

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS**

**GABRIELA SEMENSATO FERREIRA**

**A POETICS OF CHANCE: READING PAUL AUSTER**

Porto Alegre, 2011

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## **O dado**

*Sempre gostei que decidissem por mim. Com B. tínhamos uma regra: nos dias pares ele decidia, nos ímpares, eu. Quando ele foi para os Estados Unidos, me deu um dado de presente para substituí-lo.*

Sophie Calle, *Histórias Reais*

## RESUMO

A obra ficcional de Paul Auster é conhecida há pelo menos três décadas e reconhecida pelos seus detetives Quinn, ou Work ou Wilson, que passam a se chamar Paul Auster, e, ao mesmo tempo, recusam esse nome. Esses são os personagens de *Cidade de Vidro*, de *A Trilogia de Nova York*, uma das obras analisadas no presente trabalho. Estudamos ainda *Leviatã*, *O Livro das Ilusões*, *A Música do Acaso* e *O Caderno Vermelho*. Investigamos também sua prosa não ficcional, como em *Prosa Coligida*. Nosso objetivo, com estas análises, é apontar a criação de uma poética do acaso, que pode ser identificada a partir da leitura da obra do escritor norte-americano. Para isso, dividimos o trabalho em capítulos, os quais são *Hindsight (Retrospectiva)*, *Language and Silence (Linguagem e Silêncio)*, *Death and Invisibility (Morte e Invisibilidade)*, *Fiction as Mirror (Ficção como Espelho)* e *A Throw of the Dice (Um Lance de Dados)*. Cada capítulo fala de uma característica que foi percebida através de uma leitura crítica das obras de Auster. Verificamos que elas indicam ou reforçam a presença do Acaso nas narrativas. Este trabalho torna-se, portanto, a leitura de uma poética do acaso na obra de Auster, a qual lê e relê a modernidade desde Mallarmé e, por que não, Miguel de Cervantes, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, entre outros. Auster repensa, assim, as propostas desses escritores e de outros artistas de forma teórica e crítica, engendrando essas leituras em sua própria escritura.

Palavras chave: Paul Auster, acaso, literatura Norte-Americana

## ABSTRACT

Paul Auster's fictional work is known for three decades at least and renown for detectives Quinn, or Work or Wilson, who become Paul Auster and, at the same time, deny this name. These are the characters from *City of Glass*, in *The New York Trilogy*, one of the novels analyzed in the present paper. We have also studied *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions*, *The Music of Chance* and *The Red Notebook*, as well as investigated his non-fictional prose in *Collected Prose*. Our objective is to highlight the creation of a poetics of chance, which can be identified from the reading of this American writer's works. For this purpose we divided the study into chapters, in this order *Hindsight*, *Language and Silence*, *Death and Invisibility*, *Fiction as Mirror* and *A Throw of the Dice*. Each chapter speaks of a characteristic perceived through a critical reading of Auster's narratives. We realized they indicate or reinforce the presence of Chance in these narratives. Therefore, this study is the reading of a poetics of chance in Auster, whose works read and reread modernists such as Mallarmé, and, why not, Miguel de Cervantes, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, among other. Thus Auster rethinks the propositions brought about by these writers and artists theoretically and critically, recreating these readings in his own writing.

Keywords: Paul Auster, chance, American literature

## SUMMARY

1. Introduction .....	7
2. The role of Chance .....	9
3. Hindsight .....	14
4. Language and Silence.....	25
5. Death and invisibility.....	32
6. Fiction as mirror .....	38
7. <i>A Throw of the Dice</i> , Auster and Mallarmé.....	46
8. Conclusion.....	53
References .....	58

## 1. Introduction

Paul Auster was born in 1945 in the United States of America. He is a poet, a novelist, a translator. He is also a scriptwriter and director, and has been writing about cinema and literature for at least three decades. His novels have earned literary awards as well as recognition among readers and the specialized critics. His works encourage a critical reading through a kind of literature which is at the same well-humored and very serious in its inclination to think about fiction, art and the human experience.

"My first novel was inspired by a wrong number", says Auster in *The Red Notebook* (2009, p. 46)<sup>1</sup>. He picked up the phone and the man on the other end asked if he was talking to the Pinkerton Agency. Auster told him no, he had dialed the wrong number, and hung up. The next afternoon, the man called again, asking if that was the Pinkerton Agency. Auster again answered that it wasn't and hung up. This time, however, he started wondering what would have happened if he had said yes, if he had told the man he was a detective from that agency.

The complete story can be found in *The Red Notebook*, a collection of short stories about moments in Auster's life, including the reason why he became a writer. It sounds like an autobiography and is often described as one in many articles. The short story entitled number 1, for example, is followed by a paragraph which begins with "This is a real story" (2009, p. 11), where the narrator defends this idea by saying that, if the readers doubt its veracity, they can go to Sligo, where the story happened, and see for themselves.

What seems to be recurrent in these stories is the fact that most of them (if not all) are about something that happened by chance, sometimes called accident, or coincidence, perhaps. And in many moments these "accidents" motivated the writing of fiction. This is how the idea for this final paper was born.

Primarily, there was the interest to know how a writer nowadays could write something "autobiographical", using it in his other fictional works. This autobiographical art is observed more easily in works by artists like Sophie Calle, for

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition was published in 1992. The stories in this compilation appeared first in *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, and *Conjunctions*.

example, where the borders between the author's "life" and her artistic production are more subtle. So much so that Sophie is actually "used" as a character in *Leviathan* (AUSTER, 1993).

However, after reading some of Auster's published works more carefully, the word *chance* and its presence in these books became more and more noticeable and intriguing. After all, Auster is writing about the use of these "true" events, which happened by chance, in his novels.

Most of the analyses of Paul Auster's novels written so far involve the study of identity (such as IVERSEN, between 1990 and 2010<sup>2</sup>; SILVA, 2002<sup>3</sup>; and KEANE<sup>4</sup>, 2009). In this paper, we seek to understand how his fictional works could be part of an aesthetic project in which chance would play a significant role, and how this project can also be perceived through his articles of literary criticism. This perspective seems to constitute a valid though seldom sought way of approaching his writings.

This study aims to analyze the role of chance in Auster's fictional works by critically reading and comparing some of his novels and some of his articles. We also believe that through this analysis it is possible to observe theoretical and critical reflections concerning literature in his narratives. To better understand this, we search for the meaning of 'chance' in some of his fictional works, along with the *intertextual* relations<sup>5</sup> with other works, such as *The Throw of the Dies*, by Stéphane Mallarmé.

To identify the role of chance in Auster's fiction, some of his novels were studied. These are *Leviathan*, *The Book of Illusions*, *The New York Trilogy*, *The Music of Chance* and *The Red Notebook*. The main elements to be observed, which are connected to this notion of 'chance', are the presence of 'hindsight', the play with language and, reversibly, with silence, the relation between death, invisibility and chance, and the notion of fiction as mirror. In a final chapter, the study of Auster's novels in relation to the readings of Mallarmé's later works will be further commented.

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<sup>2</sup> Anniken Telnes Iversen. *Changing Identities in Paul Auster's Moon Palace*.

<sup>3</sup> Egle Pereira da Silva, *Entre o Eu e o Outro na Cidade de Vidro*.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Keane, *Doubles in The Locked Room by Paul Auster: Identity in Flux*.

<sup>5</sup> *Intertextuality*, as introduced by Julia Kristeva in the area of Semiotic studies, and also in Comparative Literature.



## 2. The role of Chance

The study of how chance is incorporated or how it works inside a novel should, perhaps, begin with an attempt to define what *chance* is. If looked up in a dictionary, the word presents many possible synonyms, linked to unpredictability, an accidental event or the likelihood of an event, the unknown, a risk or hazard, or luck, as in a game. All these meanings could fit the use of the word in Auster's novels. How and to what extent, though? And what does its use, in this context, mean?

Ronaldo Entler in his PhD dissertation entitled *Poetics of Chance: accidents and encounters in artistic creation* (2000)<sup>1</sup> – which will be often quoted in this paper because of the contribution it makes to the study of the relation between art and chance – tries to locate what could "define the criteria for the execution of a work and legitimize the use of chance in art, programs which, having chance as a fundamental form of elaboration, define specific poetics", called *poetics of chance* (p. 17)<sup>2</sup>.

Although both art and chance can represent complex phenomena which permeate our daily lives with multiple, vague meanings, Entler proposes we be less concerned about what chance is and more about what we call chance when it comes to art. By agreeing with this line of thought, we called this reading of Paul Auster's novels "A Poetics of Chance", since we also understand the term *poetics* as what determines the specificities and norms of artistic productions.<sup>3</sup> We also turn to the procedures chosen by the artist; situations in which an action or a concept connected to chance imprint qualities in the work of art.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronaldo Entler, *Poéticas do Acaso: Acidentes e Encontros na Criação Artística*, 2000. All the excerpts quoted from this paper were translated by me.

<sup>2</sup> In the original: "tentaremos localizar pontos em comum que definem critérios para a execução da obra e que legitimam o uso do acaso na arte, programas que tendo o acaso como forma fundamental de elaboração, definem poéticas específicas, que chamaremos de *poéticas do acaso*".

<sup>3</sup> Entler refers to the Italian thinker Luigi Pareyson who defines the difference between aesthetics and poetics: "a estética é a reflexão filosófica sobre a arte, sobre qualquer arte; é puramente especulativa, não dita normas para o fazer artístico, e nem define critérios para o julgamento da obra. A poética é um programa formado em torno de um gosto, uma função atribuída à arte, uma técnica ou qualquer outra coisa que determine a obra por fazer" (PAREYSON, 1989 apud ENTLER, 2000, p. 16).

If, as discussed previously, the study of chance should begin with an attempt to define the word itself, or what we *call* chance, Entler finds that the complexity of defining the term might be due to the variety of expressions we use daily and that are related to it, such as luck, coincidence, accident, destiny, fortune, randomness. Defining these words, though, may not help in understanding chance, since their relations are obscure, don't complement each other and are not necessarily similar (ENTLER, 2000, p. 19).

According to this author, in the search for a synthesis of all its definitions, there is something that could be its essence, i.e. the fact that chance is always described based on the impossibility of locating what determines some event. Other factors derive from this, such as unpredictability and the lack of control over it.

If we think about what happens in some of Auster's novels, such as *The Music of Chance* and *Leviathan*, the factor called *unpredictability* is very present, as is the impossibility to determine causes for the events. The narrator, nevertheless, seems to be the "voice" which constantly tries to figure out what *could have happened* had something different been done, what we call the use of *hindsight* in this study.

Contrasting both these narratives, however, it is clear that the use of hindsight is much harder to visualize in *The Music of Chance* in particular, since the narrative voice in this case isn't remembering the past or trying to recreate what happened but narrating as the events happens.

When it comes to the role of chance in these works we also find that it is connected to the notions of – and maybe the questioning of – "originality" in the Arts, of authorship *versus* authority, and the idea of the author's "death" in a work of art (this last topic was proposed by SILVA, 2003<sup>4</sup>).

Moreover, Auster's novels are populated by a great variety of references to modern and romantic artists. Echoes from the works of authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Henry David Thoreau, for example, are very much present in Auster's. That is another reason for the last chapter in which I propose that Auster reviews Stephan Mallarmé's works regarding the use of chance in art.

