

Traces of Deconstruction in Auster's *Ghosts*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Paul Auster's novel *Ghosts* to demonstrate how deconstructive techniques are used to question language, truth, and identity. An investigation of the novel's significant departure from conventions of detective fiction reveals how Auster unravels traditional concepts. Auster radically reframes the central crime narrative as an inquiry into the limits of language itself. Analyzing how Auster uses the detective genre primarily as a vehicle for deconstructing language and textual interpretation sheds light on his overarching philosophical project. This study performs a close reading and textual analysis of *Ghosts*, focussing on Auster's use of deconstructive techniques such as différance and metaphor. The investigation and failure of Blue's detective quest serves as a philosophical reflection on the inextricable link between language, meaning, truth and identity. All four seem dependent upon the same flawed logo centrism that Auster seeks to interrogate. The novel thus exemplifies how genre bending and surreal elements allow Auster to explore profound ontological and epistemological questions about existence, knowledge and being that challenge conventional concepts of the self and truth.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Auster, *Ghosts*, Identity, Logo centrism

Introduction

The New York Trilogy by Paul Auster consists of three postmodern detective novels: *City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. Auster subverts genre conventions to explore philosophical themes related to identity, language, and truth. Auster's early fiction featured intricate puzzles and intertextual references with autobiographical elements. *The Invention of Solitude* sets the tone by exploring coincidence, fate, and solitude. The Trilogy follows and can be read as a fictionalized exploration of autobiography and the self.

In *Ghosts*, the central protagonist is framed within an autobiographical context that draws on Derrida's ideas about language. This highlights Auster's narrative techniques and structural patterns. *Ghosts* radically departs from typical detective stories by reframing the *crime* at the center of the mystery. Rather than a conventional whodunit, the puzzle at the heart of *Ghosts* is logocentrism - the belief that language possesses inherent meaning (Tani, 1984, p.24).

Auster investigates logocentrism as a quest that ultimately breaks down in the face of language's inability to definitively ground meaning or identity. The story thus highlights the limits and fluidity of meaning rather than working towards its discovery (Russell, 1990, p.72). Auster uses the detective novel genre primarily as a vehicle for questioning and exploring the essence of language, narrative and understanding. *Ghosts* tackles metaphysical mysteries rather than presenting a conventional puzzle to be solved.

Deconstruction, as defined by Derrida, refers to questioning assumptions of truth and meaning. Auster presents binary oppositions that reveal hierarchies to reflect Derrida's concepts of *différance*, where meaning emerges through relationships of difference rather than presence. *Ghosts* illustrates *différance* within its narrative and compared to *City of Glass*, altering the potential for singular interpretations. The story moves backwards in time from Auster's own birthdate, aligning with *différance*'s textual depiction.

For Derrida, meaning emerges not from a present element itself but through its relations to other, differing elements across time. There are only traces connecting elements, establishing meaning through articulation of temporal and qualitative difference. There are no inherent meanings, only an endless play of relations and differences (Derrida, 1978, p.84).

In *Ghosts*, Auster uses the detective form and protagonist figure to reflect on the relationships between language, meaning, truth and selfhood. All four seem to depend upon the same flawed logocentrism that Auster seeks to interrogate. Auster's investigation of logocentrism in *Ghosts* represents not just an interrogation of language and meaning but of existence itself at a fundamental level. His detective story becomes a deep philosophical inquiry into being, identity, knowledge and truth.

Literature Review

Marc Chenetier explores connections between Auster's poetry and fiction, the philosophical underpinnings of his writing, its relation to detective fiction, and its unique embodiment of the postmodern sublime. His analysis provides a full examination of Auster's themes of solitude, chance, and paternity found in his

works. Chenetier situates Auster within postmodern literary traditions while highlighting the unique contributions of his perspective (Chenetier, 1995, pp. 34-44).

Eric Wirth severely criticizes Auster's stylistic choices, arguing that Auster accepts stereotypical forms of melodrama and his preference for artless language reaches clichéd figures of speech. While Wirth raises some valid critiques, his focus on style overlooks Auster's philosophical and thematic explorations (Wirth, 1995, pp. 171-182).

Alison Russell analyzes issues related to the quest for identity and identity loss in Auster's works. Regarding *Ghosts* specifically, she argues that even Blue may not be for real, suggesting he too is one of the ghosts in the text. Russell examines how Auster decenters notions of the self and shows a lack of relation between signifier and signified (Russell, 1990, pp. 71-84).

