Roberto Righi

THE Labyrinth AND THE LOCKED ROOM:
PAUL AUSTER’S THE NEW YORK TRILOGY

The words rhyme, and even if there is no real connection between them, he cannot help thinking of them together. Room and tomb, tomb and womb, womb and room.

Paul Auster – The Invention of Solitude

The New York Trilogy (1987) is probably the most important and representative of Paul Auster’s novels. With his philosophical postmodern touch, Auster explores contemporary reality, and portrays it in a novel that becomes a mirror of the postmodern age.

Even if the three sections of the Trilogy are really different, at the end of the last story (The Locked Room) the Narrator maintains that the

three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about.¹

The Narrator (who can be seen as Auster’s alter ego or fictional representation in the novel) is thus an ex-centric or de-centered postmodern artist who lives in a fragmented world that cannot be conceived and reproduced with the “conventionally ordered notion”² of unity and continuity. His world is the postmodern world as defined by Hutcheon: a “labyrinth without center or periphery”³. Jameson argues that “the unity or incoherence and fragmentation of the subject – that is, the accessibility of a workable subject position or the absence of one – is itself a correlative of the unity or lack of unity of the

¹ Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy: The Locked Room, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 294. All further references to this text, hereafter cited as LR, will be given in parentheses in the text.
³ Ibidem, p. 59.
outside world." And, as we will see, Auster identifies the contingency of his labyrinthine world with a labyrinthine consciousness. Struggling to present the unrepresentable, to "[put] forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" in order to find a solution to, or a way out of, the (physical and metaphysical) labyrinth of the postmodern condition, the Narrator synthesizes the metaphor of a locked room as the subject's (metaphysical) place of (self-)knowledge, salvation and (poetic) creativity.

In City of Glass the protagonist, writer Daniel Quinn, loves to wander aimlessly through the streets of New York, a daily habit that helps him "understand the connectedness of inner and outer":

Using aimless motion as a technique of reversal, on his best days he could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness. (CG, 61)

For Quinn walking is a way to avoid inwardness and "exert some small degree of control over his fits of despair" (CG, 61): in this way he stops thinking about his suffering, i.e. the pain of the thought of his lost wife and child. But at the same time the writer gets lost into the city and himself:

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

New York, the main setting for most of the events of the novel, is a city of the world, the microcosmic emblem of the world at large; it is the perfect symbol of the postmodern metropolitan space: the city skyline and the grid of Manhattan

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6 Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy: City of Glass, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, p. 61. All further references to this text, hereafter cited as CG, will be given in parentheses in the text.
streets suggest the idea of a three-dimensional labyrinth, a monotonous and anonymous structure that leads the characters to the unreal and alienating non-place of disappearance:

New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (CG, 4)

But when Quinn is hired as a detective and starts shadowing Peter Stillman Sr. 7, things change for him: the writer cannot avoid inwardness any more and is obliged to become aware of the concrete reality and totality that surround him. Paying attention to Stillman and his movements is like paying attention to himself and his own (inner and outer) movements. Quinn begins what Jameson defines as “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping”, accomplishing “exactly what the cognitive map is called upon to do in the narrower framework of daily life in the physical city: to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” 8. The necessity to map out and recognize the social and spatial structures he lives in is a gnoseological problem: “the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves [...]” 9. Quinn records Stillman’s daily movements in a red notebook, and after re-reading what he has written down he (almost unconsciously) decides to retrace the old man’s steps on a map of New York. When he looks at the signs he has drawn, he is really surprised as he starts glimpsing the shapes of letters in them:

It seemed to him that he was looking for a sign. He was ransacking the chaos of Stillman’s movements for some glimmer of cogency. [...] He wanted there to be a sense to them, no matter how obscure. (CG, 69)

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7 As the Narrator tells at the beginning of the novel, “[i]t was a wrong number that started it” (CG, 3). Out of mere chance, one night Quinn receives a phone call from a person looking for detective “Paul Auster”. He decides to play the role of the detective and is hired (as “Auster”) by Peter and Virginia Stillman, as they fear that Peter’s father, Stillman Sr., plans to kill them.