According to Entler (2000), there is a long tradition in western culture that defines art and chance as incompatible processes. Since Ancient Greece, when art was

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<sup>4</sup> Egle Pereira da Silva, *Por Trás das Máscaras da Autoria: Uma Leitura de Cidade de Vidro, de Paul Auster and Máscara e Dissimulação*.

any kind of manual ability systematized as a craft, to do art became synonymous *to doing something correctly*. As an outcome, art was based on the control of the creative process and naturally denied the external forces of chance. Art and science, for Aristotle, were associated as products of a judgment funded on experience, and were opposed to the accidental actions of chance. In face of the common sense, art is more related to creation, while chance is related to destruction.

When it comes to modern art, however, things are different. Chance becomes "a concept used to confront a formed tradition and a procedure that would generate new forms of articulation of different materials" (ENTLER, 2000, p. 10), involving sounds, images, objects, words, etc.

Nevertheless, Entler calls attention to the fact that since the Paleolithic time some paintings could have come from protrusions in stones which looked like animals. The first sculptures too, such as the Venus of Willendorf, were created from the structure and form the materials they were sculpted in suggested.

It is interesting to observe that there seem to be some resonances in Auster's *The Book of Illusions* (2002) involving these first relations between art and chance. There is a moment when Hector, a silent movie actor, sees a strange shape in the dark while walking down a street. He thinks it is an object, maybe a gem, so he gets near enough to touch it. However, when he does so, he realizes it is just a bubble of spit reflecting the moonlight.

As suggested by Octavio Paz (1977, p. 25 apud ENTLER, 2000, p. 10)<sup>5</sup>, "it is common for us to baptize geographical accidents using analogies, choosing metaphorical names". An example would be *Pão de Açúcar*, in Rio de Janeiro. The current notion of art, though, Entler argues, dispenses an approach of the natural creation to that operated by men (even though the latter imitates the first). Thus, "chance is denied, or at least it becomes impertinent"<sup>6</sup>, since art makes the ability to control the transformation of materials evident.

Nevertheless, in 1897 Stephan Mallarmé (1842-1898) published *Un Coup de Dés*, using the blank page in an unconventional way, "working on the text as if it were an image", in Entler's words, distributing words and sentences irregularly (non-linearly)

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<sup>5</sup> Octávio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp ou O castelo da pureza*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

across the page, resulting not in a sequence, but in a constellation in which the elements can be connected in multiple ways.

Mallarmé's unfinished *Livre* is said to have a "rigorous structure" which in fact intends to guarantee a freedom of different reading perspectives for each reader. In this way, in Auster's novels where the element of *chance* is most present it is possible also to visualize the novel as a structure where various reading perspectives can also be thought of.

Haroldo de Campos (1977, p. 18)<sup>7</sup> also describes the pages of the *Livre* as exchangeable. They could be reorganized and be read following certain orders of combination determined by the author-operator, who "doesn't consider himself more than a reader in a privileged position" given the objectivity and growing anonymity of the book.

The author described as a "reader in a privileged position" resembles the author-character inside *Leviathan*, *Invisible*, *The Book of Illusions* and *The Music of Chance*. In some cases, this author as a character, who is also the narrator, is the eye-witness to the events, or the one who fills in the "blank spaces" in another person's writings; he is sometimes telling the story as a detective, who, allegedly, only describes what other characters have said; and in some cases, as in *The Music of Chance*, there is no author-character, or else he is anonymous. He could, therefore, also be considered just a reader in a privileged position.

The following topics are all related to how chance is perceived throughout the analyzed narratives, and they serve as a way to understand what chance could mean, but also point to different reading directions. Therefore, at times, they don't share an obvious relation to chance and, in some cases, they don't refer directly to this word in the novels. The structure hereby chosen, divided in chapters, reflects a conscious choice to indicate ways to think about chance and its related aspects in these narratives.

Initially, there is a chapter called *Hindsight*, an attempt to describe the position of the narrators in each novel, since the role of 'chance' in the stories can be perceived through their narrative perspectives. Afterwards, there is a chapter on language and silence, where we discuss the blank spaces left for interpretation, the fragmented language, among other elements. Following this, death and invisibility are seen as

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<sup>7</sup> Harold de Campos, *A poética do aleatório* IN *A arte no Horizonte do Provável*.

alternatives found by the characters to deal with situations they can't control. They are also representatives of the lack of cause and effect proposed in the narratives. There is a chapter about the idea of fiction as a mirror and the relation connecting Auster's works and that of romantic or modernist writers, possibly resulting in a poetics of chance. Finally, we lead the analysis to a conclusion by reviewing Mallarmé's later productions and some of their possible resonances in Auster's novels.

### 3. Hindsight

A man blows himself up by the side of a road in northern Wisconsin. No witnesses. It appears that he was building a bomb which accidentally went off. "Today," (July, 1990) "no one seems to have any idea who the dead man was" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 6).

This is the beginning of *Leviathan*, but it is also connected to its end. The idea of an explosion, of a bomb, links the start and the end of this story, as in a cycle, or an *in media res* narrative, although it is a fake one. The narrator is only reporting this incident to explain why it is important to tell this particular story. By writing he is also avoiding that it reaches the FBI, since he needs more time to complete it. "As far as I'm concerned", he states, "the longer it takes them [the FBI] the better" (p. 2). They want to find out who was the man who blew himself up, and Peter, the first-person narrator, knows it: it was Benjamin Sachs<sup>1</sup>.

Peter starts by describing how they met. The story goes on for many pages. He tells us that Sachs was born on August 6, 1945, and referred to himself as "America's first Hiroshima baby", "the original bomb child", which ironically points to how his life ended.

Sachs liked telling stories about "coincidences" involving historical figures.

Sachs loved these ironies, the vast follies and contradictions of history, the way in which facts were constantly turning themselves on their head. By gorging himself on those facts, he was able to read the world as though it were a work of the imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols, tropes that pointed to some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real. (AUSTER, 1993, p. 27)

Later in the narrative, more details are given concerning a novel written by Sachs, called *The New Colossus*. It is, he explains, a historical novel, "a meticulously researched book

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<sup>1</sup> Auster's middle name is Benjamin: Paul Benjamin Auster. He tends to play with names in some of his novels. This name, Benjamin, for instance, is used in *Leviathan* and also in *Smoke* (1994), one of the film scripts he wrote.

set in America between 1876 and 1890, and based on documented, verifiable facts" (p. 41). Most of the characters are said to be people who actually lived at the time, and "even when the characters are imaginary, they are not inventions so much as borrowings, figures stolen from the pages of other novels". Otherwise, he concludes

All the events are true – true in the sense they follow the historical record – and in those places where the record is unclear, there is no tampering with the laws of probability. Everything is made to seem plausible, matter-of-fact, even banal in the accuracy of its depiction. (p. 41)

By putting it in these words, it's as if any doubts about the veracity of the book were eliminated, all the gaps covered. The novel is historical because it is very probable, plausible, following historical patterns, just as History books are supposed to be, truthful, factual. This makes Sachs's novel and History books very alike, with some distinctions, mainly the fact that History books are not supposed to include imaginary characters.

Sachs' novel is characterized as a *whirlwind performance*, since it "jumps from traditional third-person narrative to first-person diary entries and letters" (p. 42). It also goes "from chronological charts to small anecdotes, from newspaper articles to essays to dramatic dialogues".

This comment about Sachs's novel could actually reflect well how some of Auster's own narratives work, such as this one, *Leviathan*. The narratives analyzed here use first or third-person narrators who tell stories from a future perspective. In various points the narrative is interrupted so that short stories are introduced, presenting some period of time in the character's life. As described in *Leviathan*, these novels usually jump from third-person narrators to first-person diary entries, letters, or dialogues (direct discourse).

The use of the past tense ("I saw him", "he was") helps us to observe the location of the narrative act in a moment of time *after* the story. As in the example given by Carlos Reis and Ana Cristina Lopes in the *Dictionary of Narrative Theory* (2000, p. 112), when talking about the time (or moment) of narration, following the past tense is the use of the present tense by the narrator – "based on the little I know", "I don't know" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 5) and "I don't think" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 307). According to Reis

and Lopes, this makes the narration closer to what it refers to, maybe even overlapping them.

As systematized by Gerard Genette and Bennison Gray (1975, p. 319 apud REIS & LOPES, 2000, p. 112), there are four possibilities of temporal placement for the narration in relation to the story. Gray summarized these in: the narration after the story (past tense), the narration before it (future), the one which is contemporary to the event, as if it were a report of the moment (present), and finally the narration that may start after the event has begun but before it ends (durative).

The narration in *Leviathan* and *The Book of Illusions* occurs after the story has happened. The predominance of past tenses and the ending of the books make that easier to spot. In the first case, Peter hands the story he has written (the one we have just read) to the FBI agent; in the second, David finishes telling all he "knows" of what happened and then adds that "if and when this book is published, dear reader, you can be certain that the man who wrote it is long dead" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 318). This way, the story lives on through the readers; it only exists when read or imagined.

This kind of closure is far from being rare in Auster's novels. All the stories in *The New York Trilogy* (2004) share a very similar resolution of "conflicts". In *City of Glass*, after Quinn writes his last sentences in the red notebook<sup>2</sup>, the narrator says that "the information has run out", "at this point the story grows obscure" and "wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck" (AUSTER, 2004, p. 132). In *Ghosts*, after Blue reads Black's papers, which is actually what the whole novel is about – finding out what Black was doing – he realizes that "Black was right", he "knew it all by heart". We could start wondering then if that means he has multiple identities and is in fact Blue and Black, if he has gone crazy, if he is a character in Black's novel, or the author, etc. But then there comes the narrator's final comments. The final moment, he says, is when Blue leaves the room, and then the story would end. We never get to see what finally happens to Blue and "that is not important", "for we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood" and so "anything is possible" (p. 198). After Blue walks through the door, "we know nothing"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> It says: "what will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (AUSTER, 2004, p. 132).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



By now it is becoming evident that the difference between "the narration of a story that already happened" and "the narration that stops before the story ends" is not so clear in these cases. After all, we might not even be able to identify what is the story begin told. There are comments about *Walden*, by Thoreau, observing how "nothing happens" in it, but for a guy sitting in his desk writing. That is the same feeling we get from these stories.

In *Locked Room*, the first-person narrator reads Fanshawe's red notebook and tears its pages, complying with Fanshawe's last wishes. Again, we never get to know what was written in his notebook. The narration stops when he has torn the last page.

So what exactly is the standing position of the narrator in each of these narratives? He makes it very clear that he doesn't know what happened to the characters, but that he imagines what could have happened or what he wishes had happened. He seems to be also looking to the past, at something that has already happened, though he can't be sure *how* it ended.

The *Music of Chance* is more similar to *The New York Trilogy* in this way than the other novels analyzed so far. The narration stops at the exact moment when Nashe seems be on the verge of crashing his car and possibly dying. When Nashe shuts his eyes, unable to look at the light coming from another vehicle, the story also comes to an end. Again, is the narrator looking at some past event? We don't know if Nashe died or not. The moment he gives up the ability to see, the same ability is taken from us too as readers.

What we call here *hindsight* (term used by the narrator in *Leviathan*) is the element that allows him to analyze his own (or another character's) trajectory, most times attributing to chance the reason for what happened. Frequently, it serves as a way of justifying the accuracy of his report, which is done in first-person narratives as exemplified above.

Hindsight is also accompanied by the result of the decision the character made at a point in the past. Because of that, these sentences present conditional structures, using the present perfect and past perfect tenses, as it happens in this excerpt: "That's the horror for me: not just being unable to prevent what happened, but knowing that if Alma had called me first, it might not have happened after all" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 306).