In an illuminating article on *Ghosts*, Eric Berlatsky points out Blue's blind spot regarding race. While Blue sees Beecher as an abolitionist hero, Berlatsky argues Beecher was actually a racist opportunist. Blue is unable to see the inherent discrimination in positioning slaves as inferior to Beecher and Lincoln. Berlatsky demonstrates how Auster interrogates language, truth and reality through showing Blue's misperceptions (Berlatsky, 2008, pp. 109-142).

María Laura Arce Álvarez studies the intertextual relationship between *Ghosts* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*. She argues that Auster creates an intertextual dialogue with Poe in order to introduce aspects of his fiction like issues of identity, the concept of the double, and Auster's theory of writing. Arce Álvarez demonstrates how Auster's metafictional project engages with and transforms literary precursors (Arce, 2018, pp. 1-156).

Overall, these studies highlight different aspects of Auster's project in *Ghosts*: his engagement with postmodern themes and styles, his interrogation of language and representation, and his exploration of identity, truth and selfhood. However, only a few explicitly situate Auster's work within the theoretical framework of deconstruction. More focused analysis on how Auster employs deconstructive techniques - like those found in Derrida's work - could productively enhance scholarly understandings of *Ghosts* and Auster's methods. Examining *Ghosts* through the lens of deconstruction could shed new light on Auster's subversion of generic conventions and challenging of dominant assumptions about language, fiction and reality.

Method

The present analysis seeks to clarify Derrida's conception of deconstruction as a methodical process, contrary to misconceptions of it as permitting arbitrary interpretation. This is done through close readings of Derrida's key texts on deconstruction as well as related scholarship discussing his thoughts.

The central method involves carefully tracing Derrida's accounts of deconstruction across his works, with an eye toward explicating its essential properties and features. This captures how he understood and articulated deconstruction as a concept, method and interpretive mode. Key texts analyzed include *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1970), *Of*

Grammatology (2016), and *Limited Inc* (2022), where Derrida most directly theorizes deconstruction.

These readings are supplemented with scholarly interpretations to enrich the exegesis, drawing especially from works *Derrida* (Norris,1987), *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (Kearney, 2004), and *In the name of phenomenology* (Glendinning, 2007). Their assessments of Derrida's thought and contextualization of his key ideas help nuance the presentation.

The aim is to develop an ordered account based on Derrida's own characterization of deconstruction and the rationales behind it, as opposed to external judgments or misconceptions. This elucidates deconstruction's essential properties as Derrida conceived them:

1) It proceeds by close, step-by-step questioning of texts to reveal inherent incompatibilities and contradictions, particularly regarding binary oppositions.

2) It pursues this interrogation to the point where reason founders, or encounters aporias at the borders of interpretability (Currie, 2013, p.80)

3) It does so not to abandon meaning but rigorously confront philosophy's limits and undeconstructible remainders.

4) It generally seeks to uncover the genealogy and conditions shaping concepts, with an eye towards rethinking them.

5) It ultimately aspires to foster a kinder, more ethical thinking attentive to heterogeneity and undecidability rather than dogmatic claims.

This careful tracing through Derrida's works reveals deconstruction not as arbitrary play but a systematic - albeit disruptive - method aiming at a more self-aware, humble form of reason. The phenomena of undecidability, aporia and deferral it uncovers point to the need for non-oppositional thinking beyond rigid dualisms and hierarchies.

Overall, the analysis follows an immanent approach derived strictly from Derrida's own conceptualization of deconstruction and its motivations. It centers the proposed explication around key claims Derrida makes across his central texts on the topic, cross-referencing and extending them based on secondary literature. This yields an account reflective of - rather than imposed upon - Derrida's thinking, better suited to avoid common misconceptions about deconstruction.

The central claims, concepts and distinctions elucidated through this method aim to demonstrate deconstruction's ordered nature contrary to accusations of randomness or unrestrained interpretation. In doing so, they clarify how Derrida himself understood deconstruction as anything but arbitrary, advocating instead for a questioning that proceeds with care and rigor to confront philosophy's structuring presuppositions.

Results

The current research aimed to provide a new perspective on understanding Auster's *Ghosts* through a deconstructive lens.

Deconstruction aims to show that texts contain multiple, contradictory meanings rather than a unified whole. This implies that texts have multiple

interpretations and aporias - irreconcilable contradictions - that limit interpretation. Deconstructive reading exposes these aporias, hence called aporetic reading. Deconstruction demonstrates that texts are already self-decomposed, built upon contradictions rather than coherence (Miller, 1976, p. 341).