8 Fredric Jameson, op. cit., p. 51.

9 Ibidem, p. 51.
Hoping to find “some glimmer of cogency”, Quinn actually starts his personal cognitive mapping trying to map out, read and interpret Stillman’s steps:

For Stillman had not left his message anywhere. True, he had created the letters by the movement of his steps, but they had not been written down. It was like drawing a picture in the air with your finger. The image vanishes as you are making it. [...] And yet, the pictures did exist – not in the streets where they had been drawn, but in Quinn’s red notebook. (CG, 71)

It could all be an outer projection of Quinn’s mind, as the reliability of the letters he sees on the map is strongly called into question. The detective experiences the (physical and metaphysical) fragmentation and lack of cogency of the (post-modern) world: he cannot find the (inner and outer) compass to map a reality characterized by ontological and gnoseological relativity, and gets thus lost in his “labyrinth without center or periphery”; it is an unpresentable and unrepresentable infinite maze, where words become useless, since signified and signifier are ineluctably separated:

Quinn’s mind dispersed. He arrived in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words. [...] In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself in the town dump of his childhood, sifting through a mountain of rubbish. (CG, 72)

In his oneiric activity, Quinn condenses and elaborates the world into a labyrinth of junk, a “neverland” of unrecognizable fragments. As we have seen, the fragmentation of the world corresponds to the fragmentation (and thus incoherence) of the subject’s (un)consciousness, a concept that is perfectly summarized by the Narrator’s reflection on the relativity of the knowledge of others and ourselves:

We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself. (LR, 247, my emphasis)

The Narrator particularly explores all these themes in Ghosts, the second story of the Trilogy, where the protagonist, detective Blue, has to shadow a man called Black, constantly watching
him from a window and following him through the streets of New York. Here again the character's cognitive mapping (i.e. his almost obsessive effort to unravel the puzzle of Black's life) starts to coincide with an exploration of the self. While Blue follows Black wandering through the streets of New York, in fact, he starts thinking about himself:

Black takes advantage of the weather to wander farther afield than previously, and Blue follows. [...] As they move through the narrow streets of Brooklyn Heights, Blue is encouraged to see that Black keeps increasing his distance from home. [...] It has been many years since Blue crossed the Brooklyn Bridge on foot. The last time was with his father when he was a boy, and the memory of that day comes back to him now.

During his walk, the detective starts being overwhelmed by thoughts, memories and associations of ideas that quickly follow one another:

These divagations last several hours, and at no point does Blue have the sense that Black is walking to any purpose. (Gb, 151, my emphasis)

The physical, concrete movements, divagations, trigger off Blue's mental divagations, i.e. his process of inwardness and (self-)knowledge. It is an experience that Auster himself knows very well, since he describes it in The Invention of Solitude (1982), his partially autobiographical book:

Sometimes it feels as though we are wandering through a city without purpose. [...] Sometimes it seems as though we are not going anywhere as we walk through the city [...]. But just as one step will inevitably lead to the next step, so it is that one thought inevitably follows from the previous thought, and in the event that a thought should engender more than a single thought (say two or three thoughts, equal to each other in all their consequences), it will be necessary not only to follow the first thought to its conclusion, but also to backtrack to the original position of that thought in order to follow the second thought

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10 The protagonist of Ghosts, Blue, is a detective, hired by a mysterious man called White to shadow Black. For this reason he moves into a flat just opposite to Black's. Blue's job is to watch him constantly from his window and follow him, and write weekly reports to be sent to White.

11 Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy: Ghosts, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, pp. 148-49. All further references to this text, hereafter cited as Gb, will be given in parentheses in the text.
to its conclusion, and then the third thought, and so on, and in this way, if we were to try to make an image of this process in our minds, a network of paths begins to be drawn, [...] as in the image of a map [...], so that what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken, so that, in the end, we might safely say that we have been on a journey, and even if we do not leave our room, it has been a journey, and we might safely say that we have been somewhere, even if we don’t know where it is.12

