rhythm of the narrative in the sense that the action is paralysed and depends on Bartleby's next reaction. Obviously, all the anxiety provoked by Bartleby's apathy and disobedience is perceived by the reader through the eyes of the lawyer. Marvin Felheim states in his essay "Meaning and Structure in Bartleby" that "We must keep in mind that this is a first-person narrative and, although the story is about Bartleby, we know him and come to understand his situation through the eyes and words of the lawyer who employs him" (in Inge 1979: 117). The lawyer is a very important character in the short story and particularly in relation to Bartleby's behaviour. On this respect, Ann Smock states that "the impression one has that this lawyer can neither reach Bartleby nor escape him –that Bartleby represents a responsibility that the lawyer can neither take upon himself nor get out of" (1999: 1038). In relation to this attitude, it is important to analyse Bartleby's words in his refusal to do anything. Every time he is asked to do something he repeats "I would prefer not to", a sentence that even becomes a chorus inside the narrative and which gives to it the flow it is lacking in terms of action. Bartleby does not do anything, and with him the narrator's desperation grows parallel to the reader's impatience. However, in repeating the same sentence again and again, Bartleby draws the attention of the reader and the narrator to take them both to the end. In Blanchot's account, this refusal is a negation of the individual's own identity and, consequently, a transition to a different place:

Bartleby gives up (not that he ever pronounces, or clarifies this renunciation) ever saying anything; he gives up the authority to speak. This is abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, a relinquishment of identity, refusal which does not cleave to refusal but opens to failure, to the loss of being, to thought. "I will not do it" would still have signified an energetic determination, calling forth an equally energetic contradiction. "I would prefer not to..." belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity. We have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go. (Blanchot 1995: 17)

I would argue that the fact described in this quotation by Blanchot as "the abandonment of the self" or "relinquishment of identity" is linked to the act of writing. In his book *The Space of Literature* (1955) Blanchot claims that

The work requires of the writer that he loses everything he might construe as his own 'nature', that he loses all character and that, ceasing to be linked to others and to himself by the decision which makes him an 'I', he becomes the empty place where the impersonal affirmation emerges. (Blanchot 1989: 55)

In these terms, this is the transformation that both Bartleby and Quinn suffer after experiencing the process of writing. In "Bartleby" the copyist stays in the office with a revolutionary attitude that makes him conquer the space he is occupying and make it his own. In *City of Glass*, Quinn goes through a rite of passage in which he

has the opportunity to experience what his characters go through in his novels. At the same time, the narrator describes Bartleby as an apparition "in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in strangely tattered dishabille, saying that he was sorry, but he was deeply engaged just then and preferred not admitting me at present". Some lines later he adds that "with his cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*, yet withal firm and self-possessed, [he] had such strange effect upon me, that incontinently I slunk away from my own door" (Melville 1986: 21, emphasis added). Similar to this episode of "Bartleby", Quinn looks at a mirror and discovers that:

The transformation in his appearance had been so drastic that he could not help but be fascinated by it. He had turned into a bum. His clothes were discoloured, dishevelled, debauched by filth. His face was covered by a thick black beard with tiny flecks of grey in it. His hair was long and tangled, matted into tufts behind his ears, and crawling down in curls almost to his shoulders ... It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. He tried to remember himself as he had been before, but he found it difficult. He looked at this new Quinn and shrugged. It did not really matter. He had been one thing before, and now he was another. It was neither better nor worse. It was different, and that was all. (Auster 2004: 120-121)

Finally, the conclusion reached from Blanchot's analysis of Bartleby's refusal "I would prefer not to", is that essentially we are dealing with the idea of negation. In this way, negation implies erasure, the blurring of the character's identity so he becomes someone else or simply, he just becomes invisible. And, of course, this refusal also implies silence, that according to Blanchot it is an immediate consequence of language as an act of speaking (or writing) in which the signifier disappears once it becomes its signified. So, this negation or absence is implied in Bartleby's statement "I would prefer not to" and Blanchot comments about this:

I would prefer not to. This sentence speaks in the intimacy of our nights: negative preference, the negation that effaces preference and is effaced therein: the neutrality of that which is not among the things there are to do-the restraint, the gentleness that cannot be called obstinate, and that outdoes obstinacy with those few words. ... Language, perpetuating itself, keeps still. (Blanchot 1995: 145, emphasis original)

To conclude, it can be argued that Paul Auster, in the frame of Blanchot's theory of Literature, writes his first novel *City of Glass* using as one of the sources of inspiration Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener". In this context, it can be stated that this short fiction contains most of the basic themes that will structure the body of Auster's fiction. In this sense, two of the most important topics of Auster's novel, the figure of the writer and the process of writing creation, can be considered as borrowed from Melville's short story. Besides, these themes become, at the same time, not only the most important concepts developed in Blanchot's theory of literature but also, the thesis that will structure most of his philosophy. Thus, it can be stated that both fictions are linked by literary influence and philosophical structure. Still, these are not the only themes that connect Melville and Auster. Indeed, the idea of the double, the urban space and the consequent death and disappearance of the characters, are also topics that both fictions share and which are analysed by Blanchot's philosophy. Melville and Blanchot meet in Auster's text in order to question the figure of the author and the act of writing and consequently to give a new interpretation of Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener".

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