Deconstruction reveals binary opposites in the text that create differentiated meanings. This uncovered signs and meanings that prompt the reader to consider philosophical questions. The main binary opposition in *Ghosts* that Auster presents and seeks to dismantle provides the story's structural strength. Deconstruction aims to invert hierarchical binaries in literature. In *Ghosts*, this deconstructs the concept of a unified self by portraying identity as a linguistic creation.

Ghosts embodies postmodern rejection of modern philosophical assumptions. It blurs the fiction/nonfiction boundary, symbolizing the writer shaping experiences through language. As deconstruction rejects the unified self, *Ghosts* can be read as Auster's linguistic creation. The conflict between self and other points to postmodernism after modernism. Postmodernism challenges binary oppositions in favor of considering the relational movement of signifiers, implying multiplicity rather than opposition. This describes the formation of self and identity (Hutcheon, 2003, p.61).

Discussion

The novel *Ghosts* deviates from conventions of traditional detective fiction in several significant ways. First, the setting of New York City takes on a postmodern nature where clues are confusing or meaningless rather than helpful in solving the mystery. Blue's investigation is driven more by his personal involvement and speculation rather than objective deduction.

The urban space depicted in the novel serves as a labyrinth that both Blue and the reader navigate aimlessly. Blue becomes imprisoned within his own observatory apartment, unable to gain any clarity on the situation. The lack of resolution mirrors the chaotic postmodern urban setting that lacks clear structure and order.

Speculation and imagination play an important role in both Freud's psychoanalytic theories and Auster's fiction, as Derrida's analysis highlights. For Freud, speculation indicates that his theories cannot be proven definitively but remain open to endless questioning and reinterpretation (Derrida, 1978, p.84). For Auster, speculation suggests thinking that reflects infinitely on itself through imagination and metaphor.

The novel emphasizes the roles of the writer and detective, which are juxtaposed. Black is both a detective figure for Blue to observe and a writer who finishes composing a work. Blue realizes Black has memorized the entire story, mirroring Auster's self-reflexive fiction that explores the nature of storytelling itself (Dimovitz, 2006, 620).

While *Ghosts* has some metafictional elements that reflect upon the text, it is ultimately grounded in reality through its linear narrative and setting. The work focuses more on themes of memory, knowledge and time rather than experimental literary techniques common in metafiction (Maltby, 2016, pp.37-39).

The genre of detective fiction shapes the novel by defining Blue's perspective and filtered view of unfolding events. However, the lack of a resolved mystery and

high degree of speculation indicates it deviates from and potentially parodies conventions of the genre (Russel, 1990, p.72).

The choice to frame the story as a detective mystery highlights Blue's powerlessness as a fictional character controlled by an author. It also implicitly compares the acts of detection and storytelling.

Ghosts can thus be seen as an example of genre bending that both draws from and challenges conventions of detective fiction to explore deeper philosophical themes related to existence, knowledge, and the search for purpose (Maltby, 2016, pp. 37-39). The presence of ghosts in the form historical figures, memories and haunting events also pervade the novel, mirroring both Blue and Black's roles as detective and writer figures.

The novel notably deviates from traditional detective fiction in its urban setting, lack of resolution, and emphasis on speculation and imagination over objective deduction. It uses conventions of the genre in an unconventional way to explore themes of reflection, storytelling, and the nature of knowledge through a labyrinthine and ghostly narrative.

Paul Auster's *Ghosts* operates on multiple levels to explore profound themes relating to identity, purpose, and craft. Its loosely structured form resembles a poetic web of philosophical questioning and metaphorical insight, refusing to provide definitive answers or conclusions. The work functions as an allegory for the author's experience seeking meaning through the imaginative act of reshaping life's details into symbolic vision.

Blue's wandering introspection and unresolved doubts mirror an author pondering existence through poetic metaphor rather than logical reasoning alone. His endless circling of themes and characters becomes a metaphor for discovering truth in journey over destination. The cases and questions encountered resemble a poetic vessel for insight, familiar forms acquiring new depth through reimagining. References to famous figures serve as philosophical echoes, each tale extending a lineage of profound inquiry echoing long before any single voice. Purpose is found in forging new connections within this lineage rather than departing from tradition. Overall, the novel seems an allegory for understanding life through crafting it into poetic metaphor and symbolic insight. Its open-endedness privileges philosophical exploration over straightforward narrative (Lavender, 1993).

The work challenges traditional boundaries between genres, blending fiction and autobiography. Auster foregrounds this relationship by beginning on his exact birthdate and implying correspondences between Blue's introspection and an author questioning life through the act of writing. Blue's observations become a metaphor for gaining deeper insight through poetic seeing beyond surface details. His monotonous pursuit resembles the act of reading, spying on Black akin to reading imprints left by the author.