Auster gives here a perfect description of cognitive mapping, associating the (potentially infinite) network of thoughts to the (potentially infinite) journeys we can take in a grid of streets: as we can get lost in the (postmodern) labyrinthine metropolis, we can get lost in our labyrinthine consciousness as well. But the author also introduces the theme of the (locked) room as a metaphor, a spatial figuration of our consciousness: it is the place of the mind and of the heart where everything can happen, where inwardness starts and creativity flows out. Essentially, the characters of the Trilogy wander through their (concrete and abstract) labyrinthine spaces in order to find an answer, a haven of certainties: “[w]andering, in Auster, has this original aspect: rather than pitting the individual against a cold, hostile world, it forces him to confront himself and the scattered fragments of his existence. Everything relates back to the self, and, while the [locked] room serves as a microcosm, the outer world itself becomes an enclosure, which speaks in veiled tones”13. We can observe in this way that Auster deliberately chooses three detectives as protagonists of the novels of the Trilogy, because “[w]e’re surrounded by things we don’t understand, by mysteries, and in the books there are people who suddenly come face to face with them”14. The cases, the mysteries they are involved in are “things they don’t know or understand” (AH, 270), i.e. they face gnoseological, epistemo-

logical and existential questions: “[t]he question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are” (AH, 270). In other words, Auster’s quest is a “metaphysical quest”, “an eternal quest without guaranteed results” 15: his characters are detectives of the self trying to trace a (physical and metaphysical) map that could help them find the right points of reference (i.e. the compass) to put their (inner and outer) fragmentation back again and come out of the chaos of their postmodern condition.

Blue’s physical and mental divagations make him move from the “surface of things” to the “world inside him”:

For the first time in his life, he finds that he has been thrown back on himself, with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next. He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself. He has moved rapidly along the surface of things for as long as he can remember, fixing his attention on these surfaces only in order to perceive them [...]. (Gb, 143)

The detective starts undertaking a journey through his labyrinthine spaces, a process of self-knowledge, “reflecting” on and “speculating” about Black and consequently himself. Black becomes a kind of double, “the Other – that gaping hole, that absence at the heart of oneself which narratives must fill up, furnish, clothe –” 16, and without whom “there is no definition of the self” 17:

Now, suddenly, with the world as it were removed from him, with nothing much to see but a vague shadow by the name of Black, he finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before, and this, too, has begun to trouble him. If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term – speculation, for example – would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin speculator, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself. (Gb, 144)

15 Pascal Bruckner, *art. cit.*, p. 32.
16 Marc Chénétier, “Paul Auster’s Pseudonymous World”, in Dennis Barone (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 38.
17 Ibidem, p. 38.
Therefore, when Blue realizes that Black will remain a mystery, a ghost throughout the whole story, he loses his certainties, his belief as detective that the world (and consequently his inner world) has an order that can be categorized. Like Quinn, Blue experiences the sheer fragmentation and arbitrariness of the “real”: his “case achieves no answers, but rather the total dissemination of all that he once ‘knew’. Signifiers and signifieds no longer match up; the strident categories of subject and object have broken down completely [...]” 18:

He says to himself: what happened is not really what happened. For the first time [...] he discovers that words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say. (Gb, 147-48, my emphasis)

As detectives of the self, Blue and the protagonists of the other sections of the Trilogy try to unravel their (physical and metaphysical) cases, “evoking the epistemological – how am I to know my place in the world? – and [...] adding to it the ontological questions now central to postmodernism: what is the nature of this world? And what is the nature of my place, or lack of place in this world?” 19 The Narrator (we must bear in mind that he is the Narrator of all three sections) tries to answer these questions, to present the unpresentable in his narratives, synthesizing impossible, short-circuiting (thus poetic) metaphors.

Trying to figure himself out after his “speculation”, his process of self-knowledge, Blue sees the image of a man who has been condemned to sit in a room and go on reading a book for the rest of his life. This is strange enough – [...] seeing the world only through words [...]. But this book offers him nothing. There is no story, no plot, nothing but a man sitting alone in a room and writing a book. That’s all there is, Blue realizes, and he no longer wants any part of it. But how to get out? How to get out of the room that is the book that will go on being written for as long as he stays in the room? (Gb, 169-70)

As the detective cannot discover anything about his oppo-

19 Ibidem, p. 209.
nent, he does not manage to locate himself either. He sees the figuration of his consciousness, the image of his (inner) locked room, but he experiences it as a prison. In other words, Blue does not accept the relativity and ambiguity of our life. In the course of his (meta-physical) investigations, in fact, when he decides to enter Black’s room, he remains utterly disoriented and dislocated:

Having penetrated Black’s room and stood there alone, having been, so to speak, in the sanctum of Black’s solitude, he cannot respond to the darkness of that moment except by replacing it with a solitude of his own. To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else. But this is precisely where Black is, even though Blue does not know it. (Gb, 190, my emphasis)

Blue does not understand the ontological nature of his quest and the metaphorical significance of the figuration of the locked room; he does not grasp his inner compass and gets lost in his labyrinthine consciousness.