Hindsight could be thought as the perspective of the narrator in relation to the story. He reminds the reader of it by wondering about what else might have happened with him or a character if it were not for the role of chance and the decisions made during these past events. Sometimes, as commented above, especially in *Leviathan* and *The Book of Illusions*, he is in another place in time, looking at everything from there and analyzing the possible outcomes of these past actions. However, he doesn't rely on his "authority" as the author of the story he is trying to tell. In *Leviathan*, for instance, when the third-person narrator presents himself again, in descriptive passages, he presents other people's versions of the events, along with the mentioned dialogues, letters and few journal entries, so as to give his version more credibility through other people's words and "testimonies".

Peter, in *Leviathan*, continues his analysis of Sachs's book by listing some of the characters which are based on 'real' people that appear in the novel. Among them are Emma Lazarus, Rose Hawthorne (Nathaniel's daughter), Ellery Channing, Walt Whitman, and William Tecumseh Sherman. Raskalnikov is also there "as an immigrant in the United States, where his name is anglicized to Ruskin", as is Ishmael, from *Moby Dick*. In *Locked Room* Peter Stillman and Quinn, from *City of Glass*, also appear as characters, although they don't participate much in the story. In other narratives the names of Herman Melville, David Henry Thoreau and other writers are mentioned too.

The historical events that Sachs' book mentions are, for example, the building of the Statue of Liberty. "Small events", however, are also recorded, and these are said to be what gives the book its "texture", what turns it into something more than a "jigsaw puzzle of historical facts" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 42). In the opening chapter, for example, Emma Lazarus goes to Concord, Massachusetts, to stay as a guest in [Ralph Waldo] Emerson's house. While there, "she is introduced to Ellery Channing, who accompanies her on a visit to Walden Pond and talks about his friendship with Thoreau (dead now for fourteen years)."<sup>4</sup> This "small event" is one example of something completely plausible and yet hardly provable. It is, as the narrator commented, a gap in the historical records being filled.

The "small events", "the vast follies and contradictions of history, the way in which facts were constantly turning themselves on their head", keep reappearing

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

through the entire narrative. In a similar way, in *True Tales of American Life*, Auster introduces the collection of short stories – written by different people all over America – by saying that he was looking for "true stories that sounded like fiction", ones that defied our expectations about the world (AUSTER, 2002, p. xiv). After this project, he quotes one of the contributors, "I am left without an adequate definition of reality" (p. xvii).

Hence, the definition of reality and truth, along with the "literary games" in which they develop, seem to be of significant importance to Paul Auster's works. They play important roles in the definition of 'chance' as it is seen in his narratives, since chance is one of the reasons why some of these 'facts' in life even occur.

Peter comments that in *The New Colossus* all the episodes involving the referred "small events" are true, such as the case involving Walden<sup>5</sup> Pond. "Each is grounded in the real", he states, "and yet Sachs fits them together in such a way that they become steadily more fantastic, almost as if he were delineating a nightmare or a hallucination" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 42), which is very similar to Auster's description of *True Tales of American Life* in its introduction.

These are also examples of the use of hindsight in narratives, where the narrator is "talking" after the event, using, for this purpose, the past, but then going back to the present.

As Sachs's *The New Colossus* progresses, "it takes on a more and more unstable character"<sup>6</sup>. Filled with unpredictable associations and departures and marked by rapid shifts in tone, the novel is said to make the reader reach a point where they would feel "the whole thing begin to levitate, to rise ponderously off the ground like some gigantic weather balloon"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Walden* (first edition published in 1854), a novel by American writer Henry D. Thoreau, is mentioned more than once in *Leviathan*. On one occasion, Benjamin Sachs explains the reason for growing a beard: "Henry David had worn one". Thoreau seems to be a key figure in this book (*Walden*, the woods, naturalism) and *Walden* also comes up in *Ghosts*, the second book in the *New York Trilogy*. In the latter, Black, the character who is being followed by Blue, is apparently obsessed by this book, which makes Blue read it too out of curiosity. Disappointed, thinking that he was going to get a story, or something like it, Blue concludes that *Walden* is "no more than blather, an endless harangue about nothing at all" (AUSTER, 2004, p. 165). What also appears to be a reference to *Walden* is the presence of the woods as the space where crucial events happen in *The Music of Chance*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

One of the "coincidences" involving this novel is the presence of Columbia University. In this sense, it has a great part in this investment on the *real*. It is described, in *Leviathan*, as the place where Peter and Fanny (Sachs's wife) studied. In *Invisible* (2009), that is where Adam Walker and Jim study and where the narrative begins. Also, it's the place where Peter saw Fanny many times without once really introducing himself to her, which is called "chance" again by the narrator. Columbia, then, makes these narratives feel like they are really grounded on something "real", something "true", and something that keeps showing up in the text.

*Leviathan* is also the novel Peter's writing, which is his final promise to Sachs being fulfilled, it's the record of Sachs's life, much like the novel his friend wrote was the record of important American figures and their lives. The narrator, though, is always telling the reader that he is not certain of what happened in some point or another, that the clues have gone cold here or there, that this or that theory of what happened is just his interpretation of it, etc. In other parts, he quotes the characters<sup>8</sup>, entire dialogues, as though they were actually recorded on tape and later transcribed. It's a mixture of controlling and non-controlling. By being "truthful" to the characters' words, giving them the power of speech, he is actually taking some control over them, since it is nowhere near possible that he would remember their every word in so many different occasions. This is one reason why it sounds so much like a detective story. But it is a different kind of detective story, where the detective in question, the fictional writer, keeps saying that some points are unclear and, that, because they are so, the following details are his responsibility, his interpretation. It is a mixture of "uncontestable proof" (characters quotations) and hypothesis (his views over the events). It's a game of "hiding and letting see".

The narrator "emerges" from his report and considerations once and a while to state his presence and his knowledge of the story. On the other hand, he often comments that "all this is speculation" (p. 118) on most of his attempts of seizing authorship (or authority?) over the narrative as if to make it more consistent, more plausible. And so he states: "I have no proof to offer in support of this statement – except the proof of hindsight"<sup>9</sup>. It gives the impression that he is merely analyzing the facts, as an eye-witness of these events. He is the detective, perhaps, examining the case of his own past

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<sup>8</sup> Such as in page 250, when Sachs tells Peter his story.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

and present and of other people's too. But he is also the critic, who thinks carefully about his every word before writing them.

But Sachs didn't [consider himself lucky to have survived an accident], and the fact that he didn't – or, more precisely, the fact that he couldn't – suggests that the accident did not change him so much as make visible what had previously been hidden. If I'm wrong about this, then everything I've written so far is rubbish, a heap of irrelevant musing.

It's whirlwind performance, like *The News Colossus*. It fictionalizes the writing of a biography, a memoir, or a diary, the writing of History, and of detective stories. It plays with it, repeatedly using the words "fact", "truth", "real", apparently so as to exhaust their meanings, to prove that everything is interpretation, everything is true, and yet nothing is real. There are only realities<sup>10</sup>.

As it happens in *Leviathan*, in *The New York Trilogy* the narrators also express their awareness of the uncertainty (the lack of proof) of what follows. In *City of Glass*, for instance, he denies, occasionally, any interpretations of the story, as if trying to remain "neutral". As also quoted by Silva (2002, p. 1):

I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from any interpretations (AUSTER, 2004, p. 133).

But after relying so much on the red notebook to support his narrative he concludes that the notebook "is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand"<sup>11</sup>.

In *The Book of Illusion*, journals are used as proof of character's states of mind and actions in the past. Alma Grund, has Hector Mann's journals and uses them for the biography she is writing about him. David, the narrator's perspective, even goes to a hypnotist to try to remember everything that happened during his visit to New Mexico.

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<sup>10</sup> These matters, such as history and fiction, have been discussed by researchers like Linda Hutcheon in *A poetics of postmodernism : history, theory, fiction* (1988). In this work, she refers to postmodernism as "a problematizing force in our culture today", since "it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the 'natural'" (p. xi). Like John Barth (1984), she believes that, independent of the debate concerning postmodernist fiction, none of it is "new". What is newer, according to her, is "the constant attendant irony of the context of the postmodern version of the contradictions [of the self-reflexive and the historical] and also their obsessively recurring presence as well" (idem).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Using the recording of the sessions he says he was able to “fill in certain blanks” (AUSTER, 2002, p. 271).

When presented with two or more versions of the same story – e.g. Fanny and Ben talking about extra-marital affairs they each thought the other one was having – Peter reaches the conclusion that both could be true: "In other words, there was no universal truth. Not for them, not for anyone else" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 109).

During the whole time while telling Sachs's story, Peter (*Leviathan*), is writing his own novel and letting us in on it, bit by bit. At the same time, this is what this novel levitates around: the process of writing a book and the struggle to complete it. Peter, up to a point, says he is writing *Luna*, but then he mentions *Leviathan* as the title of his book, in homage to Sachs' unfinished second novel. "To mark what will never exist, I have given my book the same title that Sachs was planning to use for his: Leviathan" (p. 159). This is also the name of Paul Auster's novel, which overlaps the two novels, as if Peter and Paul Auster were the same person, the author. This detail also helps create a powerful sense of truth or verisimilitude to the narrative, as if it were an ongoing memoir, a biography perhaps. This way, there are three *Leviathan*'s – Sachs's, Peter's and Auster's. *Leviathan* is also a reference to Melville's *Moby Dick* and to the Bible.

All the novels analyzed here are examples of narratives that reflect about the writing of a story. They also call attention to the act and process of writing. "If I question this optimistic portrait of Sachs during those years, it's only because I know what happened later" (p. 118). In other words, it's only he, Peter, the 'author', who can talk about it because he knows the end, because of hindsight, because he is the narrator of the story. On the other hand, he never really gets to know what happened up to the end. There always comes a point when the narrator states very clearly that he doesn't know what happened after that.

In the *Music of Chance*, the use of hindsight doesn't seem to happen so often, or is not easily recognizable, as stated before. The comments of the narrator about the story, the use of conditionals, of the hindsight as a way of looking at the past, which were identified in the other narratives, is not so perceptible in this novel. All the comments of the narrative "voice" made in the third-person in the other cases, now appear through the first-person, since they are only present in the narration of the character's thoughts.

There was a problem, however. It had been there all along, a small thing in the back of their minds, but now that the sixteenth was only a week away, it suddenly grew larger, attaining such proportions as to dwarf everything else (AUSTER, 2006, p. 136).

What they realized at this point was that the debt they owned to the billionaires called Flower and Stone would be paid at that date, but they would only be back to zero, with no money to go home.

Flower and Stone had hired them to build a wall so they could pay off their poker debt. After this point in the narrative, Nashe and Pozzi decide to continue working for them so that they could get some money to start a new life. Flower and Stone then send them a contract setting out the condition for 'labor subsequent to the discharge of the debt'.

That was what was so strange about it. They hadn't even come to a decision until last night, and yet here were the results of that decision already waiting for them, boiled down in to the precise language of contracts. How was that possible? It was as if Flower and Stone had been able to read their thoughts, as if they had known what they would do before they knew it themselves (AUSTER, 2006, p. 128).

It is interesting to observe that, while the narrator seems to be speaking for Nashe, the latter thinks that it is as if Flower and Stone had been reading their thoughts. It is even slightly confusing, since it sounds like there is no end to it, one person inside the other person's mind and so on. But this also sounds like "fortune prediction", as if Nashe were suggesting that Flower and Stone had found a way of knowing their future before it even happened, predicting it. Though it is fundamental to understand that this is what Nashe thinks *could* be happening, as if looking in hindsight (again, through the narrator). So it could all be random, a mere coincidence, or it could be that the billionaires were controlling them as if they were puppets, as if they were the models of their creation. This idea of recreating a model of the world is very present in *The Music of Chance* and will be further analyzed in the chapter called *Fiction as Mirror Thesis*.