Identities prove porous, morphing from writer to detective and back again. References create echoes across the trilogy, unveiling insight through rereading. Dichotomies collapse between self/other, purpose/meaning, and truth/craft into a manifold network. Postmodern concepts emerge, challenging modernist binaries and privileging flux over rigid opposition. Difference pervades, forging connections between knowledge, identity and creation (Hutcheon, 2003, p.61).

The room operates as a metaphor for writing, evoking its angst, constraints and reflexivity. Imagery of entrapment represents the isolation of an author's existence. Paradox springs from the room as both confining and freeing, its self-reference reflecting on the writing that imagined it. The room becomes a symbolic node, encapsulating themes of metafiction, purpose and the writer's plight.

Ghosts works on many levels to explore profound philosophical themes through poetic metaphor and symbolic vision. Its form rejects straightforward narrative for open-ended wandering, privileging journey over destination in a search for meaning. Dichotomies collapse into interconnection, and identities prove porous. The tale becomes an allegory for discovering purpose through reshaping life's details into deeper insight - familiar forms as vessels for reimagining. The room stands as metaphor for metafiction, craft and the constraints of a writer's existence. A manifold network emerges in place of opposition, flux privileged over stasis. Truth reveals itself through poetic seeing into layers beneath the surface (Jahshan, 2003, pp.392-402).

The novel emphasizes textuality, language, and self-reference through the walking metaphor, representing writing as a journey of discovering meaning. Recurring images of wandering signify the open-ended, exploratory nature of crafting fiction. The metaphor introduces writing as fluid interpretation of experience rather than something fixed or concluded. It signals how stories evolve through movement, uncovering insight step by step.

Blue declares it time to move to the next stage of his tale, yet remains trapped by the words reverberating in his mind. The space confining him resembles the text, with boundaries unclear between inside and out. A chain of substitutions uses room, book and case interchangeably, signifying a center never fully grasped. Blue recognizes Black as a reflection of himself, spying on the other yet seeing only himself. Mutual gazing signifies entrapment within a system offering only confinement, not transcendence. Each watches and is watched, representing imprisonment in the other's gaze. Black subtly subverts the logic of surveillance but cannot overcome its fate. They reflect endless entrapment, never freedom (Martin, 2007, p.130).

Two mirrors generate infinite regression, representing thought endlessly reflecting with no ground or limit. Blue and Black become ensnared in a conceptual space with no exit, allegorizing how craft can entrap by infinitely reflecting on itself. The signified perpetually deferred, insight seems to plunge into an abyss of vertiginous recursion. The story reflects the reader's mind back to itself, shaping and confusing understanding.

Blue's history haunts him like the ghosts of his tale. The frozen body of a father signifies the surreal, sinister metaphor of paternal loss haunting identity. Blue struggles to match his father and teacher, spectral presences judging his work though gone. The bridge accentuates this, completed the year of his father's birth. His vision of walking it with his father represents memories of a time lost yet still powerfully shaping him. Two engineers, a father and son, juxtapose with Blue and his father. Washington Roebling's fate resembles Blue's father and Brown, metaphorically confined though physically absent.

Blue quotes *Walden*, acknowledging the urge for utopia and the difficulty of its assumptions. Assuming one place and finding it lacking, we assume another,

explaining spatial dilemmas. The first mistake believes home a place rather than a binary of home/away. The other will solve problems, though presence is always elsewhere - Heidegger's future. Characters seek to eliminate home by wandering or finding utopia, failing to see interdependence of oikos and telos.

The key themes are writing as journey, the metaphorical nature of craft, entrapment in infinite reflection, history haunting identity, and the assumption of utopia as an escape from the interdependence of origin and purpose. Recursion allegorizes thought plunging endlessly into itself with no conclusion. Characters signify imprisonment in mutual gazing offering only confinement. Blue struggles with ghosts of the past, his father's death and teacher's example judging his work. The bridge and frozen father are surreal metaphors for loss shaping him. Seeking to eliminate home fails to understand its relationship to purpose and destiny. Overall, the novel explores craft and existence as open-ended wandering rather than something fixed or escapable. Freedom is found not through transcending constraints but realizing their inescapable interconnection. Insight emerges not by concluding but perpetually journeying.

The rooms inhabited by Blue and Black serve as a backdrop for profound explorations of identity, perspective, and the subtle power of writing and imaginings. Although physically bounded spaces, they come to represent interiority and exteriority, obscuring distinctions between self/other in haunting fashion. Each room houses the ghost that torments its occupant, introducing a vertiginous logic where spaces fold into themselves through reflection. Strangeness emerges within even the most familiar or domestic setting (O'Connor, 2011, p 110).