Quinn undergoes an analogous process: “[d]etection becomes a quest for identity, as the mystery outside releases the mystery inside the detective” 20. For this reason the writer feels upset and incomplete when Stillman Sr. disappears: he cannot locate his opponent any more, and therefore he “cannot locate [himself], either within the complex labyrinth of the city or within the labyrinth that has become his own identity” 21. The character’s sense of displacement corresponds thus to a gnoseological and existential crisis:

Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine. (CG, 104, my emphasis)

In The Locked Room the Narrator acknowledges the same crisis of displacement when, in the obstinate search for his friend Fanshawe, he arrives in Paris 22. Like Quinn, he experi-

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22 The Narrator is the protagonist of The Locked Room. He is contacted
ences the "connectedness of inner and outer", the interdepend-
ence between the self and its environment, so that he loses his
(physical and psychical) positions when he does not recognize
the totality that surrounds him:

I had been displaced, and it made me suddenly unsure of myself. I felt
my grip loosening, and at least once an hour I had to remind myself
why I was there. (LR, 287)

Not only does the Narrator lose Fanshawe's traces, but also
his own. Looking for his friend, he gets lost into himself: as
for the other characters, the Narrator's "investigation cannot
possibly concern the world, [but] it can only refer the inves-
tigator to his own interiority, where the unconscious bubbles
up" 23.

My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond
myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable. This was
the tiny hole between the self and not-self, and for the first time in my
life I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world. (LR, 232, my
emphasis)

As we have seen with Quinn and Blue, the physical displace-
ment also causes a psychological displacement and fragmenta-
tion:

I became inert, a thing that could not move, and little by little I lost
track of myself. If I am able to say anything about this period at all, it
is only because I have certain documentary evidence to help me. [...] Those days come back to me in fragments when they come at all, bits
and pieces that refuse to add up. (LR, 293)

Like Blue during his investigations, the Narrator identifies
his opponent, Fanshawe, with a specular double: trying to find
and locate him, he finds his own (un)consciousness, his unlo-
catable "nowhere", "the tiny hole between the self and not-
self". It is a (meta-physical) place where he can only wander

by Sophie Fanshawe, the wife of Fanshawe, a friend of his when he was
young. As Fanshawe, a writer, has mysteriously disappeared, she wants the
Narrator to become the literary executor of his works. When he receives a
letter from his friend, who tells him he is still alive but wants to remain
missing, he starts an obsessive search for Fanshawe.

23 Marc Chénétier, art. cit., p. 37.
alone: he gets lost into his "labyrinthine interiority", where the
"self remains the ultimate mystery, the ultimate threshold, across
which we have no access, the locked room inside the skull" 24:

Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the
beginning. From the moment his letter arrived, I had been struggling to
imagine him, to see him as he might have been – but my mind had
always conjured a blank. At best, there was one impoverished image: the
door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in
that room, condemned to a mythical solitude – living perhaps, breathing
perhaps, dreaming God knows what. This room, I now discovered, was
located inside my skull. (LR, 292-93)

It is at this point that he becomes aware of the meaning of
his search: Fanshawe becomes the embodiment of the place of
consciousness, of the pivotal center of identity; the Narrator is
looking for nothing but his own self. He has a clear vision of
a "room [...] located inside [his] skull", but the door of this
room is locked, inviolable. With this metaphor the Narrator (as
a poet, an ex-centric artist) presents the unpresentable (of the
postmodern condition he embodies): the metaphor is both
abstract and concrete; it is powerfully paradoxical and short-
circuiting; it struggles to make possible the impossible, to give
a meaning to the fragmentation and unknowability of the post-
modern "real" with its arbitrary language. The image of the
locked room becomes thus a symbol of reaction to, and re-
demption from, the alienated and sterile situation he finds him-
self in. After this perception the Narrator starts his personal
"speculation": his physical and psychical displacement drives
him to a mad-like (almost schizophrenic) state and activity. This
is how he can tell the same story three times, in three different
ways 25: differently from Blue, he takes a step further and ac-
cepts the ambiguity of life, using (postmodern schizophrenic)
creativity as a means of exploration of his emotional landscapes:

25 This reading is clearly referred to Jameson's definition of postmodern-
ism, for whom the aesthetic model of postmodern art can be associated to
schizophrenia: alienation, dislocation and lack of historicity cause "a break-
down in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of
signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning. [...] With the break-
down of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an
experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure
and unrelated presents in time." (Fredric Jameson, op. cit., pp. 26-27).
If words followed, it was only because I had no choice but to accept them, to take them upon myself and go where they wanted me to go. [...] The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle. (LR, 294)

Fundamentally, the Narrator finally learns what Fanshawe had always tried to teach him indirectly in their youth: the importance to live, to experience and taste life in order to know ourselves and survive in the non-meaning of the postmodern reality. Fanshawe is aware of the inexplicable and inescapable “mysterious centre of hiddenness” (LR, 210) of life, and wants to unravel it: the Narrator remembers an episode, when Fanshawe goes into a freshly dug tomb:

Somewhere in the middle of the cemetery there was a freshly dug grave, and Fanshawe and I stopped at the edge and looked down into it. [...] Fanshawe said that he wanted to see what it was like at the bottom. [...] When his feet touched the ground he looked back up at me with a half-smile, and then lay down on his back, as though pretending to be dead. [...] Fanshawe was alone down there, thinking his thoughts, living through those moments by himself, and though I was present, the event was sealed off from me, as though I was not really there at all. (LR, 220-21)

It is as if Fanshawe were (symbolically) entering his own locked room: the Narrator realizes that he cannot enter it, that he cannot share his friend’s thoughts, that they will always be unknown to him. For this reason the locked room can be perceived as a tomb: it is the cold, sterile, inaccessible place of incommunicability and loneliness. But, most importantly, this scene reminds him of something that happened in the boys’ childhood:

By some obscure train of thought, it made me think back to when we were very small – no more than four or five years old. Fanshawe’s parents had bought some new appliance, a television perhaps, and for several months Fanshawe kept the cardboard box in his room. He had always been generous in sharing his toys, but this box was off limits to me, and he never let me go in it. It was his secret place, he told me, and when he sat inside and closed it up around him, he could go wherever he wanted to go, could be wherever he wanted to be. But if another person ever entered his box, then its magic would be lost for good. I believed this story and did not press him for a turn, although it nearly broke my heart. We would be playing in his room, quietly setting up soldiers or drawing pictures, and then, out of the blue, Fanshawe would announce that he was going into his box. I would try to go on with what I had been doing, but it was never any use. Nothing interested me
so much as what was happening to Fanshawe inside the box, and I
would spend those minutes desperately trying to imagine the adventures
he was having. But I never learned what they were, since it was also
against the rules for Fanshawe to talk about them after he climbed out.
(LR, 220, my emphasis)

Fanshawe’s box, just like the tomb, is “his secret place”, his
metaphor of the locked room of consciousness: his microcosm,
his “nowhere”, is this mental place that nobody can enter and
violate, and that cannot be presented and represented. This
experience of absolute solitude in the locked room starts off
the process of self-knowledge: Fanshawe (physically and meta-
physically) wanders inside his inner geography, he (magically)
explores and discovers new emotional landscapes.

Once the Narrator understands the importance of this expe-
rience, he (fictionally) presents the different degrees of aware-
ness of the question of (self-)knowledge.