Hindsight, in this sense, is what allows the telling of the stories, what makes them so "true", and, at the same time, what prevents the teller from being completely sure about the events. It can be compared to the way memory works. First, what wasn't seen could as well be not there at all. What has been seen could be an illusion. And when we think the end will come and we hope for the story to finish, it does, but no

answers are given. The book ends, the story might go on. All we would need to do is imagine.



#### 4. Language and Silence

*The flat screen was the world, and it existed in two dimensions. The  
third dimension was in our head.*

Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*.

In 1988 David Zimmer, a professor of comparative literature at Hampton College in Vermont, published a book about Hector's films called *The Silent World of Hector Mann*. Three months after that, a woman named Frieda Spelling, Hector's wife, sent David a letter inviting him to pay them a visit. Their correspondence is what gave motion to everything that happened subsequently: David's journey to New Mexico, where the couple lived, his encounter with their friend, Alma Grund, and its repercussions.

Everything started when David was watching TV on his sofa, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, the remote control in the other. He was mindlessly surfing channels when he came upon a program that had already started: a documentary about silent-film comedians. After some renowned names came up, such as Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd, other lesser-known figures followed, like John Bunny, Larry Semon and Hector Mann. During all this, David wasn't really paying attention to the show. But then a two-minute sequence from *The Teller's Tale*, one of Hector's films, was there and all he cared about was watching as Hector, a clerk working in a bank, tried to count money and, at the same time, keep dust from falling on his suit while flirting with a girl. And then, the most unexpected happened: he laughed.

In David's eyes this was almost shocking. Even if comedies were supposed to be funny, nothing could be funny to him anymore. His wife and sons had died in a plane accident not so long ago. As if destiny was making a humorless joke, David thought of planes as the safest way to travel, and so, in order to get his family in one of them, he

even exceeded the speed limit while driving. If he hadn't done that, maybe they would have missed that plane and wouldn't have died.

This is the beginning of the story of *The Book of Illusions* (AUSTER, 2002). It is as much about David Zimmer's life as it is about Hector Mann's, since their "paths" were crossed because of language and silence, precisely.

David was also a published author. He had written two books of criticism and studied the work of Hamsun, Céline, and Pound "in relation to their pro-Fascist activities during World War II" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 14) in a volume entitled *Voices in the War Zone*. His second book of criticism, *The Road to Abyssinia*, was about "writers who had given up writing, a meditation on silence"<sup>1</sup>.

Although this is David Zimmer's work, who, as said before, is a character in *The Book of Illusions*, it sounds like a phenomenal "coincidence" that Paul Auster himself wrote an article about Hamsun (AUSTER, 2010)<sup>2</sup> where the narrator struggles with hunger.

He peers into the darkness hunger has created for him, and what he finds is a void of language. Reality has become a confusion of thingless names and nameless things for him. The connection between self and the world has been broken (AUSTER, 2010, p. 321).

In Auster's words, the hero in Hamsun's story has a "language disease". He hears voices, he gets confused, sinks deep into chaos. After a violent fit, "all goes still, with no sounds but those of his own voice, rolling back from the wall" (p. 321).

He sustains that *Hunger*, Hamsun's novel, proposes a different concept of art. According to him, it is an art indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it. Not an art of autobiographical excess, but "the direct expression of the effort to express itself" (p. 323). It is "an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire"<sup>3</sup>.

In another article, Auster writes about Giuseppe Ungaretti's work where he states that

Like Mallarmé before him (though in ways that are very different), Ungaretti's poetic resource is silence, and in one form or another, all

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger*. In: *Collected Prose*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

his work is an expression of the inexhaustible difficulty of expression itself (AUSTER, 2010, p. 360)<sup>4</sup>.

This "difficulty of expression" and the "language disease" of which Auster talks about seem to echo in his literary work too. Perhaps even more "coincidences" are at hand, since Enrique Vila-Matas, a contemporary Spanish writer<sup>5</sup>, also wrote a book about writers who have stopped writing, *Bartleby y Compañía* (2000), which, in its turn, makes reference to *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, by Herman Melville. Bartleby is the character who preferred not to act. In the words of Gilles Deleuze,

Não há qualquer dúvida, a fórmula [*"I would prefer no to"*, dita por Bartleby] é arrasadora, devastadora, e nada deixa subsistir atrás de si. O que em primeiro lugar se nota é o seu carácter contagioso: Bartleby "torce a língua" dos outros. (...) A fórmula germina e prolifera. A cada ocorrência é o estupor que irrompe em torno de Bartleby, como se se tivesse ouvido o Indizível ou o Irrebatível. E é ainda o silêncio de Bartleby, como se este tivesse dito tudo e esgotado de repente a linguagem. A cada ocorrência fica-se com a impressão de que a loucura aumenta: não 'particularmente' a de Bartleby, mas a loucura em torno dele, e, em especial, a do advogado que se entrega a estranhas propostas e a condutas mais estranhas ainda (DELEUZE, 1993, P. 91).<sup>6</sup>

This chain of *intertextual* relations would certainly not end at this point, provided some effort be put in the investigation of these sources.

In many ways these references seem to relate. When reflecting on the nature of Cinema, the third-person narrator, from David's perspective, reaffirms the fact that it was a visual language that created a way of telling stories by projecting images onto a two-dimensional screen. When sound and color were added, though, an "illusion of a third dimension" was created (AUSTER, 2002, p. 14).

Thus the art of story-telling through images, which correspond to the making of silent movies, as described in *The Book of Illusion*, seems to bear strong relations to Ungaretti's and Mallarmé's poetry when it comes to silence as "poetic resource". And where does silence come from? In *Innocence and Memory*, Auster points to "the inexhaustible difficulty of expression itself" (2010, p. 360).

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster, *Innocence and Memory*. In: *Collected Prose*.

<sup>5</sup> There is an interesting moment when the narrator in *Invisible* (2009) comments on the books the character is taking in her bag. One of these books is Vila-Matas'.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby ou a fórmula*. In: *Critique et Clinique*.

This difficulty seems to create then the need for another kind of expression, i.e. another kind of language, which turns into the production of silent comedies by Hector Mann. It is as if silence creates language, and its means for communication are the many facial expressions of the actors and their movements. From David's analysis of Hector's movies, every moment of the actor's performance is said to indicate some crucial detail of the story, as if Hector's mustache seemed to communicate his spectator of something important to the scene taking place.

Other elements are involved – the eyes, the mouth, the finely calibrated lurches and stumbles – but the mustache is the instrument of communication, and even though it speaks a language without words, its wriggles and flutters are as clear and comprehensible as a message tapped out in Morse code (AUSTER, 2002, p. 29).

"Hector's gags unfold like musical compositions"<sup>7</sup>. In one of his movies, Hector is in one of the scenes where he manages to do many things all at the same time while trying to take a necklace from a woman. When he finally gets it, it is only "by accident". Hector is "rescued once again by the mutinous unpredictability of matter" (p. 38).

Analyzing this film, *The Prop Man*, the narrator defends the idea that it could be a parable of Hector's life under contract to Seymour Hunt, owner of the company who made the films. And then he compares it to a card game.

When every card in the deck is stacked against you, the only way to win a hand is to break the rules. You beg, borrow, and steal, as the old adage goes, and if you happen to get caught in the act, at least you've gone down fighting the good fight (p. 39).

This quotation could even be in the novel *The Music of Chance*, because of its reference to card games, where luck is involved. In *The Book of Illusions*, it is being used to defend the idea that Hector's life could be compared to a game. Also, in *City of Glass*, in *The Locked Room*, in *Ghosts* and in *Leviathan*, the lives of all the characters that go missing ("disappear") or are being followed could be described as games, maybe compared to a hide and seek game.

Besides the more obvious relation between chance and games, there is also a connection between music and chance. Music, as a way of expressing ideas or feelings,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

is also another kind of language and works with codes different from that of the spoken languages.

When writing about what he calls "the poetics of chance", Ronaldo Entler (2000, p. 15)<sup>8</sup> analyses the music of John Cage (1912-1992), which, according to him, goes deeper into the use of chance in many ways. Cage offers great liberty to its performers and seeks the extension of the world of sound. He incorporates everyday noises and silence to his musical executions and takes objects and the body as instrument. He also uses other symbolic systems, such as maps, drawings and poems. In Entler's words, Cage became one of the exponents of the *Art of Performance*.

In *A Arte no Horizonte do Provável* (1977), Harold de Campos states that John Cage's work is directed to chaos and to the pure excess of chance, and that his method is based on the random manipulation of the Chinese game called I-CHING. His, Campos affirms, is a transposition of the action painting to music, where indeterminism is cultivated to its maximum potential.

Music is very present in *The Music of Chance* and in *The Book of Illusions*. In the first, it is the way Nashe finds to resist the meaningless life he had for some time, while driving without a destiny around the entire country. He also continues to listen to classical music when he moves to the woods in Flower and Stones' property. There, it also represents the escape from his current depressing reality. In *The Book of Illusions*, the music serves as soundtrack for most of Hector Mann's films, except in *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*<sup>9</sup>, for example, where there is a voice-over narrator. In the preface to *The Throw of the Dice*, Mallarmé says he got inspired by the music he heard in concerts (CAMPOS, 1977, p. 19). Harold de Campos states that "sob a categoria do provável houve, então, entre os compositores de vanguarda, uma reconsideração da música instrumental e da função do intérprete"<sup>10</sup>.

We believe that the use of language and silence, the references to music and to chance, in the referred narratives by Paul Auster, is a way of rethinking the role of the narrator in the twentieth century in light of the modern arts.

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<sup>8</sup> Ronaldo Entler, *Poéticas do Acaso: Acidentes e Encontros na Criação Artística*.

<sup>9</sup> *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* is also the name of a film written and produced by Paul Auster in 2007, which is partly an adaptation of this part of *The Book of Illusions*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

In *Book of the Dead* (2010)<sup>11</sup>, Auster refers to the narrator in Becket's *The Unnamable*, who is "cursed by the 'inability to speak [and] the inability to be silent'" (p. 369). It reminds us of Peter Stillman, in *City of Glass*, to whom it was hard to teach words, because "his mouth did not work right" (AUSTER, 2004, p. 17).

In *Ghosts*, there is a passage where Blue is trying to understand what Black is writing in his book. Black just writes and writes and this makes Blue question the nature of the writings. He thinks it could be just a copy of the phone book, for example, or a handwritten copy of *Walden*. "Or perhaps they are not even words, but senseless scribbles, random marks of a pen, a growing heap of nonsense and confusion" (p. 173). He reaches the conclusion that this would mean that White was the real writer, and Black no more than "his stand-in, a fake, an actor with no substance of his own"<sup>12</sup>. As he attempts to understand this, months go by and he feels he is dying.

In midsummer, though, he decides to put on a disguise. He sits in front of a building pretending to be a beggar and waits for Black to come out. Black sees him, starts chatting with him and says Blue looks like Walt Whitman. After that he tells Blue stories about Whitman and Thoreau. He ends the stories by saying that they are similar, since they are about "trying to get inside a writer to understand his work better" (p. 177). But then, when looking inside the writer, he says, "there's not much to find in there"<sup>13</sup>, it is not so different from what you might find in anyone else.