Blue's interest in detection, film-watching and stories of disappearance/reappearance proves meaningfully interconnected. His positioning watching flickering images intersect with views into Black's room creates a haunting mirroring effect, open to manifold metaphorical purpose. Resonances between his interests, behavior, and Freud's fort/da game suggest themes of loss, identity as performance, and fictions' influence. However, more questions are posed than conclusively answered regarding motives, insights effectively conveyed, or single interpretation. The web of reflections remains eerily obscure yet moving.

When Blue and Black engage in role reversal and subtle play-acting, boundaries blur between self/other in strange fashion. Black implies coming to see the world through another's eyes and assumptions, suggesting metaphorical reversal of observer/observed. His phrasing seems intentionally ambiguous, highlighting themes of merged perspectives and being. An autobiographical reference further complicates their relationship, reflecting paradoxes where an autobiography becomes heterobiography, and readers author another's life. Perspectives have shifted in uncanny ways.

Blue's actions underline the desire to end dynamics confusing identity and grasp on perspective in favor of clarity. However, entering Black's room means confronting dangers of ontological collapse and inability to perceive distinction. Stealing pages from Black's manuscript reflects abandonment to merged being, as writing has distorted each into the other's image. Realities have blended beyond separation through narrative's power.

When Black tells Blue he has made him his death, implications emerge of Blue embodying a death drive responsible for Black's demise. As an agent of discipline

containing Black's anguish, Blue also enables the pleasure principle's triumph. However, when rejecting Black's authority, Blue becomes a destructive force imperiling Black's being. Themes of death instinct, archives' annihilation, obscured tracks and anarchy arise. By undermining memory and history, Blue unleashes aggression intent on effacing Black's traces. While the death drive defies principle, its mission is silent archives' destruction.

The rooms and reflections between Blue and Black represent a haunting web of metaphorical purpose and eerily indeterminate insights. Although spaces may be bounded, interior/exterior dichotomies dissolve as each inhabits and shapes the other through subtle imaginings and the language giving form. Mysteries emerge around motives, identity and the anarchic impulse, as fictions imperil being and memory's annihilation proves the death drive's end. More questions are evoked than resolved, as the reflections create vertigo where self and other cease to stand apart. Meaning seems endless yet obscure within this hall of mirrors, as readers author lives not their own and autobiography transfigures into heterobiography without end.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Auster's *Ghosts* represents a profound exploration of self and the subtle complexities of writing equally haunted and haunting. Although approaching the autobiographical, Auster adopts techniques creating distance necessary to transfigure the familiar into strange. Splitting himself between Blue and Black, he objectifies experience, permitting progress where first-person proved obstacle. The vertigo of their reflections mirrors Auster's own oscillation between oppositional states in approaching the written.

For Auster, memoir and fiction prove strangely interchangeable as each examines his role/purpose as author. Whether tangible or intangible, physical or abstract, he inhabits the space between to craft tales of identity as performance and imaginings' transformative power. Blue and Black reflect this fluctuating between fact and fancy, just as Auster shifts from memoirist to novelist and back again. Their mirroring represents his own unstable navigation of the paradoxes within.

In doubling and dividing the self, Auster creates a 'ghost' to observe and reflect, documenting his own anguish. Yet through detachment, the familiar is made unfamiliar, and Auster relatively exorcised of his demons through the powers of language. In giving them form as 'Blue' and 'Black', his ghosts are lent substance only to be dispelled through the communication of internal depths. The rooms represent interiority housing the ghosts of exterior observation.

Auster's maneuvers highlight how language shapes reality and the self as written. Through manipulation of vantage and voice, the story of 'I' transfigures into heterobiography ghosted by fictions. In questioning where Blue or Black's experience ends and his beginnings, we confront the vertigo of identity as ceaseless performance. Their tale leaves traces of the death drive's satisfaction in effacing boundaries between fact/fiction, self/other, and pleasure/reality principles...principles governing stability utterly dissolved within these elusive rooms of memory and imaginings entwined.

In navigating the space between opposites, Auster's work evokes restless mysteries around the subject's substance and the object's (in)tangibility. Through his ghosts, what haunts the familiar is made visible and strange depths sounded, as the

rooms' reflections fold endlessly in on themselves. His maneuvers suggest how writing exorcises demons by giving them form, even as their tale imperils notions of identity as fixed. In the end, more questions are evoked than resolved as vertigo triumphs and Blue, Black and the author who crafted their rooms seem to merge and stand apart, self and other ceasing to be stably defined. Confronted by imaginings' powers, we commence endless navigation of these haunted halls.

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