In Ghosts Blue, not accepting the ambiguity of the “real”,
drifts into his labyrinthine “nowhere” and feels like a prisoner,
“like a man who has been condemned to sit in a room” (Gb,
169). For him, thus, the locked room is a tomb from which he
would like to escape: but he does not find any way out:

Then, from out of the blue, he begins to consider another possibility.
What if he just simply left? What if he stood up, went out the door,
and walked away from the whole business? He ponders this thought for
a while, testing it out in his mind, and little by little he begins to
tremble, overcome by terror and happiness, like a slave stumbling onto
a vision of his own freedom. [...] But that is not to say he does not feel
afraid. From this moment on, there is only one word that speaks for
Blue, and that word is fear. (Gb, 186-87)

Confronted with the hidden ambiguity of his labyrinthine
consciousness, the feeling that prevails in Blue is fear, terror.
His position also represents Fanshawe’s nihilistic choice: the
writer decides to disappear from the world, to escape from the
terror of the relativity and paradoxicality of the postmodern
“real”; he hides in a locked room that becomes his (physical
and metaphysical) tomb. That is why there is no answer, no (cre-
ative and vital) solution in the words of the notebook he writes
for the Narrator: while the Narrator struggles to present the
unpresentable in his narratives, Fanshawe intentionally wants to
erase it, to fool the reader with sterile, arbitrary, failing words:
All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. I can think of no other way to express it. Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. [...] And yet, underneath this confusion, I felt there was something too willed, something too perfect, as though in the end the only thing he had really wanted was to fail – even to the point of failing himself. (LR, 313-14)

On the other hand, the Narrator understands that our self, our locked room can be a prison, but “a prison that opens the gates of freedom; the self is a dungeon we must voluntarily enter in order to find escape” 26.

From this point of view the locked room as tomb represents the first necessary stage (i.e. of death) that the self has to go through in order to gain the possibility of redemption and rebirth.

The theme of rebirth is particularly dealt with in City of Glass. As we have seen, after the disappearance of Stillman Sr., Daniel Quinn has no gnoseological and epistemological certainties any more: lost in the unrecognizable and alienating “nowhere” of New York and in the infinite labyrinth of his consciousness, the writer decides to take refuge in Peter and Virginia Stillman’s flat. Entering the apartment (where the whole case, the mystery began), he enters his (un)consciousness; he crosses the ultimate threshold between the physical and the metaphysical; in this flat the (poetic) metaphor of the dark, locked room becomes incarnate, it becomes a symbolic womb, “a kind of mental uterus, site of a second birth. In this enclosure the subject gives birth, in essence, to himself” 27. Quinn takes off all his clothes, “making himself completely naked like the child just emerged, or about to emerge, from the womb” 28: it is his final metamorphosis, the last phase he lives through in order to complete his quest for identity and develop into a new man:

For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. [...] He remembered the moment of his birth and how he had been pulled gently from his mother’s womb. (CG, 130)

26 Pascal Bruckner, art. cit., p. 28.
27 Ibidem, p. 28.
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Daniel Quinn "gives birth, in essence, to himself": it is a rebirth of the self that implies a new awareness and an acceptance of all the ambiguities and contradictions, of the unknowability, of the gnoseological and epistemological uncertainties of the postmodern condition.

Metaphorically, this is what happens to the Narrator in the final act of *The Locked Room*, what makes him decide to pour out all his creativity: he reads the red notebook that Fanshawe has left for him, but after he finishes reading it, he destroys it. He is not lured by the writer's blinding words, and he gains his personal (poetic) freedom and independence, since he manages to accept his own, and the world's, ambiguities and contradictions. In other words, he understands that they are the necessary condition that makes the process of (self-)knowledge start and helps him face the fragmentation of the world and become a mature, independent postmodern subject:

One by one, I tore the pages from the notebook, crumpled them in my hand, and dropped them into a trash bin on the platform. (*LR*, 314)

**ABSTRACT**
In his novel *The New York Trilogy* (1987), Paul Auster fictionally explores the contradictions and ambiguities of contemporary postmodern reality. The protagonists of the three stories find themselves in a New York that becomes the emblem of the postmodern space: an unknowable and infinitely fragmented labyrinth they get lost into. As they have the ontological necessity to know and define the "real", their environment, they start a "cognitive mapping" that makes them experience gnoseological relativity, their own labyrinthine consciousness. The Narrator (who maintains to be the narrator of all the three sections) offers a solution to the chaos of their postmodern condition, synthesizing the metaphor of a locked room as a physical and metaphysical place of (self-)consciousness, (self-)knowledge and creativity.

**KEY WORDS**