The metaphor used by Black could reflect the view that writers are no better than other people, which differs from a romantic idealization of the artist as a genius. Blue starts thinking that Black is "talking in riddles", as though trying to tell him something. What is more interesting: *Ghosts*, as well as the other narratives analyzed here, gives the same impression. All the references to other writers, the anecdotes, the ideas concerning reality, truth, literature suggest that the text is "trying to say something" in riddles. This also leads us to think of games and, by consequence, of chance.

Silva<sup>14</sup> (2003, p.6), when writing about *City of Glass*, finds that the double identities and Quinn's disappearance, instead of promoting the author's eternity,

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Auster, *Book of the Dead*. In: *Collected Prose*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Egle Pereira da Silva, *Por Trás das Máscaras da Autoria: Uma leitura da Cidade de Vidro, de Paul Auster*.

promotes its "assassination". She quotes Barthes (2004)<sup>15</sup> to defend that writing is the destruction of every voice and origin. In this article, Barthes also says that the writing is also where the subject's identity is lost, starting from the body who writes (p. 1).

If we consider the fragmented language spoken by Peter Stillman, written by Quinn in his last days – which means the last days the "author" knows of – along with the other riddles that Auster's writings suggest<sup>16</sup>, the way this is presented indicates a play with language and also with silence, where language fails to provide comprehensible answers<sup>17</sup>. This playing or game makes the disappearances of the subject become the actual plot of the narrative. The characters in *The New York Trilogy* describe *Walden* as a novel about a man sitting in his chair and writing about nature, where nothing happens. In their case, they are also writing and, again, not much action happens, since the disappearances become the plot. The play with language and the silences, the "blanks" in these narratives, are parts of the game.

In the next chapter, the study of invisibility and death is yet another attempt of reflecting about these disappearances and the direction the plots of these novels take, often determined by chance.

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Morte do Autor*.

<sup>16</sup> And here we could think of the many other examples which have been talked about in this study, such as the maps, drawings, the play with names (such as Paul or Benjamin), the *collage* of genres (letters, for instance) and even the uncertainties of the narrator in relation to the story he is telling.

<sup>17</sup> As it happens in *Leviathan*, where Fanshawe's notebook can't be read and understood.

## 5. Death and invisibility

*De onde vem tua paixão por desaparecer?*

Enrique Vila-Matas, *Doutor Pasavento*.

One day in 1929 Hector Mann went missing. People thought he would return at any moment. But he didn't. It was as if "Hector Mann had vanished from the face of the earth" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 1).

Nevertheless, though similar to what happened to Fanshawe (*Locked Room*) and Benjamin Sachs (*Leviathan*), Hector Mann didn't completely vanish. He was just gone to another place and therefore his disappearance could be considered an illusion.

In these novels, there seems to be a link between chance and death, since all characters who disappear, who are, in fact, invisible throughout the narrative or for some while, have the same "fate": death. Paul Auster's characters often find their death as the novel itself ends.

In *The Book of Illusions*, the film *Mr. Nobody* shows Hector as he is tricked into drinking a potion that makes him invisible. He still lives, but it is like the world has no room for him anymore. He has been murdered, but no one killed him. He has been erased.

When David Zimmer, in the same novel, meets Alma Grund, she wants to take him immediately to Hector and Frieda in New Mexico. When he refuses, she points a gun at him, desperate to succeed in her attempts of convincing him. And then he feels as if his skin had become transparent, as if he was melting in space instead of occupying it. "What was around me was also inside me, and I had only to look into myself in order to see the world" (p. 108).

He starts talking, saying that he isn't afraid to die. She starts crying and then puts the gun away. He then takes the gun and points it to his own head, sure that the gun isn't loaded, trying to humiliate her even further. She panics, begs him not to do it. He pulls the trigger, but it's stuck, nothing happens. When he analyzes the gun, he sees that the



safety catch was still on. She had forgotten to release it, and the gun was loaded. "If not for that mistake, one of those bullets would have been in my head" (p. 111), says the narrator.

By the end of the narrative, Alma commits suicide because of the destruction of her book, an autobiography about Hector Mann. It is very similar to what happens in *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, when Clair is only kept on living because Martin burns his book (it is as if she was his inspirational muse – as long as the book lives, she lives).

In *Leviathan*, after Benjamin Sachs's accident, when he falls from the fire escape of a building, he loses the power of speech for 10 days (AUSTER, 1992, p. 122). He becomes silent, but by his own choice. The moment Sachs interrupts his writing he "vanishes" for two years, when he and Peter finally meet again and *Leviathan*, through the hands of Peter, is continued and becomes another book, one about its previous "author", Sachs.

When Sachs begins speaking again, he explains the feeling of falling to Peter: "I wasn't there anymore. I had left my body, and for a split second I actually saw myself disappear" (p. 131). The moment of near death is felt as the moment when the body disappears, when it becomes invisible.

Sachs goes missing for good one day, leaving the manuscript of his second novel on his desk, only reappearing to see Peter by accident in his Vermont house and to tell him of his journey while absent, helping Peter to fill in the gaps of his story, the final "evidence" that Peter needed to write his novel. By falling down the fire escape, Sachs later realizes that he not only saw himself disappear, but also that he fell almost on purpose, that his objective was to die.

Very similar to this situation are the cases of Fanshawe in *The Locked Room*, Quinn in *City of Glass*, Blue in *Ghosts*, Jim (plus the narrator's younger brother) in *Invisible* and Pozzi in *The Music of Chance*.

In *The Locked Room* Fanshawe ends up locking himself up in a room and only communicates with the narrator through that door. Fanshawe wants him to destroy the book so that he can die "in peace". The narrator tries to talk him out of it, but fails, and then follows his friend's instruction on the destruction of the book. Before he does that, though, he attempts to read it and gets utterly confused.

Each sentence erased the sentence before it, each paragraph made the next paragraph impossible. It is odd, then, that the feeling that survives from this notebook is one of great lucidity. (...) He had answered the question by asking another question, and therefore everything remained open, unfinished, to be started again (AUSTER, 2004, p. 313).

He is left without an answer for the motives of Fanshawe's death. Instead, more questions are left to him.

*Fanshawe* is also the name of a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, published in 1828. Hawthorne's Fanshawe is a young scholar who rescues a lady, who was his friend, from danger. Although she ends up in love with him, since he becomes her hero, he dies before the end of the novel, afflicted by an incurable illness, suggested in many opportunities during the narrative. Auster's Fanshawe is also separated from his love, but his disappearance becomes a mystery, which was supposed to be solved by his friend, the narrator.

Leviathan, the book that wasn't finished by Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan*, becomes the name of the book Peter is writing, and is also the name of the book the reader is reading. Sachs's Leviathan, then, is "invisible" in Auster's narrative. In Enrique Vila-Matas's *Bartleby y Compañía* (2004, p. 9), the narrator says he is writing footnotes to an invisible text. The book is a catalogue of writers who stopped writing by many reasons, and writers who have never written.

There is a moment in *Leviathan* when Sachs "disappears", runs away. What happens is that he ends up killing a man called Reed Dimaggio. After that, he goes to Maria Turner's house, a friend of Peter's. Sachs is then presented to another fact determined by chance: the man he killed was the husband of Lillian Stern and she was Maria's best friend. He understands that "the nightmare coincidence was in fact a solution, an opportunity in the shape of a miracle" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 187). He decides to go talk to Lillian and stays at her house for some weeks.

This moment in the story is one example of an extensive "absence" of the narrator's opinion or intrusions in his report. It is long enough to make us forget, for some moments, that he is, in fact, quite present. It is as though the story was being told by Sachs himself, although in third-person. No opinions from the exterior. Everything that seems to be an opinion could easily be Sachs's, close as we feel to him. And then, all of a sudden, at the end of the chapter, Peter, says:

Or so they thought. In point of fact, that was the first sign of doom, and from the moment Lillian slapped Maria across the face until the moment Sachs left Berkeley five weeks later, nothing was ever the same for them again. (AUSTER, 2004, p. 240)

After this, a series of bombings of replicas of the Statue of Liberty begins. After leaving messages such as "do something for your people besides building them bombs", the vandal responsible for this attacks would sign them as "The Phantom of Liberty".

Throughout the novel, the Statue of Liberty represents many changes and important experiences for the characters. Sachs writes about it in his first novel, his mother becomes afraid of heights after trying to climb it, Sachs falls from the fire escape in the celebration of the Statue's anniversary, and finally he bombs many of its replicas in an attempt to call America's attention to the decline of Democracy.

After bombing some of the statues and hiding, Sachs returns to his house in Vermont and finds Peter, to whom he tells his story. That is how Peter learns everything up to that point when Sachs disappeared. Even then "there were gaps, holes in the account I haven't been able to fill in" (p. 250).

After this last encounter between Peter and Sachs, the latter disappears once more and is never seen again by Peter, when the ultimate bombing of a replica is attempted and the reports of a tragedy finally reach Peter through the newspapers. That is when FBI agents find his phone number in Sachs remains and go talk to him to uncover the whole story, which Peter tries to avoid. By avoiding to give key information about the case in the beginning of the narrative, he ensures some time to write the whole story, that is, the novel *Leviathan*. By the time he starts reviewing the novel and rewriting some parts of it (up to the middle of chapter four, he tells us), one of the agents pays him another visit, and that is the end of it. The FBI had discovered some of Sachs's fingerprints in Peter's novels, which, as Peter himself had told them, had fake autographs; they had been signed by someone else, that is, Sachs. The final lines of the novel describe the moment when Peter hands the agent the pages of "this" book (p. 275).

In *Invisible* (2009), Jim also attempts to write a book, but can't finish it; he also dies. It's his friend, Adam Walker, who does the job of filling in the "blanks" and finishes the book for him. He does that by taking the notes Jim had left and "reading" in them the story the latter was trying to tell in a fragmented way, towards the end.

Alma's death, as commented before, only happens in *The Book of Illusions* when her own book, a biography, is destroyed by Frieda Spelling.

In *City of Glass*, Quinn disappears as "the information has run out" and the events that followed his last notebook entry "will never be known" (2004, p. 132). Again and again, as the words run out or become fragmented sentences, the characters die or become invisible.

Can fictional characters "survive" after the writer has stopped writing? Paraphrasing Quinn, what will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook? In *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* the "muse" dies when Martin finishes the book and stops writing but is revived when he destroys it. Hector Mann dies and wishes for his films to be destroyed, but other copies survive, which gives the narrator hope that the rest of them will be found. *The Book of Illusions* is written by a man who wishes it to be published after he dies, imitating *Chateaubriand's Memories of a Dead Man*, and so intends to make his own book the memories of a dead man.

So if stories can survive the deaths of their authors and the attempts for their destruction, and characters can also survive the "death" of the story who originated them, it seems that they both go on as long as they are read or imagined.

Books, works of art, are never "finished". They are "open", as defended by Umberto Eco in *Obra Aberta* (1968 apud CAMPOS, 1977) and Harold de Campos in *A Obra de Arte Aberta*<sup>1</sup>. They can be thought of as open because they continue existing in other works of art, "resonating" as sound waves coming from a musical composition do in everyone around the musical instrument. Stories are never complete but always being "completed". There are always blanks.

In other words, people are affected by music as literary works are affected by other productions. None of them can be thought of as isolated, they are part of a context, situated in place and time, and read by others, who could be even called "co-authors", in the Campos's words.

Finally, these deaths are also connected by one more detail: the coincidences that led to them. The stories are always surrounded by events which occur by chance, extraordinary coincidences or "random" acts (like walking without no apparent destination). As it happens with the role of language and silence in the narratives,

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to by Campos himself in *A Arte no Horizonte do Provável*, 1977.

therefore, these deaths and the invisibilities also point to a kind of literature which allows reflections about the very nature of writing literature. This takes us to the next topic: fiction as mirror.

## 6. Fiction as mirror

*Dom Quixote lê o mundo para demonstrar os livros. E não concede a si outras provas senão o espelhamento das semelhanças.*

Michel Foucault, *As Palavras e as Coisas*

"Maybe there's something wrong with the mirror" (AUSTER, 2002, p. 46). This is David's interpretation of Hector's performance in the film *Mr. Nobody* from *The Book of Illusions*. Hector, now invisible because of the potion he drank, stares at the mirror, incapable of seeing himself. It is only later, when sleeping next to the bed where his wife lays, that he can be seen and touched by her again. In what could be considered his last film, Hector smiles for the last time to the camera and this is the last anyone sees of him, except for David.

After writing his book about Hector Mann, David moves to a house in Vermont. He thinks that "to inhabit those blank, depersonalized interiors was to understand that the world was an illusion that had to be reinvented everyday" (p. 57). Could a similar thought have occurred to Bartleby, the scrivener, as he stared at a wall through his window in the Wall Street office?

Is life a series of events randomly happening as time goes by or is it a chain of cause and effect? As we choose one path, all the others could be closed and then a new array of possibilities would lie in front of us. All we have to do is make a decision. Interpreted this way, Bartleby's choice was in fact simple: he preferred not to do it. Although David Zimmer chose differently and went on a journey where he eventually found a man who was supposed to be dead, but had actually been invisible to everyone, the end of his journey only seems to prove that point. All the reality in which he has lived for few days couldn't resist the presence of death. When Alma Grund's biography (of Hector Mann) was burned by Hector's wife, Alma's world also collapsed.

As Hector becomes a friend of Nora, he discovers that life is a fever dream "and reality was a groundless world of figments and hallucinations, a place where everything you imagine came true" (p. 163).

When Paul Auster started the *National Story Project* (which resulted in the publication of *True Tales of American Life*), he was looking for stories "that defied our expectations about the world, anecdotes that revealed the mysterious and unknowable forces at work in our lives, in our family histories, in our minds and bodies, in our souls" (2001, p. xiv). In other words, he wanted to receive from contributors all over America "true stories that sounded like fiction"<sup>1</sup>.

He thinks he is not alone in the belief that the more we understand of the world, the more elusive and confounding it becomes. He says to be "left without an adequate definition of reality" (p. xvii). Similarly, Alma, in *The Book of Illusions* (2002, p. 219), says that Hector's story sounds impossible, because he's told her "the truth".

According to Auster, the selection of stories for the *National Story Project* was based on merit, for their humanity, truth, charm. The results "were determined by blind chance" (2002, xix). The stories, divided by him in categories, are based on real life experiences, and only a small portion of it resembles anything that could be qualified as "literature". In his words, it is "something else".

Entler, in his dissertation, states that "to create is to establish an order, because a work of art is like an organism with coherent relations between its parts" (2000, p. 61). Therefore, if the idea for a work of art comes from a lived experience, it is necessary for the author to organize the ideas perceived from this experience in order to create. As Entler says, the artist articulates his/her ideas and materializes them in an object that can be captured by our senses.

A obra passa a representar o mundo não porque absorve suas aparências, ou porque trabalha com associações construídas pela cultura ou pela tradição. Em termos da semiótica, não se trata de uma representação icônica ou simbólica. Essa obra representa o mundo na medida em que ele imprime nela marcas de suas ações (2000, p. 93).

Considering this, he proceeds with the analysis of the art which elects chance as one of its fundamental operators, which he calls "poetics of chance". He refers to Marcel Duchamp, for instance, an artist who makes the use of chance in his work explicit, such as in *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923), made in a glass frame. When moved, its glass was cracked and this is how it is seen today. Duchamp

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

said<sup>2</sup> this "accident" improved his work, because this is the "destiny of things" (1997, p. 131 apud ENTLER, 2000, p. 50).

So if fiction can be considered a mirror, what kind of mirror is it? What kind of "image" does it reflect? The mirror, according to Foucault (1984)<sup>3</sup>, is a space of utopia and heterotopia, a mixed experience between the unreal and the real, where we see our image reflected and also our absence – or non-presence – as we see it distant from us in a place which is there, but isn't there.

Thus what Patricia Waugh (1984) states about literary fiction in *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction* seems accurate. She says that in fiction there's no way of 'representing' the world; it is only possible to 'represent' the *discourses* of that world. After World War II, the political, cultural and technological changes in society, "its lack of a fixed identity" left the novel – the traditional concept of novel, connected to the attempt of representing reality in fiction – vulnerable, unstable, open, flexible. Instead of thinking of these changes as the "end of the novel", the author proposes that we think of it as the response to a sensed need for the novel to theorize about itself.

Jamie Schilling Fields, in his thesis entitled *Fiction as Mirror: Mirrors in the Fiction of Borges and Nabokov* investigates about these two writers who, among others, invest and often saturate their works with mirrors.

Not only does the mirror convey a great deal about the nature of writing and the distortion inherent in any attempt to capture reality, it also embellishes the traps in which characters find themselves (FIELDS, 1989, p. 3).

Although being very different in the use of narrative techniques, Fields argues that both Nabokov and Borges "revere art as the only palpable reality available to humanity" (p. 1). It is precisely through having a similar attitude toward these three elements - art, reality, and humanity - together and apart, that they seem alike, he concludes. Paul Auster's literary works, in some ways, also have an attitude concerning these three elements and the use of mirrors.

In *The Music of Chance*, as Nashe gradually gets involved in the poker game against Flower and Stone, he feels his behavior has changed, he is no longer acting like

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<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp interviewed by Pierre Cabanne in *Marcel Duchamp: engenheiro do tempo perdido*.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Outros espaços*. In: *Ditos e escritos*.



himself. Even as he speaks, his words don't seem to belong to him; it is as if he were "no more than an actor performing on the stage of some imaginary theater, repeating lines that had been written for him in advance" (AUSTER, 2006, p. 33).

As they enter Flower and Stone's house, Nashe, still thinking about films and Hollywood because of the references to Laurel and Hardy, finds it impossible not to think of the house as an illusion. Similar sensations might have been triggered as he stared at one of Stone's inventions, a miniature scale-model rendering of a city. The so called "City of the World" made them stare in awe at its "crazy spires and lifelike buildings, its narrow streets and microscopic human figures" (p. 71). Many of the figures represented Stone, transforming it into a kind of autobiography and, at the same time, a utopia, "a place where the past and the future come together, where good finally triumphs over evil"<sup>4</sup> as described by Flower. In a blank area of the platform, the house where they were all standing in would be designed. Stone would have to be in it, which meant that, inside it, another "City of the World" would have to be created, and so on, infinitely. This creation would be like the many reflections inside a mirror when positioned near another mirror: a series of images, one inside the other, until minimal scales the human eye can't reach, which reminds us of the notion of mirror as a place of utopia and heterotopia as presented by Foucault (1984).

Stone's city model is also the impossible work, the unfinished work, since the amount of time he would need to finish it would be incalculable. It is a work in progress and will always be. Like an autobiography written until the author's death, its end would only come when the author's life also came to an end, thus becoming the work of a dead man, as Chateaubriand's memoirs, translated by David Zimmer in *The Book of Illusions*, and David's own "memories", since he says he must be already dead if someone is reading his story.

In the middle of the novel, it is already possible to count a series of events that connected the money each of the characters owned and the role of chance, or luck. Nashe and Jim both inherited money from their fathers, Flower and Stone won their fortune through the lottery. Finally, Jim and Jack lost all their money and freedom to Flower and Stone through poker. One single game was enough to make them lose it all and even accumulate an expensive debt.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

If some of the characteristics of chance are the impossibility of locating what determined some event, its unpredictability and the lack of control over it (ENTLER, 2000), it could also be summarized as the said absence of cause and effect. It could be argued that, for example, the effect of betting is either winning or losing. But it can't be determined who is going to win or lose, or even if anyone is going to win or lose, if they are going to be cheated, what will happen to them afterwards, etc. Similarly, it can't be determined what caused Nashe's wife to leave him, why he met Pozzi, why he paid for the poker game or the reason for him to accept to stay at Flower and Stone's paying the debt while building a wall of stones. Many other examples from this novel could be given here, not to mention from the other novels analyzed in this study. What seems to be important, concerning these details and the relation between chance and the use of mirrors in fiction, though, is that the events connected to chance in the narratives don't depend on the determination of causes and effects. They are part of the creation of these "illusions" inside the novel; they work as part of these "reflections" in the mirror of fiction.

Still, it is important to emphasize that, as argued by Entler (2000, p. 51), what is called chance is not the determination without the subject's intention, but the crossing between determination and intention.

Finally, the character of Maria Turner (inspired in the artist Sophie Calle, according to Auster<sup>5</sup>) in *Leviathan* is a good example of how fiction as a mirror does not "represent" non-fictional reality, but its discourses, as defended by Waugh (1984).

Right from the beginning, Maria's participation is linked to a chain of events which, according to the narrator, would have led the story to its final results. All these events, however, happen "by chance".

If not for the breakup marriage to Delia Bond, I never would have met Maria Turner, and if I hadn't met Maria Turner, I never would have known about Lillian Stern, I wouldn't be sitting here writing this book. (...) Everything is connected to everything else, every story overlaps with every other story (AUSTER, 2006, p. 57).

She is described as a "twenty seven or twenty eight, tall, self-possessed young woman" (p. 65) with blond hair and a bony, angular face. "Maria was an artist, but the work she did had nothing to do with creating objects commonly defined as art" (p. 66). She would

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<sup>5</sup> He added this statement near the catalog information: *The author extends special thanks to Sophie Calle for permission to mingle Fact with fiction.* Paul Auster, *Leviathan*, 1992.

be called a photographer, a conceptualist, a writer, "but none of these descriptions was accurate", since, in Peter's opinion, she couldn't be pigeonholed in any way. Her work is characterized as being nutty idiosyncratic, and "too personal to be thought of as belonging to any particular medium or discipline"<sup>6</sup>. She would have ideas and would work on projects; there would be concrete results that could be shown in galleries,

but this activity didn't stem from a desire to make art so much as from a need to indulge her obsessions, to live her life precisely as she wanted to live it. Living always came first, and a number of her most time-consuming projects were done strictly for herself and never shown to anyone.<sup>7</sup>

Some of her "projects" were: saving all her birthday presents since the age of fourteen, still wrapped, arranged on shelves according to the year; holding annual birthday parties in her own honor, always inviting the same number of guests as her age; some weeks indulging in what she called "the chromatic diet", eating food of a single color each day; dressing a man she found handsome, Mr. L., by giving him anonymous gifts, etc.

In the beginning of her career as an artist she started going out with her camera and taking pictures of random people, whom she followed. At night, when she returned home, she would sit down and write about what she had seen and done, "using the strangers' itineraries to speculate about their lives and, in some cases, to compose brief, imaginary biographies" (p. 69). Other projects followed this. "Her subject was the eye, the drama of watching and being watched"<sup>8</sup>.

In one work, she hired a private detective to follow her around the city. This man took pictures of her and recorded her movements in a small notebook, "omitting nothing from the account, not even the most banal and transitory events" (p. 70).

Analyzing a similar event when studying *City of Glass*, Egle Pereira da Silva (2002, p. 1) observes that when Quinn follows Stillman around the city and watches him, Quinn's experiences are Stillman's experiences. Quinn's task is to tell not his story, but the story of the other, who is a complete stranger. It is by being observed that this "other" (individual) can exist and be noticed in the invisibility that constitutes him.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

She also quotes Silviano Santiago<sup>9</sup> who, in a study about Edilberto Coutinho's short stories, affirmed that one of the tasks of fiction is to analyze the role of the narrator in post-modernism and "to dramatize the experience of someone who is being watched" (SANTIAGO, 1989, p. 44 apud SILVA, 2002, p. 1).

In *Leviathan*, after being photographed by the detective she hired, who also wrote all of her moves in a notebook (exactly what Quinn does in *City of Glass*<sup>10</sup>), Maria looked at the photos of herself and "felt as if she had become a stranger, as if she had been turned into an imaginary being" (AUSTER, 1993, p. 70). To interpret the sequence of photos, she had to feel as though it wasn't her on the images, it was another self. To "dramatize this experience", the woman in the pictures had to become a character and she, the observer, could then, perhaps, become the narrator of the story.

Since Peter only gets to know Iris, his future second wife, because of Maria's second art exhibition, she is portrayed as "the reigning spirit of chance, as a goddess of the unpredictable" (p. 113).

In one episode after Sachs had an accident, Peter got to observe him walking down the streets in New York, in what he calls a "contemplative pace, never rushing, never seeming to care where he was" (p. 140). Although Peter thinks he is following Sachs, he is actually following him while Sachs is followed by Maria Turner. That is to say, they are on a project. It's almost a performance, a projection of a random walk. While Peter doesn't notice Maria, nevertheless, she notices him, so she is capable, as the artist in question, of observing not only her main character Sachs, but also a second one, Peter. Meanwhile, Maria takes in the role of the private detective.

In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge observes Auster's clearly artificial way of naming his characters in *The New York Trilogy*, which would "reaffirm the arbitrariness of language when applying it where it doesn't vigor" (2011, p. 50).

Sophie Calle is indeed an artist who transcends the common boundaries of experimentation. She allegedly incorporates events which happened in her life to her art. However, she also plays with the notion of representation as a copy. In *Histórias Reais* (CALLE, 2009) there is, for example, a black and white photograph of a bed and, on top of it, a painting of a romantic woman writing. It could suggest a relation between the

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<sup>9</sup> Silviano Santiago, *O Narrador Pós-Moderno*.

<sup>10</sup> The red notebook serves here as a journal to record characters moves, but also appears at least in *Locked Room* and is discussed in *The Red Notebook*.

sweetness of the girl and the bed, or sexual relations; but it could also suggest the many medias in one single work of art, since it is a photograph of a painting (the picture of a picture). Moreover, the girl is writing. In a similar way, Sophie's work is a visual text which has to be interpreted by an observer in order for these meanings to be possible.

Maria, therefore, is Maria. She is not a realistic representation of Sophie Calle. When Quinn, in *City of Glass*, says he is Paul Auster, he is not Paul Auster. In this fiction the signifier and the signified don't correspond or aren't fixed.

## 7. A Throw of the Dice, Auster and Mallarmé

*What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories.*

Paul Auster, *City of Glass*.

*Un coup de Dés*<sup>1</sup>, by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), was published in 1897. After this experimental poem, Mallarmé began working in what is called his *Livre*, an unfinished work in form of notes which would follow *Un Coup de Dés*. These notes, preserved and commented by Jacques Scherer (1957)<sup>2</sup> are mostly observations concerning the structure of what would be a critical poem, where chance would be integrated to the composition. According to Scherer (1957 apud Campos, 1977, p. 17) the *Livre* "can't, if it wants to abolish chance, speak of nothing but itself and to confront beings which it will have created in a time of need"<sup>3</sup>.

Paul Auster's narratives, although distant in time and in form from Mallarmé's poetry, also speak of themselves. In a different way, though, the narratives don't clearly show a desire to abolish chance, but rather to create fiction based on it.

Campos thinks that Mallarmé's later works seek to control chance, and

while affirming the impossibility of abolishing it, [Mallarmé] dialectically insinuated – under the relative assurance of a *maybe* – the viability of this denied possibility through the constellation-work, an event and a human moment ("UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD/*Excepté peut-être pour une Constellation*") (Campos, 1977, p. 17).

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<sup>1</sup> *Un coup de Dés*, by Stéphane Mallarmé, was translated several times to different languages, but, for this study, we chose to use, for this study, Harold de Campos' Brazilian Portuguese version in *Mallarmé* (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Scherer IN *Le Livre de Mallarmé*.

<sup>3</sup> The original is in Portuguese, so these excerpts were translated into English by me.

The attempt of abolishing chance was, therefore, combined with the viability of succeeding. It is the image of the poet walking on a rope at the edge of the abyss, a movement which precedes what would be later pursued and discussed by modern and contemporary artists and writers.

The constellation-work referred by Campos can be visualized when reading *A Throw of the Dice* through the way the words and phrases are organized in the pages.

Scherer (1957 apud Campos, 1977, p. 18) thinks that in the *Livre* there is a project, the "sparse outlines of an existential thematic", interpreted by him as the effort towards the foundation of "modern myths". For instance, he comments on a passage in this book where the "hero" is invited by a lady to join in a strange party, where everything is allowed, except for eating; on the verge of starving, he takes advantage of the omission of law and devours his hostess, "in an erotical-anthropophagical surge", which, according to Scherer, anticipates the "anxiety without cause" in Kafka's short stories.

In the article *The Art of Hunger*<sup>4</sup> (1970), Paul Auster analyzes *Hunger*, Knut Hamsun's first novel. According to him, "it is a work devoid of plot, action, and – but for the narrator – character. By nineteenth-century standards, it is a work in which nothing happens" (p. 318). The young man in Hamsun's novel hungers, he curses the world, he doesn't die, and "in the end, for no apparent reason, he signs on board a ship and leaves the city"<sup>5</sup>. The hero is affected by a language disease, he no longer believes in anything, "lies and truths are as one to him", "hunger has led him into darkness, and there is no turning back" (p. 322). Auster also comments on Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* and its "aesthetics of hunger", where the hunger artist is "at once an artist and not an artist" (p. 323).

In *The Music of Chance* Auster also works with hunger, but in a different way from Kafka's or Hamsun's stories. The *music* of chance is a beautiful way of looking at the relation between people's lives and the events that occur "by chance" as time goes by. Each event could be like a note, and the sequence of these notes could result in music.

Nashe, the main character, is a classical music enthusiast. The narrator takes on his perspective to tell the story of his life from the time when he had inherited a

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger*. In: *Collected Prose*, 2010, p. 317-324.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

considerable amount of money from his father. His wife had also just left him by then, leaving scars that wouldn't heal for some time to come. These factors were what initially motivated his journey, by car, throughout the country. One day he started driving around for some while to empty his mind of horrible thoughts. And then he couldn't get himself to stop. He quit his job in the fire department, told his boss he was going to live near his daughter, who was currently at his sister's. When he went there to visit her, he found out she was actually quite well without him, and was used to the new environment.

There was nothing left, neither his wife, nor his daughter or his job. There was only the money, the car, and the road ahead. Sitting in the car and driving became a joy. It also became a hunger to be fed at any price. Nothing around him lasted for more than a moment. It was as though only he existed. "He was a fixed point in a whirl of changes, a body poised in utter stillness as the world rushed through him and disappeared" (AUSTER, 2006, p. 11).

The only thing that didn't change in his life, up to this point, was the visits to his daughter Juliette. Sometime after one of his visits, he went to Berkeley, California, and met an old acquaintance, Fiona Wells. And "like most of the things that happened to him that year, it came about purely by chance" (p. 13). From then on, they had an affair, the only one that endured, though only for a while, Nashe's constant travelling.

Slowly, his adventure was turning into a paradox. The money, responsible for his freedom, was also what denied him that freedom, since every time it bought him some more time, it also limited the amount of time he still had to spend it.

However, he planned to marry Fiona, to stretch out his money as long as he could. When everything seemed to be going well, though, "his luck began to desert him" (p. 17). Fiona went back to her ex-boyfriend. He went to Saratoga, checked into a hotel and spent a whole week gambling on horses, but only managed to lose more than he won.

That was when he found Jack Pozzi, who called himself Jackpot, sitting alone by the side of a road, his clothes in rags and blood all over him. He told Nashe he had been playing poker and winning, when he and the other players were robbed. The owners of the house where he was had blamed him so he ran away. He tells Jim about Flower and Stone, two millionaire friends who lived together and had invited him to play poker. It was his chance of winning, since he thought they played so poorly. This leads to their



trip, the poker game and the high debts, their losing the game, and the necessity to pay this debt. As suggested by Flower and Stone, and later agreed by terms of contract, they begin the construction of a wall using the stones of a ruined castle in Great Britain. It is a great metaphor for the creation of art based on the reading of what preceded it. Auster reads *Walden* which can be read in *The Music of Chance*; it is not Thoreau's *Walden* anymore, but something else.

When Nashe and Pozzi have worked enough to pay for their debt, they decide to celebrate and so ask for expensive food, beverage and the services of a prostitute. They wish to continue working for just some more days before leaving for good, since they are back to zero, no money, no transportation, nothing for them to build their lives from again. And so they celebrate, they eat and drink, and Pozzi ends up sleeping with the woman they called. The next day, however, brings bad news. The property's caretaker is left by the owners with a bill listing all the expenses Nashe and Pozzi had asked for. Their debt was not paid off, after all. They were still imprisoned and chained to the wall of stones they had to build.

Auster's way of working with the idea of hunger can be interpreted in many ways, perhaps, but what is most evident from this reading is that hunger, in this novel, is not just the need for food, it is the need for freedom represented by money and obtained, or not, through a throw of the dice. In this case, the dice don't set the characters free. They start being controlled in the same instant they lose in the poker game. From then on, they begin seeking for freedom in other ways.

They decide it would best if Pozzi ran away. And so they dig a hole near a fence in the limits of the property and Pozzi leaves. The next morning, Nashe finds Pozzi's body lying in front of their house. It's evident that he was nearly killed by someone or something, but Nashe never gets a chance to know what happened, since the caretaker and his son take him away "to a hospital", although he thinks they could be lying.

Nashe is completely alone after that. His freedom is never obtained but through death, perhaps. This happens while he is driving a car with the caretaker and his son, after he has completed his job again and paid the debt. When he is finally "free", though, he decides speeding, which seems to result in a car crash, but is suspended by the end of the novel. We never get to see the crash but are left with Nashe's final and somewhat ironical thought: "this was the last thought he would ever have" (2006, p. 198).

The narration of Nashe's life begins with his driving and ends in the same way. It could, therefore, be interpreted as a cyclic story. Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of the Dice* is also said to have a cyclic characteristic, according to Entler (2000, p.11). Its beginning, "a throw of the dice never will abolish chance" is linked to its last sentence, "every thought emits a throw of the dice". As observed by Harold de Campos, Mallarmé "confers reversibility, *da capo*, restructuring the problem *ad infinitum*" (CAMPOS, 1974, p. 187 apud ENTLER, 2000, p. 11).

Entler defends that Mallarmé's ideas contribute to almost every experience that, in the XX century, makes some kind of reference to chance. As examples, he mentions Brazilian Concrete poetry and artists such as Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and others, who explore the graphic form of the text and experiment with new structures that allow different connections between letters and words, as well as many directions for reading. In this way, the provisory form of the poem would await to be finalized by the particular approach of a reader.

Still according to Entler (2000, p. 12), chance appears in an explicit way in the European vanguards, especially in Dada. In this movement, it becomes more than a paradox: it is a fundamental strategy for the characterization of what was called an "anti-art".

In *Dada Bones*<sup>6</sup> (1975, p. 331), an article about the Dada movement, Paul Auster also writes about the continuing presence of Dada in the late twentieth century, and the fact that

Dada's questions remain our questions, and we speak of the relationship between art and society, of art versus action and art as action, we cannot help but turn to Dada as a source and an example.<sup>7</sup>

He thinks that "we want to know about it not only for itself, but because we feel that it will help us toward an understanding of our own, present moment"<sup>8</sup>.

As a final analogy, one situation discussed by Entler (2000) may help us comprehend the role of chance in Auster in face of what has been produced by modern artists.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Auster, *Dada Bones* IN *Collected Prose*, 2010, p. 331-336.

<sup>7</sup> It would be interesting to analyze how artists in the Dada movement and the Surrealists have dealt with the aspects of chance in their works of art in very different ways.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Consider a person taking a walk without thinking about his/her destination. The region where this person is is new, so it doesn't matter if he goes left or right. So the person takes a coin and flips it, waiting for the result, heads or tails, to lead their way. Up to this moment, it doesn't make sense to think if the result, either left or right, is responding to a previous desire. Entler asks, however, if the option for letting the game decide isn't proof of an expectation. He thinks it is. The option was consciously chosen. What is interesting to observe here is that this person consciously opted for letting the world participate in his choice for a destination.

When someone makes a bet, a throw of the dice will determine if they win or lose. The result is casual, but a meaning is given to each number on the bet. The attribution of a meaning to the numbers endorses the idea of chance, because "the meaning and movement of the dice are two independent events that are crossed" (ENTLER, 2000, p. 35).

Chance seems to be a key element for the reading of Auster's works, as it allows us to realize that his writings are not, as said before, isolated, but they consider modernity and the present time, they are as much a reading as a form of art.

Many passages in Auster's novels reflect this choice for chance. Some of them are Stillman's trajectory around the city and the crazy maps that Quinn draws trying to understand the logic behind them, in *City of Glass*; Nashe's inconsequent driving around the country and suddenly coming across Pozzi, in *The Music of Chance*, not to mention the poker game. There is even the story about a coin that Auster lost in a place and found in a different part of the city, which he tells in *The Red Notebook*.

Similarly, reading *A Throw of the Dice*, by Mallarmé, is choosing a path among the many offered by the poem. The poem can be read in many different ways and each time we read it we come across a different meaning. The reader participates in the composition of the poem, in this sense, by a conscious determination, although being led by the words in a page in a sequence which is not pre-determined by the text (since the reader has the freedom to choose where to start). Different meanings can be reorganized every time.

According to Haroldo de Campos (1974, p. 124), in *A Throw of the Dice* every page contains the "seed" for the ones that follow. The "rigidity" of the structure allows for the freedom of choice when reading. This can also be said of Auster's novels. The "seed" in each page, in this case, is related to the explicit reference to *hindsight*, but the

results, the meaning for the events in the novel are left to be interpreted by the reader. The narrator makes it his role to inform the reader of the fact that some "truths" go as far as he can see, they are not permanent.

What can also be concluded, at this point, is that Auster is thinking of the modernist vanguards and also the American romanticism, of Mallarmé, as well as other important works produced in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century to write his own literature. Thus, a poetics of chance can be perceived through this act of reading and recreating.

## 8. Conclusion

The five main topics discussed so far are part of an attempt to critically read Paul Auster's fictional and non-fictional prose and to suggest some ways of approaching them.

The first part, concerning the use of hindsight, analyzed the narrator's perspectives. In Auster's novels both the narration from a point in the future and the one which is developed as the events happen always make evident the presence of chance. In the case of the narrative about something that already "happened", the narrator suggests alternatives to the story, wondering what could have been different. As though the events were independent of an author, the narrator takes on the responsibility of telling about them, putting the pieces together, reporting the facts, dialogues, very similar to what would happen in a detective story.

These detectives, however, are very far from the traditional kind. In *City of Glass*, the narrator focuses on Quinn, who becomes Paul Auster, and, in this process of creation of multiple identities, sees them as artificial: "I'm Paul Auster. I'm not Paul Auster", he writes in his notebook.

*The Red Notebook*, on the other hand, allegedly a book of non-fiction where Auster talks about his "life", is the key representative of all the notebooks that appear in his narratives and, why not, in other works of fiction. His Notebook is very similar to the ones in Enrique Vila-Matas' novels, such as *El Mal de Montano* (2002), *Doctor Pasavento* (2005) or *Dietario Voluble* (2008)<sup>9</sup>. They are so fictional that it could be said they really talk about the truth, as Vila-Matas' and Auster's narrators like to say. Or, inversely, they are so true that they seem like fiction.

This leads us to conclude that observing the narrator, his perspective and the time in each work is a starting point for understanding what notions of literature, of fiction, are present in each narrative. Fiction, then, is compared to truth, and also to a mirror.

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<sup>9</sup> During the years in which I was part of a research group to investigate Enrique Vila-Matas' writings (coordinated by Professor Rita Lenira de Freitas Bittencourt at UFRGS) I had the chance to study the fictional diaries and the disappearances of the "author" in these novels. We came to the conclusion that Vila-Matas' fiction theorizes about fiction, and that authorship becomes a fictional project.

The ideas developed in this study made it possible to realize, first, that this "truth" is not representing the "real" non-fiction world, but its own world, and reflecting the discourses of the outer context. Second, the mirrors in this fiction, therefore, do not reflect the non-fictional world *faithfully* and have no interest in doing so, since it is not possible. René Magritte stated something similar to that in 1948 when drawing a pipe and writing under it: "This is not a pipe".

If chance involves the absence of cause and effect, as observed by Fields (1989), in literature chance then affects the narration, language and structure of the narrative. It results in events without apparent explanation, blurred reflections in the mirror of fiction or infinite images reflected inside the mirror. This is translated into events such as the winning or losing in a poker game, a billionaire lottery ticket, an absurd decision made, sudden disappearances, unexplainable deaths and books, walking without destination, fragmented language, the changing of identity, models of the world, etc.

The disconnected sentences in *City of Glass* could be given as an example, as well as the notebooks that don't seem to make sense or that have "blanks" which need to be filled in in *Locked Room*, *Ghosts*, *Invisible*; or the need for some narrators, as in *Leviathan*, to reassure the reader that a report is accurate or could be just his interpretation; or even, as happens in *The Music of Chance*, to leave the understanding of absurd situations to the reader.

When it comes to the names in *The New York Trilogy*, for example, David Lodge (2011, p. 50) says that death or despair are the only alternatives for the characters who are faced with an insoluble mystery and are lost in a labyrinth of names<sup>10</sup>. Writing about writing, or exposing the artificial creation of names is one way of making a statement on the nature of fiction itself.

John Barth (1967, p. 34 apud FIELDS, 2000, p. 4)<sup>11</sup>, when discussing the "new" trend in art, calls "literature of exhaustion" the fiction "which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders on its own caricature". Barth writes about Borges and Nabokov

who achieve this effect by conveying the felt "ultimacies," as he calls them, of the age. Works-within-works, word play, and *regressus in*

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<sup>10</sup> David Lodge, *Names*. In: *The Art of Fiction*.

<sup>11</sup> John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion*. In: *The Atlantic*.

*infinitum* abound in their fiction as do, obviously, doubles and mirrors (ENTLER, 2000, p. 4).

Fields, in his thesis, explores the ideas of some theorists who seek to identify the "new" post-war writers and their characteristics. He quotes Cooper (1983 apud FIELDS, 2000, p. 6)<sup>12</sup> who differentiates neorealist writers from counterrealists, for instance. The first would have an affinity for the kind of realism that "present[s] rounded, individuated characters who are explained, or made explicable, through attention to their psychology and motivation". The counterrealists (a term coined by John Barth) convey characters as

flat, insubstantial figure[s] adrift in an alien world. That world . . . is typically fantastic, grotesque, absurd . . . filled with unforeseen events or shocking juxtapositions—a labyrinth, oddly animated by plots that seem deliberately and malevolently opposed to human priorities.<sup>13</sup>

Nabokov and Borges would be among the latter. Like Susan Sontag and Barth, Cooper discerns an ultimacy in this sort of fiction. According to Cooper, characters in this fiction don't "reach the conclusion that life is absurd through some grueling process of disillusionment; that premise is rather a starting point for them and a mindset from which they never deviate" (p. 7).

These ideas may serve here to understand what kind of theories have been discussed in the late twentieth century concerning writers who have been called experimentalist, fabulists, metafictional writers, among many other classifications, and to read Paul Auster's fiction taking these theories into account.

Auster could, it is true, be understood as a metafictional writer, or even autofictional, term used by Marie Th evenon (2009). His characters, moreover, are not so easily classified as flat or well-rounded as the attempt described above. He could be nearer to the notion of counterrealism, then. These properties would have to be further discussed in a different opportunity.

Auster's novels also don't fit into a traditional view of the novel. Again, if the narrator's perspective in each novel referred to here was analyzed more attentively in a future study, it could be confirmed that it is not always clear who is talking, thinking, i.e., it is not always clear whose point of view is being read. It has been mentioned how, sometimes, it is possible to forget who the narrator is (third-person, first-person?),

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<sup>12</sup> Cooper, *Signs and Symptoms*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

because the perspective, the focus, is so centered in one character that it is as though the narrative person has shifted without us noticing.

Fields (1989, p. 7) also quotes Cooper to refer to the absence of cause and effect in fiction, which can be related to its use in *The Music of Chance*, for instance.

Within the individual and within the larger world, the authors destroy the bond that one expects to find between cause and effect; they playfully violate the chain of logical links between events that the reader or character needs to orient himself. Anything can happen at any time for any reason – and for no reason.

Things happen by chance, they can't be fully explained. What the narrator does is to try to understand, through conditional sentences and the use of hindsight, what could have happened if something had been different. The reader is only assured of the narrator's uncertainties though.

Another topic addressed in this study was death and invisibility in these narratives, which could involve the despair of the characters who are lost in a labyrinth of names, as observed by David Lodge. Death or disappearance, in this sense, could be the character's only alternative, since they are confronted with their own fictional nature. What are names, but a choice, and perhaps a "random choice" i.e. not motivated by a clear association to a symbol that the author may wish to imply. Good examples might be the names in *Ghosts*, for instance, which are colors.

Death can also be connected to the death of the work of art. The author can't resist the destruction of his creation, as happens in *The Book of Illusion*, but the creation may not be destroyed if the author perishes. A story continues existing as long as it is read and retold. It depends on the reader to complete its meaning. The same thing might be said of Mallarmé's poem, of the works of the vanguards, and has been discussed over time.

In *Crítica y Clínica* Gilles Deleuze (1996, p. 5) says that

Escribir indudablemente no es imponer una forma (de expresión) a una materia vivida. La literatura se decanta más bien hacia lo informe, o lo inacabado, como dijo e hizo Gombrowicz. Escribir es un asunto de devenir, siempre inacabado, siempre en curso, y que desborda cualquier materia vivible o vivida. Es un proceso, es decir un paso de Vida que atraviesa lo vivible y lo vivido.



This leads to the final part of this reading. Comparing Auster's and Mallarmé's works, although a very complex task and far from being exhausted at this point, helped us read contemporary fiction because of the role of chance in each production. Yet, what now seems more important refers to the other characteristics connected to chance and discussed, each in a chapter, in this study. Perhaps entire new essays could be written about every one of these topics so that they could be explored in more detail in the future.

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